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Creating Democratic Classroom Communities with Morning Meeting Humanizing Social Practices.

A Response to *The Morning Meeting: Fostering a Participatory Democracy Begins with Youth in Public Education*

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Abstract

In our response to Tilhou's article published last issue, "The Morning Meeting: Fostering a Participatory Democracy Begins with Youth in Public Education," we share and discuss ethnographic data from Morning Meetings in two U.S. elementary classrooms. We detail ways the democratic potential of Morning Meetings is being cultivated in these classroom communities where one teacher has extended the Responsive Classroom model while the other has developed his own structures. We show how classroom democratic norms are established through humanizing community-building social practices as we argue that Morning Meetings must be understood across time and activities that may have an academic function.

This article is in response to

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Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself. (Dewey, 1916/2004, p. 239)

We are united by the fundamental belief that every human being is of infinite worth, deserving of compassion, dignity, and respect. (Harris, 2020)

W E WRITE AT a time of increasingly corrosive partisan division in the United States, and of autocratic governments worldwide, that is undermining trust in democratic institutions. With distress, we have witnessed how the coronavirus pandemic has been politicized to undermine faith in democratic decision-making. However, like the author of the article that we are responding to (Tilhou, 2020), we have hope that schools can provide an antidote to such disturbing trends. Along with John Dewey, we too envision classrooms as communities where young people can practice democracy. In particular, Morning Meetings in Responsive

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Classrooms could become spaces "to foster a new generation of participatory, empowered democratic civic actors" (Tilhou, 2020, p. 2). We remain hopeful because we have worked with caring, humanizing teachers who share democratic values with political leaders who have a "fundamental belief that every human being is of infinite worth, deserving of compassion, dignity and respect" (Harris, 2020, para. 7).

In the article to which we are responding, Tilhou (2020) made three related points in her argument about why the democratic potential of Morning Meetings in Responsive Classrooms is not being achieved. First, the American public education system has largely failed to create experiences of democracy for students in schools. Second, classroom meetings have come to be regarded as an extension of academic study. Third, Morning Meetings have not been organized with democratic decision-making processes drawn from the free school movement founded on the Summerhill model. We use these three points to structure our response. While we agree with much of Tilhou's broad critique, using examples from our recent published studies, we both disagree with the implication that academic study is not a democratic process and illustrate democratic social practices within Morning Meetings that go beyond the model Tilhou proposes.

Humanizing Classroom Communities

Whereas Dewey (1916/2004) envisioned schools as essential democratic institutions, we agree with Tilhou (2020) that public educational policies and hierarchical institutional schooling structures have created an American public education system that largely fails to create consistent experiences of democracy for students in schools. The situation has only worsened in the 21st century with federal curricular mandates and increased testing.

We agree that schooling in general has failed to create democratic spaces for young people. Alas, the institutions of schooling more often dehumanize rather than humanize the lives of young people in schools. However, in contrast to Tilhou's (2020) focus on a *generic* critique of schooling, we (Boyd & Edmiston) present examples from Boyd's extensive ethnographic research, conducted along with graduate students, in two *specific* classrooms that we believe are consistent with the democratic ideals for education championed by Dewey. The data from a two-year case study conducted in Rachele's second-grade classroom and a one-year case study in Michael's third-grade classroom provide hopeful examples of education in humanizing classroom communities that are, in Dewey's (1916/2004) words cited in the epigraph, "not preparation for life" but rather illustrations of "life itself."

Dewey's (1916/2004) work serves to remind us that a school is a miniature society, so a core democratic aim of education must be to socialize young people into learning how to live together in community. Democratic classroom life should not be presented as an idea but rather experienced as a humanizing reality. In the life of each *particular* classroom, a teacher should strive to develop not only "liberating human intelligence" but also "human sympathy" (Dewey, 1916/2004, p. 221). In other words, teachers can promote democracy not only by helping young people in making intelligent, informed decisions but also by striving to build socioemotional

connections among everyone in a classroom community so that all feel they belong to society as whole people. As former President Obama put it, "an active and informed citizenry" shares "that empathy, that decency, the belief that everybody counts" (Obama, 2020, para. 5).

