Democracy & Education

Democratic Teacher Preparation and Praxis

Creating Active, Reflective Educators (CARE)

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the ability of teachers that have completed their clinical experience—i.e., teacher preparation—in a school grounded in Deweyan theory to maintain a democratic practice. As such, the study focused on educators that were graduates of a school-university partnership program, known as CARE—Creating Active, Reflective Educators. Data were collected to address the following research question: "To what extent can former CARE students practice democratic education in their current public-school teaching environment?" Interviews conducted with current school teachers and leaders that were former CARE program students. Responses were audio-recorded and transcribed, then coded and organized into thematic units to report findings.

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Scholars have long discussed democratic education as an ideal means of educating the young in a democratic society (Alshurman, 2015; Counts, 1933; Dewey, 1916; Embry-Jenlink, 2018; Gutmann & Ben-Porath, 2015; Hess et al., 2014; Jenlink, 2009; Lowery, 2012; Mursell, 1955; Sanli & Altun, 2015). However, any widespread definitive approach to democratic education has yet to be altogether realized in schools (Carr, 2006, 2008; Hess, 2016; Portelli & Solomon, 2001). Some argue that resistance to a democratic approach is due to the deep and compromising roots of mainstream teaching methods (Apple & Beane, 2007; Collins et al., 2019; Hess & Hutchinson, 2019; Johnson & Hess, 2010; Kincheloe, 2008).

We argue that lecturing, drilling material, and rote rehearsal of fact-based information to prepare students for performance on standardized tests continue as regular practices in many classrooms. Many schools have replaced real-world, hands-on learning with what Wood (2005) called "drill-and-kill" test preparation. By doing so, schools have oversimplified their own curriculum by emphasizing a student's ability to select a correct multiple choice answer over authentic inquiry or critical thinking. According to Horn (2009), curriculum, instruction, and assessment as school activities have become influenced by special interests that vie for control over American democracy (p. 98). In the opinion of both Wood and Horn, democratic ideals such as the social and cultural aspects of shared interests and joint activity have been supplanted by decontextualized and disjointed knowledge and skills.

Nonetheless, many schools over the years have endeavored to be more democratic. Some schools, particularly those that identify as Democracy Schools (e.g., in Illinois) and those following the Sudbury model (the Highland School in West Virginia and the Sudbury Valley School in Massachusetts), have adopted progressive philosophies and experiment with ways of being democratic (Highland School, 2019; Robert R. McCormick Foundation, n.d.). However, these schools are often private or funded by grants and tend to function as boarding schools. Also, it is notable that these examples are most often located near urban sites. As such, Democracy Schools and those based on the Sudbury model are unlike the rural public schools represented in this study. In the scope of our investigation, the focus is on public, rural schools with a deep commitment to values of democracy (Apple & Beane, 2007; Carr, 2008; Dewey, 1916, 1939a).

Democratic education, although not prescriptive, requires a fundamental change in the paradigm of teaching and learning. The role and the relationship of teacher and students shift. Teachers are guides and coaches who assist students on their journeys of learning (Furman & Starratt, 2002; Jenlink & Embry-Jenlink, 2008; Jenlink, 2009). For Dewey (1916), democratic education depends on "the realization of a form of a social life in which interests are mutually interpenetrating" (p. 87). Therefore, an individual method is inherent in that democratic education gives students ownership of their learning. This stake in the educational process requires "that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own" (p. 87).

For this to happen, democratic educators need to create a culture where they and their students build strong relationships (Casapulla & Hess, 2017; Jenlink & Embry-Jenlink, 2008). These relationships form by pairing teachers and students together for advising or by providing more time through lengthening class periods (Wood, 2005). What is important is that teachers and students together become active in the school community and become reflective about their practice and learning (Furman & Starratt, 2002; Jenlink, 2009). By having opportunities to voice their opinions and contribute to the school as a whole, students learn to contribute to society as informed and engaged democratic agents. By collaborating to create innovative learning environments and having a say in curricular decisions, teachers develop democratically as professionals.

As a qualitative case study, this inquiry investigates perceptions and experiences of ten practicing classroom teachers who were former candidates in the Creative, Active, and Reflective Educators (CARE) program of Ohio University's College of Education. Specifically, we explore their ability to practice democratic education in their current public school teaching environment. Our purpose was to better understand the perceptions of current practicing public school educators about the sustainability of democratic education in schools lacking in or not explicitly focused on democratic teaching and learning. By giving voice to licensed teachers who participated in this unique educator preparation, we believe programs can be better shaped to promote democratic practices in future teachers.

We recognize that democratic practices in education can be implemented at numerous stages and at various levels of schooling. However, our focus is on how educator preparation translates into ongoing professional practice. To investigate this, we asked, how do teachers sustain the theoretical and pedagogical democratic practices they experienced in a uniquely designed educator preparation program? Specifically, this study explores to what extent can and do former democratically trained teacher candidates practice democratic education in their current K–12 teaching environments?

Context of Study

Democratic education is foundational to Ohio University's Gladys W. and David H. Patton College of Education (PCOE) CARE program, an educator preparation curriculum founded on Dewey's principles of democracy. As such, CARE teacher candidates focus on education as "primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (Dewey, 1916, p. 87). Through the school-university partnership between the Patton College and the nearby K–12 public school, Federal Hocking Local Schools, teacher candidates carry out their professional internship in an environment marked by democratic educational practices and a philosophy grounded in the leadership of Dr. George Wood, school superintendent, and William Elasky, university lecturer and school board member.

The CARE program adopts progressive philosophical principles about democratic education. Teacher candidates apply these principles to their professional preparation in order to develop a reflective practice and the habits of mind necessary for their future careers as educators. Teacher candidates in CARE fulfill their placement requirement at Federal Hocking Local Schools—often referred to as Fed Hock. At Fed Hock, candidates are exposed to the democratic teaching practice in classrooms in rural Appalachian Ohio, under the mentorship of teachers that espouse the democratic principles of the school. Superintendent Wood, cofounder of CARE and a former university faculty, has shared these principles in his book, *Time to Learn*. Wood (2005) outlined the structure, curriculum, and democratic principles used in this school, as well as the Deweyan concepts that are fundamental to the CARE program. These principles include but are not limited to small school size, reduced number of classes per day, teams of teachers paired with teams of students, students monitoring their own progress, significant activities, student-centered control and decision-making, and expectations for graduates.

Creative, Active, and Reflective Educators (CARE)

The PCOE at Ohio University has several school-university partnerships. One of those partnerships is the CARE program. Grounded in the Deweyan idea of democracy, CARE is based on five fundamental principles: social/cultural domain, nature of the learner, democratic curriculum, democratic pedagogy, and democratic praxis, partnership, and commitment.

Social/Cultural Domain

According to the CARE website, the social/cultural domain of teacher preparation is integral not only to democratic education but to a free democratic society at large. The program purports, "In a democratic society, a primary role of the school is to develop in students the habits of the heart and mind that make active and full democratic citizenship possible" (PCOE, 2019, para. 1). To prepare teachers to take democratic values into their classrooms means developing in them a responsibility to not simply teach students subject content or prepare them for future careers. Instead, the CARE program recognizes education as "both a social activity and an institution that is embedded in an always changing socio-cultural context" (PCOE, 2019, para. 1). As such, the CARE program recognizes a moral obligation to ensure democracy to all citizens. To accomplish this social/cultural goal, the program seeks to "foster democratic ideals such as equity, social justice, freedom, responsibility, community and tolerance" (PCOE, 2019, para. 1).

Nature of the Learner

Teacher candidates in the CARE program "explore the nature of the child as learner and how psychological, emotional, cognitive and physical development impact learning and teaching in the classroom" (PCOE, 2019, para. 2). CARE students explore ways to promote the natural curiosity in learners in all grade levels by engaging them democratically in the development of their understanding of the world. As a program, CARE encourages aspiring educators to reflect on how all children can be educated and to contemplate "issues of difference such as socio-economic class, race, gender and family configuration" (PCOE, 2019, para. 2).

Democratic Curriculum

The CARE program defines curriculum as "the sum of the experiences a child has in school" (PCOE, 2019, para. 3). It recognizes that teachers and other educators can easily overlook the importance of how the formal curriculum is structured. Likewise, the CARE program notes that teachers can disregard the hidden curriculum (Apple, 1980). Dewey (1938) referred to the concept of hidden curriculum as "collateral learning" or the enduring attitudes and biases implicit in teaching and learning. Therefore, CARE has asserted, "The choices that teachers make should be predicated upon enhancing the intellectual, moral and social development of each child within the context of a democratic society" (PCOE, 2019, para. 3). The program of study in CARE is focused on instilling students with "an understanding of how knowledge is organized and curriculum is created" (PCOE, 2019, para. 3).

Democratic Pedagogy

A foundational idea of the CARE program is that "the role of teacher in the democratic classroom goes beyond providing students with information to enhance their social, emotional, and intellectual development through experience" (PCOE, 2019, para. 4). Teacher candidates in the CARE program develop an "understanding that children have different learning styles" and should "explore how to utilize creative and active strategies that allow children to experience various educative processes" (PCOE, 2019, para 4). This principle is rooted in the idea that these various ways of learning and exploring is important to a democratic method which includes diverse ways of constructing new knowledge and skills (PCOE, 2019, para. 4).

Democratic Praxis, Partnership, and Commitment

In terms of teacher preparation, the CARE program adheres to three basic commitments in teacher education: (a) praxis, (b) partnership, and (c) commitment. Together, these three elements form an ethos of reflection and action. Praxis refers to "a blending of theory and practice, and that these two domains inform each other to create a stronger sense of teaching" (PCOE, 2019, para. 5). The aspect of partnership for teacher preparation involves "practicing educators, students, and university researchers as an educational team" (PCOE, 2019, para. 5). Commitment speaks to exploring the democratic ideal of shared experience and activity for the common good of a diverse society.