The two classrooms that we report on represent different socioeconomic contexts. Rachele, a second-grade teacher with over 10 years of experience, taught in a multiethnic, multilingual lottery charter school within a high-poverty urban district (all students in this district received free or reduced lunch). All teachers in the school embraced Responsive Classroom. Of her 25 students (11 boys, 14 girls), about a quarter received push-in or pull-out services for English language learning and/or academic intervention support. In contrast, while Michael's classroom also reflected ethnic diversity, there was less socioeconomic diversity in the school. Michael, a veteran third-grade teacher with over 30 years of experience, was the only teacher in his school to hold Morning Meetings. The public school was located near colleges; several students had parents who were faculty or enrolled as students. About half of the 18 students (10 boys, 8 girls) had at least one parent born outside the USA; no student received English language learning support (although some students spoke languages other than English at home); and four students received support services, one of whom was assigned a full-time teaching assistant. Whereas Rachele's Morning Meeting routinely offered a constellation of predictable types of practices, Michael focused primarily on talking about independently read, student-selected books (after taking care of schoolwide and classroom announcements). Morning Meeting was integral to how both teachers actively cultivated caring participation and active contributions among all students in their classroom communities.

Both ethnographic case studies employed sociocultural discourse analyses of extensive videotaped, observational, and interview data to analyze for the temporal and reflexive development of talk and the purposeful and accretive nature of instructional practices (Mercer, 2008). A purpose was to elucidate what Morning Meeting looks and sounds like as well as to detail the critical, personal, deep, and continuous work of these experienced teachers (for details, see Boyd et al., 2018, 2020; Boyd & Galda, 2011; Boyd & Markarian, 2011, 2015; Boyd & Smyntek-Gworek, 2012; Lysiak et al., 2020).

Following, we illustrate both similarities across each classroom community and the distinctive approaches of each classroom teacher as we synthesize findings and quotes from teacher interview data. The social practices in both Rachele's and Michael's classroom communities created shared humanizing norms: young people became more active, caring, informed citizens. At the same time, each teacher's practices were consistently implicitly resisting the status quo of typical undemocratic dehumanizing schooling.

Morning Meeting Can Offer an Academic Function within Humanizing Social Practices

Though Morning Meeting, as part of the Responsive Classroom movement, has a democratic potential, Tilhou (2020) lamented that this has largely been lost in recent years when Morning

Meetings have been used to teach academic standards and thus are not focusing on disrupting the inequalities of schooling.

While we recognize that the democratic potential of Morning Meetings within some Responsive Classrooms is not being achieved when classroom meetings are merely regarded as an extension of, and preparation for, uncritical academic study, we question Tilhou's (2020) characterization of a binary between classrooms with Morning Meetings that have or do not have a focus on academics. We do so because that is not a finding supported by the data from Boyd's research in these two classrooms where Morning Meetings were not detached from academics. We view these practices as in concert with the humanizing social practices in each classroom community. For example, students may be readying for an academic focus, playing games that rehearse academic content, or experiencing structures and opportunities for practicing literacy skills in personal and socially meaningful ways, all of which humanize classroom life.

Over decades, Michael evolved Morning Meetings into a relaxed, predictable structure to create and nurture a community where students wanted to read and to talk with one another about what they had read. Morning Meetings focused these eight- and nine-year-old children on the core academic subject of reading—yet reading was never detached from life. In their Morning Meeting "performance dialogues," each student had "a time to shine," to be listened to across the week, and to talk about whatever book they had read and written about in their reading log. It was common practice for students to loan books to other students. On the day when particular logs were due, three or four students shared entries. Michael and the rest of the class took active-listening roles (and relaxed positions on the floor) as they freely asked questions of the presenting students, who were consistently positioned to have interpretive authority. Michael collected the students' exercise books containing their reading logs and responded in writing before handing them back the next morning. Students, in turn, often responded in writing to Michael's comments. Michael's purpose was to move children beyond retelling stories. He was never focused on decontextualized skills but rather wanted the sharing of stories to deepen the children's social relationships and to connect to their lives in and out of school. He noted his core purpose in an interview: "Really relate it [a story] to yourself and to others and to other things you've done and seen, and it just brings a whole other dimension or life to the books."

Michael was deeply interested in what every student thought and mediated how they connected what they and others had read. He had a clear structure and rationale for celebrating how students used reading logs: They functioned to support each student's reading, social connections, and creative uptake (see for example, Boyd & Markarian, 2015, for details of how one student's reading log was celebrated).

Beyond what happened in Morning Meetings, Michael was looking for "progress in relationships with other kids," especially in terms of kindness and inclusion of previously isolated children. Every year he built on and extended ongoing supportive collaborative practices, as when he brought in professional storytellers to lead a two-week workshop for the children. The children took responsibility as they worked in groups with the professionals to rehearse and tell tales culminating in joyful storytelling for an audience of parents and peers.