Fed Hock: A Site of Democratic Preparation

The vast majority of CARE students complete their student teaching experiences at a nearby school-university partnership site, Federal Hocking Local Schools. Fed Hock is a nationally recognized school located in rural Appalachian Ohio (Lowery et al., 2019). According to the school superintendent, Wood (2005), high school is democracy's "finishing school" (p. xxii). Wood stated

that Fed Hock secondary teachers endeavor to ensure students are included in the school's decision-making process as much as possible (p. 137). He noted, "[T]he more opportunities we give our students to be full-fledged citizens of our school, the more they amaze us with their ability to take on responsibility" (p. 138). He also defined the structure, principles, and curriculum of the high schools as a democratic space:

Table 1. Federal Hocking Structure, Principles, and Curriculum

School Structure	• Small School Size • Fewer Classes per Day • Teams of Teachers Paired with Teams of Students • Each Student Provided an Advisor- Advisory • Unstructured Time for Student-Teacher Relationships
Democratic Principles	• Students Track Their Own Progress • Every Student Does Something Significant • More Student Control Over Time • Student Empowered in Decision-Making
Curriculum	• Focus on What We Want Our Graduates to Do, and Plan the Curriculum from There • Graduation Not Based on Credits Earned but on Demonstrated Proficiency • Role Shift to Student-as-Worker and Teacher-as-Coach • Fewer Things Taught More Effectively • Focus on Literacy

Developed from Wood (2005).

Deweyan Democracy in CARE

The notion of democratic education as espoused by the CARE program is based on Dewey's (1916, 1939a, 1940) idea of education as a democratic enterprise. According to Jenlink (2009), "At the heart of Dewey's philosophy of education was the importance of preparing students for democratic citizenship" (p. ix). In other words, "For Dewey, education is at the heart of a viable democratic society" (p. 6). However, schools and university preparation programs are directly "affected by the undemocratic nature of society" (p. 16). In effect, this creates undemocratic school cultures that focus on standardized tests, administrative acts, and other structural and systemic constraints that present various challenges to teachers working to sustain a practice of democratic pedagogy (Counts, 1933; Embry-Jenlink, 2018; Jenlink, 2009).

Dewey (1939b) observed that "unless democratic habits of thought and action are part of the fiber of people, political democracy is insecure" (p. 721). His concept of insecurity can be viewed as democracy lacking the social interpretation and internalization of democracy by the people of that democratic society. Democracy is about empowerment and participation (Dewey, 1916). Democracy emphasizes a faith in the social aspect of democracy as a personal way of individual life (Dewey, 1940, p. 222).

For Dewey (1916, 1939a), education—as a mode of conjoint communicated experience through teaching and learning—was the catalyst for developing this social aspect of an individual's personal way of life. To teach democratic ideals, as Dewey framed them, involves an attempt to educate students for a world that have not yet come into existence (Counts, 1933; Dewey, 1916). An early proponent of Deweyan democratic values, Counts (1933) expressed that educators "cannot evade the responsibility of participating actively in the task of reconstituting the democratic tradition and of thus working positively toward a new society" (p. 19). Counts's words speak to the importance of having an ethical faith in the democratic ideal as it was historically framed.

Similarly, Mursell (1955), another democratic theorist influenced by Dewey, made clear that democracy is "based on faith in [people], and in [their] essential reasonableness and goodness" (p. 25). He extended this idea of democratic faith as a belief that "if people [e.g., students] are honestly and devotedly helped to understand [i.e., taught] issues and problems of life, they will be able to achieve understanding; and that if they achieve understanding, they will act on it" (p. 26). In short, CARE embraces a philosophy that "when the democratic ethic is honestly and adequately put to the test, its workableness is demonstrated" (p. 26).

Potentially, Dewey's (1916, 1938) democratic education provides students the freedom to blossom in an open setting that encourages students to take risks and teachers to be leaders, lifelong learners, and agents of social change. Each member is afforded a freedom to develop frameworks through individual methods that will guide their actions and contributions for the purpose of becoming well rounded, reflective and active citizens in the democratic microcosm of the school (Dewey, 1916; Mursell, 1955; Parker, 2003; Wood, 2005).

As a Deweyan, Mursell (1955) held that "[t]he governing purpose of education in a democratic society is to support, perpetuate, enlarge, and strengthen the democratic way of life" (p. 3). Students learn not to depend on making a particular grade or meeting graduation requirements, but instead they learn how to become individuals capable of contributing to their community and developing the skills expected of fellow participants in a free democratic society. Therefore, curriculum in a democratic school is not focused on meeting criteria or standards, subject-matter based. Instead, curriculum is built upon what students as people and citizens should be able to do (Dewey, 1916; Mursell, 1955; Wood, 2005).

Dewey (1938) defined the progressive concepts of democratic education as: (a) expression and cultivation of individuality, (b) inspired free activity, (c) learning through experience, (d) acquisition of skills and techniques by means that make direct, vital appeal, (e) opportunities of present life for educational exploration, and (f) acquaintance with a changing world (pp. 19–20). Fundamental to this concept of democracy is an understanding that democracy is "not so much a 'ideal' to be pursued as an 'idealized' set of values" that guide people in their lives as citizens (Apple & Beane, 2007, p. 7). Another essential concept for a democratic way of life relevant to this study is an ethical faith in the individual as well as her or his mutual ability to

resolve problems and use reflection to evaluate problems and policies (Apple & Beane, 2007; Mursell, 1955). To secure and maintain a democratic way of life, students must experience associated ways of living and conjoint communication in school. Students are afforded the opportunity to share conjointly in how democracy can inform and enhance their civic and social participation (Apple & Beane, 2007).

Importantly, teachers in K–12 schools work to deliberately develop students who authentically understand and accept the democratic ethic, as citizens who are capable of solving social problems (Mursell, 1955, p. 52). This means that "[d]emocracy can be made a steady, permanent influence, and exert full power for good only through the educational enterprise" (p. 52). Numerous scholars have maintained that democratic education promotes the necessary experiences for lifelong participation in democracy as an associated way of living (Apple & Beane, 2007; Counts, 1933; Dewey, 1916; Gutmann & Ben-Porath, 2014; Hess & Hutchinson, 2018; Jenlink, 2009; Mursell, 1955). In a Deweyan democracy, K–12 education has a moral responsibility to influence meaningfully the development of students as members of a democratic society (Dewey, 1916; Mursell, 1955).

Methodology

Design of Inquiry

This qualitative case study utilized a researcher-developed protocol and semi-structured interviewing for data collection (Patton, 2015; Stake, 1995). The case represented "a bounded system" defined by graduates of a self-identified democratic teacher preparation program who were current practicing educators. Information used to identify program graduates as potential participants was limited. As well, favorable responses from those individuals invited to participate resulted in the selection of ten participants. According to Stake (1995), case study is about the particularization of the case(s) and not a sample-driven method. Each participant represented a unique case; however, collectively, as a unit of analysis, they represented a bounded system in their identities as graduates of one particular educator preparation program (Stake, 1995).

Participants

Participants included one principal, one assistant principal, one media specialist, and seven classroom teachers (see Table 2). Their experience ranged from two years up to 17 years in education. Participants, all identified with pseudonyms, were selected using purposeful sampling; as well, a key informant assisted with this process. As Patton (2015) has pointed out, "Qualitative inquiry typically focuses on relatively small samples, even single cases" and participants are "selected *purposefully* to permit inquiry into and understanding of a phenomenon *in depth*" (p. 52, italics in original). In this case, all participants were former CARE students who now are current public-school educators—classroom teachers or school administrators. All participants in this study completed their clinical experiences as teacher candidates at Federal Hocking High School.

Table 2. Participants

Pseudonym	Years in Profession	Current Educational Position
Trevor	17 years	Principal
Lori	16 years	Media Specialist
Bonnie	8 years	Middle School Teacher
Rachel	6 years	Elementary School Teacher
Daniel	6 years	High School Social Studies
Kurt	5 years	Assistant Principal
Brianne	5 years	Middle School Social Studies Teacher
Erin	3 years	Middle School Social Studies Teacher
Terri	2 years	High School Math Teacher
James	2 years	Middle School English Teacher

Data Collection and Analysis

The research team developed and used an in-depth interview protocol as the instrument to collect data (Patton, 2015). As Stake (1995) has stated, "Much of what we cannot observe for ourselves has been or is being observed by others . . . The interview is the main road to multiple realities" (p. 64). Interview protocol included a guide for prompts and probes to add depth to the responses (Glesne, 2016; Patton, 2015). According to Patton (2015), "Probes are used to deepen the response to a question, increase the richness and depth of responses, and give cues to the interviewee about the level of response that is desired" (p. 465).

Our interactive approach to interviewing (Glesne, 2016) focused on engaging the participants in dialogues about both their preparation and practice, how they defined democratic education and/or pedagogy, and the ways in which they were able to sustain the principles of democratic education based on their understanding of democracy in education. We also asked all participants what impact their democratic preparation in the CARE program had had on their practice, if they could identify obstacles they had faced in enacting a democratic pedagogy, what types of supports existed for democratic education, and what were things they viewed as successes in regards to democratic teaching. In asking the participants to describe their most relevant and relative experiences, the interviews formed a narrative. The conversational nature of the interview was necessary to extend the interview, obtain clarification when needed, and to elicit details and description to participants' responses (Glesne, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

All interviews were audio-recorded, professionally transcribed, and analyzed by the team using first and second cycle coding (Patton, 2015; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Post-coding and pre-writing analyses, such conceptual analyses and codeweaving, were then used to organize codes based on patterns in emergent themes for purposes of reporting (Saldaña, 2016; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018).