In Boyd's article that Tilhou (2020) cited (Boyd & Smyntek-Gworek, 2012), Tilhou inferred that in Boyd's analysis of talk in Michael's classroom, she was arguing that Morning Meetings should be academic. However, in Boyd's discourse analysis of the reading log talk, she was actually arguing that there was no need for any generic scripted literacy programs by showing how Michael's Morning Meetings were a way of building a community in which reading, talking, and writing about books met all the imposed literacy standards that Michael was required to achieve. Further, she was arguing for faith in effective teachers who listen, are attentive to students, and make responsive decisions that are attentive to the humanity and needs of everyone in the classroom community.

For Rachele, Morning Meetings set up each day socially as well as academically and over time were integral to creating core democratic values:

> Morning Meeting is the way we get everyone on board. It's the way we get everyone together, knowing each other, caring for each other. It builds buy-in for academics. It teaches character, empathy, listening, patience, flexibility . . . weaving academics into Morning Meeting in a fun way is like a free pass to guaranteeing learning; just be careful not to overdo it and make it feel like a test, or like a drag, or like fake fun.

Rachele routinely infused academic as well as socioemotional learning and teaching into Morning Meeting routines that included a greeting, sharing, group activity, and morning message (for details of two group activities that Rachele personalized, see Boyd et al., 2018, 2020). Morning Message salutations were personalized and timely. They often positioned students as academic experts, for example, Dear Mathematicians, Dear Poets. A morning message (which was visible upon entering the classroom) might include a brainteaser or a math story problem to work on as all students were welcomed, welcomed others, and prepared for the rest of the school day. Group activities were permeated with fun and active academic content. Facets of ongoing class foci were introduced and focused on in the Morning Meeting so as to set up subsequent collaborative activities. For example, a field trip by bus to the village was introduced as part of a social studies unit on "wants and needs." At times, across several weeks of the unit, Morning Meeting time included opportunities for children to envision and then plan and role-play what would likely happen on the trip when contacting and interviewing local shopkeepers. This academic preparation laid the groundwork for subsequent interviews that were honest and respectful as children were able to follow their curiosity to find out about how people in local community businesses were responding to the material and social wants and needs not only of customers but also, for example, of homeless people. In this unit, every student decided on an issue that was important to them, conducted research, and then wrote persuasive letters to local or national people about the topic. Morning Meetings were the place where responses to students'

persuasive letter writing were read aloud and discussed: Each student came to value their voice and came to understand ways in which each could make a difference in the world.

In both classrooms, an academic focus enhanced rather than detracted from social practices as part of creating more democratic spaces in which, to quote Harris (2020) again, there was a "fundamental belief that every human being is of infinite worth, deserving of compassion, dignity and respect" (para. 7). Classroom communities were being created in which students were not engaged in tasks detached from life, for example, preparation for literacy tests, but rather were coming to regard themselves as self- and other-directed people where their collaborative talk, reading, and writing were valued by everyone in the ongoing community life of their classroom. The focus of collective action was consistently directed toward making a critical difference to their lives within the classroom community, and in some cases to people beyond.

Establishing Democratic Norms

Tilhou (2020) argued that students would be "participatory, empowered democratic civic actors" (p. 2) if Morning Meetings were modeled on democratic meetings in "free" schools founded on the Summerhill model, where students experienced equality when their votes were counted as equal to adults in meetings making decisions. We agree that students are able to shape, challenge the status quo, and make changes to what, how, and where they may learn when they feel "safe" and have the "freedom" to generate ideas together because of their acknowledged "right" to express their opinions and be heard.

Though we recognize the democratic potential of organizing Morning Meetings with principles drawn from the free school movement, we again question the author's (2020) binary contrast with all current approaches to Morning Meetings in Responsive Classrooms while privileging the free-school approaches. Rather than reducing a teacher's role to a vote in important decisions, our data illustrates the complexity of teachers' roles in mediating the creation of a democratic values-based classroom community with an orientation intending that all young people not only have a voice but are also consistently humanizing and being humanized across all classroom social practices, not only those of Morning Meetings. We use examples from the data to illustrate a more nuanced understanding of how Morning Meetings may promote inclusive, and thus humanizing, social practices within each classroom community that established democratic norms.