Trustworthiness

According to qualitative methodologists, qualitative researchers frame their studies based on trustworthiness and credibility more so than reliability and validity (Glesne, 2016; Patton, 2015; Stake, 1995). Glesne (2016) identified criteria for trustworthiness as prolonged engagement; triangulation; rich, thick description; negative case analysis; member checking; clarification of researcher bias and subjectivity; peer review and debriefing; and audit trails. For the purposes of this study, we focused on triangulation, thick description (via field notes and memoing), researcher subjectivity, and peer review and debriefing.

For triangulation, we first used "more than one type of respondent" (Glesne, 2016, p. 152). Participants were school administrators and classroom teachers; as well, they represented a broad range of years of experience, ranging from two years to 17 years. We also triangulated findings with the philosophical foundations of the CARE program and the democratic principles of Federal Hocking High School, where their teacher candidate practicums were completed. Finally, our research team is made of multiple theoretical perspectives, providing what Glesne (2016) and Stake (1995) have referred to as both investigator triangulation and theory triangulation. Team members consist of diverse theoretical backgrounds and perspectives and include a former school administrator, an expert in educational foundations and cultural theory, a licensed teacher with a background in adolescent and young adult language arts, and a teacher candidate currently completing her educator preparation program.

Although we also engaged in developing thick, rich description through detailed field notes and discussed at length our subjectivity in interpreting participant responses and reactions to questions, these strategies often overlapped with our peer debriefing sessions. In peer debriefing, we as team members met together and asked ourselves, "What did we notice?" and "Why did we notice what we noticed?" (Glesne, 2016, pp. 152–153). This included reflection on our own subjectivity as we made meaning of the contexts and content of the participant responses and narratives.

Findings

The findings of this paper are organized into five thematic units: (a) democratic educator preparation, (b) a student-centered democratic foundation, (c) maintaining democratic practice, (d) impact of leadership on democratic practice, and (e) the democratic struggle. These themes emerged from the coding and post-coding methods as described in the methodology. As thematic units, the five categories directly address the philosophy and pedagogy of these democratically-oriented teachers in their current places of educational practice and align to our inquiry into how practicing teachers sustain the democratic preparation and development that they received in the educator preparation program, CARE.

Democratic Educator Preparation

Participants noted that they viewed their educator preparation as markedly different from that of their peers who were not in CARE at the same institution. CARE's philosophical underpinning coupled with the sustained experiences at Fed Hock created a unique experience for them as developing teachers. In a moment of reflection, one participant—Brianne—intimated, "I don't know if I would necessarily have that full faith in what kids can change and the impact they can have in our world if I didn't go through CARE." She acknowledged,

> *I definitely think CARE influenced my philosophy. Like, my philosophy as a teacher is instilling in kids the passion to want more, to have curiosity about the world, that you can make a change, that you can impact your community, which could be your classroom [or] your school.*

Collectively, the participants noted the importance of democratic community and an understanding of the Deweyan notion of an associated way of living in their preparation program. As a whole, participants saw this as an essential component of their CARE experience. In discussing the school as a community and an incubator of democratic life, James stated that he embraced the idea of community that he was exposed to in CARE. As a practicing teacher now, he noted that he is not "a teacher that just shows up, teaches, and leaves." He explained that democratic teachers "invest in what the kids are doing and what the community is doing as well." This was something that CARE taught him.

In CARE, James stated that they studied Dewey and other scholars of progressive education. CARE provided a foundational experience that helped him view teaching as something more than simply giving students information. Pedagogy meant ensuring students were actively engaged in their own learning and not just passively preparing for "regurgitating [information] on a multiple-choice test." Through CARE, he acknowledged the importance of a democratic experience for himself that carried over eventually into his own teaching. James noted the long-term professional impact of his democratic preparation:

> *I'm really thankful for [my student teaching internship] and one that I got to take on a lot of responsibility. Like any student teacher I lost control of the class a few times. I thought it was the worst thing in the world. I thought it was a total failure, and I remember talking with my mentor, and she said it's pretty simple—just stand up there and say, "I need your attention."*

As a teacher, he never forgot about this experience, and it positioned him to democratically maintain a student-centered perspective. By valuing students as individuals and not dehumanizing them, it was not simply about being in control but creating a space for mutual respect. Noting that when he lost control of his class a few times during his first year, his democratic experience came into play. In his words, "You don't need to yell. You don't need to threaten anything. Just say, 'I need your attention,' and wait."

A Student-Centered Democratic Foundation

All participants articulated democratic education as a practice and philosophy of being fundamentally student-centered. They discussed student-centered teaching in terms of providing the

students a space to have voice in their educational experience, to make choices, and to engage in projects that were relevant and meaningful to them as learners. For example, Bonnie asserted about student choice, "For me, it means focusing more on the child rather than the standards that I'm teaching." Bonnie shared that before she started doing her placements as a teacher candidate at Fed Hock, the idea of student-centered learning was a concept that she simply did not quite grasp. Likewise, for Erin, high school had been very much grounded in taking notes and following teacher directives. Referencing her placement, Erin noted,

> *[I]t was really their senior portfolios that kind of blew me out of the water. Starting those their freshman year, [it was] very student-based. The students choose what they want to do. They work with this project for four years; they have their community service hours, things like that. It brought it all "big picture" for me . . . This is what learning can look like for kids.*

Correspondingly, participants expressed democratic education as creating an environment in which students have a voice in their educational experiences. In discussing his teaching practice, James shared that education is about democratic participation in society. He asked himself a series of questions that related to this practice: "Am I giving kids a voice? Am I bringing the community into our school? Am I letting kids make decisions? Does everyone have a say?" Likewise, Lori echoed this idea, stating that being democratic "means giving students voice in the classroom."

Maintaining Democratic Practice

When asked about maintaining a democratic practice in their current school setting, participants agreed unanimously that it was difficult. As Brianne stated, "You can't have a Fed Hock moment every single day." For her, this means she cannot be consistently democratic in her practice. She must make compromises. Administrative obligations particularly related to high-stakes standardized testing take away a great deal of time to authentically and creatively be democratic. She said, "I savor those moments that I can take advantage of opportunities to design really cool democratic learning experiences for the students." With an air of regret, she shared, "If I'm dreading a lesson to teach it, I'm not going to deliver it democratically. So, if I don't want to teach it, kids are not going to want to learn it." Likewise, another participant, Rachel, stated,

> *I think that the high-stakes testing sometimes overlooks all the democratic elements of education, [for example] engagement, interest, and ownership, and feeling like they have a say in their education, and it stresses out all the adults involved.*

For her, in the interest of the adults in the schools, decisions get made that are not in the best interest of the kids. She attributed student burnout to this phenomenon. Students lose interest in learning and develop a universal sense that education is all the same from classroom to classroom Therefore, when they do come to a class with a democratic teacher, they meet it with a degree of uncertainty or completely distrust the process.

One of CARE's primary purposes is to create reflective practitioners in the classroom. All the participants addressed this as a principle component of their democratic teaching. As James pointed out,

> *CARE taught me to be reflective and to think in a democracy-centered style. If you reflect, you're trying to make things better. To make things better, you open things up to giving people voice. . . . I let my students critique me pretty frequently just so I can make it more open to them. But when they're critiquing me, they're also reflecting on their own learning.*

For these teachers, reflection was a means to stay democratically positioned. Reflective practice was inherently connected to maintaining a praxis which focused on keeping students engaged and giving them voice in their learning. In James's words, his reflective approach ensured that students were "thinking about what they learned, whether or not they liked it, why they liked it, and why they didn't like it." There is a value in this because it provides students with a voice in the democracy of the classroom. As James summed it up, "The idea of reflection—taking what we learn from that reflection and moving forward—I think is more of a democracy-centered style. If there is a stake for everyone; then, everyone is involved." This central tenet of CARE gave all the teacher-participants a framework and foundation to discuss their teaching as currently practiced as more democracy-centered than that of their peers.

Leadership Impact on Democratic Practice

All participants spoke in-depth to the importance of having a supportive school leadership, particularly in the person of the principal. Having a committed and supportive leader was imperative to their ability to sustain a democratic practice. The way in which school leaders allocated time and resources was critical—from having enough Chromebooks for each grade to take the state test at the same time to having two and a half hours of time in the week to do whatever they felt they needed for our students. One participant, Lori, put it this way:

> *I think it depends on your administration, to tell you the truth. I think that leadership's huge. You either have an administrator that is supporting what you're doing in the classroom or you don't. We've had a lot of turnover in our district, so I've experienced a lot of different administrators. I have had a few administrators in the past who didn't necessarily support democratic teaching.*

In the opinion of the participants, the leader sets the tone of the school and therefore sets the tone for being transformative and making changes that are positive for students. A quote from Trevor's interview revealed this same idea:

> *Thinking back to just the day-in-and-day-out grind, trying to hold on to those [democratic] principles in the classroom, I was just feeling defeated. So, I would say maybe more inward as opposed to an outward frustration. Because it's like swimming upstream after falling off a raft whitewater rafting. The theory is there, and the practice is there, but being the only person that's really trying to paddle that boat*

wears you down. [My principal] just handed me one of those books and said, 'Just teach from this.' And this is what you teach. So . . . for me, that was the day education died. Because now this is all I'm teaching. I've been told I have *to teach this. I can try to make it interesting, but I'm literally just teaching to a test. That's all I'm doing. And I think that's where I got so burned out in the classroom that I just had to make a change.*

With his statement "for me that was the day education died" in mind, we then asked if he thought that the democratic philosophy of CARE had been taken away from him. His response was:

You know, at a certain point, it really was. Because, for a long time, I was the only one in the building that was really trying a different approach. I didn't have anybody else to bring onboard with me that saw [democratic education] the way I saw it. And it became a challenge.

The Democratic Struggle

The idea of a challenge to practice democratic teaching was expressed by all participants. The democratic struggle was expressed as working in a negative culture, stigma against democratic practices, inconsistent expectations due to mandated changes, and overcoming traditional mindsets. Rachel talked about the obstacle of teaching in the negative culture created by high stakes testing. She noted a need for a type of democratic perseverance to counter this:

High-stakes testing and other administrative demands create a negative culture in my opinion. But more so, it's the adults that can make the difference. It's what we as teachers do with the kids. The kids know they have to take tests. The kids see the news articles; they know how much we are held accountable based on these tests and other things, but at the end of the day, if you teach them what they need to know, and you do it in a way that's enjoyable for them, they're going to do fine.