Meier (2002), who has founded and written about several democratic schools serving students of all ages, ethnicities, and socioeconomic status, believes that "all the habits of mind and work that go into democratic institutional life must be practiced in our schools" (p. 177). In "Democracy and Public Education," the final chapter in her book *In Schools We Trust*, she stressed that classroom norms need to be democratic because "democracy assumes the prior existence of people with shared loyalties, confidences, and understandings. It doesn't create them" (pp. 177–178). For Meier, "human-scaled schools" become democratic institutions not simply because students and teachers may

have equal votes in decision-making but because the "democratic habits" that develop norms are continually "sending messages about what one has a right to expect from society and what one is responsible to give back as well" (p. 181). Habits formed across social practices are central, Meier wrote, in "learning to relate to people" and developing a "sense of community" so that we may come to trust one another both as we find similarities with others and celebrate differences in recognizing "the complexity and interconnectedness of people and other living things" (p. 180).

Equality and Community Building

We agree with Tilhou (2020) that students must "experience equality, decision-making, and mutual respect on personal levels" (p. 2). Yet our examples illustrate how teachers' views of equality and community building extend beyond the ability to vote to make decisions in formal meetings. We show community social practices in which all voices are equally valued, heard, and responded to in ongoing dialogue.

Significantly, Rachele did not merely implement Responsive Classroom ideas as procedures but rather employed their structures with intent to merge them with her own developed Morning Meeting social practices. Michael built a community based in equality. In addition to the performance dialogues and storytelling noted previously, he implemented daily chapter book read-aloud time after lunch (Boyd & Galda, 2011, ch. 5). The selection of the next book was "a big deal" and was made with the children. Though he took a student poll, he was clear this was not a simple vote because, as he noted, the children couldn't know that some books were better than others to read aloud. He routinely introduced fun, ongoing academic activities in which children worked with different people. As examples, students practiced with and assessed each other in math times tables, and throughout the year they designed, built, decorated, and then launched their own rocket.

Rachele was clear about how the social practices of Morning Meetings build a community culture and establish habits based in the principle of equality.

> We build a shared culture through songs, games, jokes, the morning message, thinking challenges, etc. Having genuine fun together brings everyone on board and promotes "buy-in" from the kids. I wouldn't start the day any other way. Everyone comes to school from their own worlds, and Morning Meeting brings us together into our classroom community for the day. We can all see each other in the circle, everyone is on equal footing. During the greeting, everyone is greeted and welcomed by name. I believe that to hear your name spoken aloud in greeting helps integrate you into the group. During sharing, kids learn to listen to each other and respect each other.

Rachele was aware of both building community culture and presuming equality as she planned and ran Morning Meetings. She acknowledged that incorporating Morning Meetings was "hard work" for her personally because "you need to sincerely be engaged and present an authentic yourself in order to make it work." Further, she stressed that she had to "take into consideration the personality, needs, culture, and background of the class as a whole and of individual students, in order to engage everyone." Morning

Meetings were especially important to respond to particular needs. It provided Rachele with "a chance to 'take the temperature' of the class—how is everyone feeling? What's the mood? Is there someone who is struggling today who needs some extra attention or leeway?"

Rachele introduced and developed two community-building social practices that were rooted in radical equality in the sense that across a year every person contributed ideas that were accepted and celebrated by everyone: Class Handshake and Song of the Week.

The Class Handshake (Boyd et al., 2018) was a physically active, coauthored, whole-class greeting activity that occurred (and was added to) every Thursday across a school year. It began with a simple handshake, and as the ritual was repeated and developed, it became longer and more sophisticated. Rachele conceived it as "an example of learning kinesthetically, verbally, and cooperatively." Practicing together prompted frustration, concentration, and laughter, despite errors. Through the activity, these second-graders were developing norms of social interaction, participation, and relations as they collectively and repeatedly embodied accepted ways of interacting. They practiced attentive listening and cocreation as they connected the content at hand (the performance) both to what was already known (the established practice) and to however students in a leadership position wanted to develop the Class Handshake (as they added a move each week). Rachele clarified how the contributions and mistakes of children and adults were accepted equally: "The handshake activity was a supercharged classroom community-building activity. We all worked together, and laughed a lot, and made mistakes together, and figured things out together . . . Everyone's ideas were valued and included."

Song of the Week (Boyd et al., 2020) was centered by playing commercially available prerecorded music tracks by a variety of musical artists. In addition to nurturing a shared sense of belonging to the classroom community, each song connected thematically to whatever project was currently focusing academic pursuits in social studies, science, or language arts. Children often requested to sing favorite songs together and were heard singing the songs with friends. Rachele was clear about how singing created a shared community identity: "It's a community. It's our identity. It's our classroom identity. We all know these songs and we sing together. Singing is like this huge community builder."