In the end, being a democratic teacher did not mean students would perform poorly on a state mandated assessment. In fact, for Rachel and others, it was the opposite. Being democratic was not an either/or choice, it was simply a matter of doing what was right for students.

Participants also shared a common perspective about the struggle of being a democratically prepared educator in a school environment that ranged from laissez-faire to hostile toward democratic education. At least one participant referred to the school environment as "not necessarily democratic," and another noted that his school was not like the democratic experiences as Fed Hock. Specifically, this was in the sense of not being with like-minded democratic teachers. For example, Rachel commented on her first teaching experience as one in a setting where she felt that her democratic identity—in fact, her democratic *self*—that she had worked so hard to develop had to be set aside to meet the expectations of the school. In reflecting on this experience, she stated,

The struggle is I came into a system that said: "This is how you're going to do this. Here's a checklist of things you need to do in your lesson plans every week; here's what you need to do to give a quiz every Friday. You need to have at least 10 homework assignments per semester." I feel like, at first, I was trying to internally battle this; this isn't what I've been taught, but this is my job. Then, after a while, it was a matter of finding a balance.

To this extent, Rachel recognized the need to rediscover how to practice democratic education. In a real sense, she had to put aside the democratic model she had learned in her CARE preparation, to align with expectations of the school community. At one point, after gaining an understanding of the school culture and curricular expectations, she was then able to say, "Now, I know how to do this." This enabled her to embrace a pedagogy that was more aligned with her own democratic education philosophy within the school environment. She found that she could do this without completely going against the traditional culture of the school and district goals.

Even when Erin had found her progressive stride, other teachers sometimes struggled to understand her democratic educational methods. Erin stated that her democratic practices were viewed as unorthodox and were cause for concern among her peers. She acknowledged,

I still get the weird looks from some of my colleagues. They aren't completely onboard with what I do. They'll walk in my room and it looks like organized chaos because the students are all doing their own thing working on projects. It looks like organized chaos, and they look at me and ask, "Do you have your stuff together?" For the longest time in my building the stigma was you're a good teacher if someone walks in your room and everyone is quiet and paying attention.

For the educators in this study, the struggle was real. However, they felt that CARE had empowered them to be democratic regardless of the school's traditional expectations. They found that although democratic teaching was a challenge due to systemic stigmas and structural obstacles, they also believed that teachers can control to a great extent what they do in their classrooms. Erin added, "We're slowly breaking away from that stigma. I feel like as a building, we're kind of more aligned with my viewpoints now. Because we are viewed more as experts than we were when I first started teaching."

Participants felt that whatever time limit a teacher was allotted—whether a 40-minute period or a block schedule—they still had a degree of autonomy to "teach from the heart." As James reflected, teachers shouldn't be afraid to jump in or *cannonball* into something exciting that would engage students democratically. As he put it, "I always had someone in my classroom [conducting observations and critiquing me] and it didn't stop me from cannonballing in and doing what I was trained to do in CARE."

Noting the ongoing day-to-day struggle to be a good educator, Lori also drew from her preparation in CARE. She said that to be persistent in her efforts and to be democratic meant persevering even when faced with what she perceived as adversity:

You're going to face adversity. But you have the tools from the CARE program inside of you to do great things in the world and to make a difference. CARE really gave me the sense that I can *make a*

difference—that I am *making a difference. I don't feel that every single day. But, I'll have those moments where I'm like, "Yes, this is why I'm a teacher—for this moment right here." When I feel successful teaching democratically.*

For Trevor, being a lone democratic teacher in an under-resourced district was a struggle. He saw himself as the only educator in his school to offer a democratic educational experience to students. He acknowledged that his school is "a really tough place to try to maintain those [democratic] principles." He attributed this to "the way teachers perceive poverty" and the way teacher approach their practice in a very "traditional way." As such, students spend "their entire schooling career with a traditional take on things."

In this sense, a focus on textbooks, worksheets, lecturing, and test preparation—what Trevor viewed as traditional—were an obstacle that took valuable time away from opportunities for democratic pedagogy in the classroom. This culture of the traditional created an environment that failed to prepare students for the type of learning that takes place in a democratic classroom. With an air of frustration, Trevor lamented,

They come into to my classroom where I'm doing things differently . . . We're doing different types of projects [than other teachers]. Our conversations are a little different. They have more of an equal voice in my room. But then they leave. And they don't get it again until they come back. So, I'm 42 minutes of democracy in their day.

In Trevor's views, the school's structural disruption of democratic opportunities in schooling, while not conducive to instilling the democratic values of society, did not have to prevent democratic teaching.

Discussion

Of significance, this study offers a unique understanding of democratic pedagogy and democratic praxis as experienced by democratically-trained teachers. However, many have noted that the development of a democratic citizenry has not been a primary focus of schools or of educator preparation programs (Apple & Beane, 2007; Collins et al., 2019; Embry-Jenlink, 2018; Hess & Hutchinson, 2019; Jenlink, 2009; Johnson & Hess, 2010; Kincheloe, 2008). A common idea shared by these teachers is that democratic education is important in helping to shape democratic citizens. As Embry-Jenlink (2018) noted, often schools "do not serve our society in fulfilling the purposes of education within a democracy" (p. 9), and as such, many teachers confront daily challenges to enacting authentic democracy within the school system (p. 11). For the democratically trained CARE educators interviewed in this study, the promise of democratic education is realized, at least to some degree, as they helped learners discover their own voice and their capacity to make decisions relevant to their educational experience.

According to Hess (2016), most educator preparation programs in colleges and schools of education simply reify the status quo of the "demands of state and federal educational mandates" (p. 73). The candidates graduating from such programs "enter classrooms and often, without knowing, uphold the status quo, which is often devoid of democratic ways of learning and knowing" (p. 73). Similarly, Embry-Jenlink (2018) stated, "In educator preparation, our role as teacher educators is a much larger one as we prepare the teachers and educational leaders. They are the front line for preparing the next generation of citizens and leaders to sustain our democracy" (p. 10).

The participants in this study, as graduates of the CARE program, demonstrate the capacity and potential of teachers to engage in a democratic pedagogical praxis regardless of the school's environment. The philosophy introduced to these teachers through CARE instilled in them a desire to be as democratic as possible even when the culture in which they practiced could at times work against this goal. Now practicing educators, these former CARE students, wrestled with ways of maintaining their commitments to democratic education in the context of schools where democratic education was not necessarily a focus or even existed in the Deweyan or progressive sense of CARE.

In many ways, Dewey, Counts, and Mursell remain relevant to the practice of these teachers given the foundations of their teacher preparation. Dewey (1938) argued that the learner's experiences and interests must be part of the educative environment, and these teachers sought ways to acknowledge that for their students (pp. 38–41). Dewey also noted that teachers "should know how to utilize the surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from [students] all they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worthwhile" (p. 40). By engaging students democratically in the classroom, the participants in this study understood their practice was not simply about the "acquisition of isolated skills and techniques by drill" but also about the development of democratic citizenship (p. 19).

As Wood (2005) noted, democratic education "must link what students learn with how they use what they are learning, it must be equitable as all students become citizens, and it must empower our children to become citizens" (p. xxiii). The idea of democratic education and its potential to help people develop a lifetime of democratic citizenship are articulated by the former CARE students as participants in this study. For these democratic teachers, this meant being open to new ideas and seeking out challenges, being themselves lifelong learners, craving knowledge, and demonstrating what CARE principles can mean for democracy and their students. They were inspired to find ways, even in the face of adversity, to introduce democratic values to their students through a pedagogy of action and reflection.

Recommendations

Gutmann and Ben-Porath (2015) argued,

In democratic societies, schools bear a dual responsibility to help develop in young people both the knowledge and skills that individuals need to live free lives and the shared values (including respect for the civil and political freedoms) that citizens need to support the institutions that enable them to live freely. (p. 1)

Accordingly, democratic education has the potential to equip students with the knowledge and skills required to ensure our basic liberties and social opportunities, especially the capacity to engage

in informed and educated democratic governance (p. 1). This requires schools and school leadership to consider new and creative ways of viewing democratic education. We suggest the following recommendations based on literature and findings:

1. emphasis on democratic values in educator preparation for democratic practice through active and reflective teaching;
2. a student-centered foundation for democratic pedagogy;
3. empowering students to take ownership of their learning and cultivating their democratic agency to explore their actions and consequences of engaging in learning as a meaningful way of developing citizenship;
4. leadership and organizational frameworks that encourage and facilitate teachers to continue democratic efforts to engage students;
5. focus on leadership creating and cultivating democratic spaces for democratic education; and
6. policies and procedures to mitigate obstacles and restraints to democratic teaching and learning. (Alshurman, 2015; Collins et al., 2018; Gutmann & Ben-Porath, 2015).

According to Alshurman (2015), the implementation of fundamental democratic values can only be achievable in educational settings that have a strong foundation grounded in democratic educational practices and have strong democratic leadership (p. 861). Hess, Johnson, and Reynolds (2014) underscored the importance of educational leaders' dispositions and practices in guiding and developing their organizations as democratic educational settings. This is critical to creating a democratic culture in schools that will facilitate teachers in maintaining the democratic principles acquired in educator programs such as CARE. Lowery (2012) argued that the "indivisible connection between democracy and education should permeate every aspect of education" (p. 229). For this reason, the school setting should be "a democratic platform from which all voices can speak and be heard" (p. 229). This begins with the students at the center of democratic education, taught by teachers working against the trends to de-democratize education. As one participant, Lori, acknowledged, the student-centered goal of democratic education is to empower students to be active and reflective citizens.

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