Student Agency

Meier (2002) was emphatic that in a democratic school community, everyone has agency, not just teachers. Schools should make it possible for everyone—teachers and students—to "show their stuff, to display and demonstrate both their passion and their skill in highly personal ways (not just to talk about what they're good at but actually to do their stuff alongside of novices)" (p. 20).

Those examples illustrate how both Michael and Rachele were continually promoting the agency of every student and thus acknowledging everyone's potential to make valued contributions to all classroom community-building activities, not just in formal decision-making. Students were neither expected nor ever left to be passive in their classrooms. Rachele clarified how Morning Meetings were integral to developing student agency.

One of the most important things a person can have is self-determination and a sense of agency. Students should feel like they have a say in decisions that affect them, that they have a voice, that their opinion is valued, and that they have the power to make positive changes. So, the question is about how Morning Meetings contributes to that. All are requested to contribute and be a part of what is happening at this moment in our community. Students often make requests about what games we play, what greeting we use. They are able to see their classmates as agents, respect each other's viewpoints even when they disagree (or get annoyed), listen to each other, take turns, respect time. Ideally, after the routine is established, the students take over parts of the Morning Meeting and make it their own. Their ownership in Morning Meeting is what makes it work.

Rachele envisioned that each child would learn how to act with agency so as to dialogue with one another despite disagreement, an essential element of dialogue in a democracy that is sadly lacking in contemporary public discourse.

I want them to learn how to hold an unstructured conversation, especially one with disagreement and conflict . . . How do we handle these kinds of conversations? How do we hear others and make ourselves heard? How do we take in what other people are saying and have it affect our thinking?

Here we agree with Tilhou (2020) when she argued that "the more dialogic adults and students are, the greater the likelihood a community of democratic and critical engagement is produced . . . and more widespread changes in education can occur" (p. 8).

Michael was clear about how student agency was building relationships within the classroom community, again, despite the challenges. Here he spoke about a boy who began the year without friends.

One of the highlights of my year has actually been the progress that he's made in terms of relationships with other kids, uh, and what other kids have done for him, which has been absolutely incredible. The kindness and caring that I've seen, and it's come from all sorts of different kids. The group of girls . . . has really been just spectacular and being kind to him and trying to include him in things.

As Boyd has shown elsewhere (Boyd & Janicki-Gechoff, 2020), Rachele and Michael were each intent on working with students to create a classroom community experienced as "a dialogic local space." Their intentions were that everyone's realities had value in a living space where all would feel heard and be open to hearing others so that they could make new meaning together. For the time that they were with their teachers, all of the children were living in democratic communities.

Conclusion

Meier (2002) envisioned schools as "crucibles of democratic life" (p. 180). Crucibles are transformative because heat and stirring creates change that cannot be reversed. In democratic classroom communities, people of all ages experience the vibrancy of real-life

interactions made all the more human by the stirring of unanticipated events and ideas.

As Meier (2002) stressed, to live in a democracy means that we must "learn the art of living together as citizens" (p. 176). We have to change when we learn "how to relate to people we don't automatically trust" (p. 179). Rachele and Michael knew that children would only come to trust them, and trust one another, when each could bring what they knew and what they were curious about to classroom projects that would engage and humanize them as whole people. Always, Michael and Rachele were modeling and nurturing a dialogic value orientation (Aukerman & Boyd, 2019) to learning—and to each other. They knew that people would relate to others and accommodate others' needs, when they may talk and be heard, laugh, sing, and move together, as well as knew that other people, especially their teachers, could encounter challenges, learn by trial and error, and yet retain their humanity.

The pandemic has disrupted education throughout the world. Acknowledging the dehumanizing upset for the children in her class with week after week of minimal internet connection, Rachele could not finish the school year without every child knowing that she still cared for them and that they were still connected. On the official last day of school in June, with New York state still in partial lockdown, Rachele could not have the anticipated end-of-year celebration. So, by car, she visited the houses of each of the students who had been with her that year. Masked and keeping physical distance in the crucible of the pandemic, she transformed each child's isolation into a joyful celebration. She again stirred up their lives as she met and spoke with each child, sometimes through a window or a cracked-open door. Some were ecstatic. Some were tearful. All were touched.

Rachele posted a photo blog so that all the children could experience virtually what she had worked so hard to establish that year: a democratic community where everyone was always seen, heard, and valued. Despite the deadly daily news headlines, as Dewey might have said, "This was education because it was life itself."

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