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ABSTRACT

In this inquiry I investigated how teachers in a democratic school describe their feelings, about the opportunities they have to have their voice heard. How do the same teachers describe their satisfaction with their working conditions? In order to answer these questions, I began with a literature review in order to gain a well-rounded understanding of democratic schools. Next, I share data gathered from conducting teacher interviews at the Delta high school program. My report on my analysis of that data found three pervasive patterns among the interviews; teacher voice, autonomy and rapport with students. These patterns gave insight into what created a positive experience for teachers at a democratic school. How those attributes could be applied to other schools to raise teacher satisfaction, is a point for greater investigation.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Before I started my education at Penn State, I went to the Delta Program for high school - a democratic alternative program to the local high school in State College, Pennsylvania. In this environment, I thrived academically and socially. I was diagnosed with a learning disability in elementary school, and although I was able to keep up with school work after services were discontinued in 7th grade, I never prospered in a school environment until I attended Delta. The autonomy and choice the school provided the students and teachers allowed for me to shape my own education. When I did struggle with content, my teachers were easily accessible, and welcomed my questions. Years later, I am at Penn State studying Special Education, and I found that the self-advocacy skills and the passions I developed at Delta prepared me well for college. With graduation less than a year away, I am faced with the looming question of what kind of school I would like to work in.

Where will I be able to pass on my love of education, and my own understandings born from hard-won personal experience of how frustrating learning can be when not given the proper tools? Do I want to seek out a democratic school at which to teach? These questions prompted this inquiry. In order to focus my investigation, I pinpointed the following two questions I wanted to answer. How do teachers in a democratic school describe their feelings about the opportunities they have to have their voice heard? How do the same teachers describe their satisfaction with their working conditions? In order to answer these questions, I began with a literature review in order to gain a well-rounded understanding of democratic schools. Next, I share data gathered from conducting teacher interviews at the Delta high school program. My

report on my analysis of that data found three pervasive patterns among the interviews; teacher voice, autonomy and rapport with students. I begin with a description of the study context.

Context: The Delta Program

Delta was started in in 1974 within the State College Area School District (SCASD). It was originally named the Alternative Program for grades 9-12. It is a branch of SCASD's original high school. Students who graduate from Delta receive the same degree as the district's traditional high school, and can take classes at the original high school during their school day. Delta was founded with the goal of utilizing the community as a classroom. Its central value is to involve students, staff and parents in decision making. In The Alternative Program's first year, 120 students enrolled. In 1993, the name was changed to the Delta Program. In 2014, a separate (Delta Middle) program was opened for students in grades 5-8. Both programs have a registration cap to keep class sizes small. There is an application process to attend Delta for students seeking an alternative to the traditional middle or high school offerings in the district. Due to the high level of independence allowed to students at Delta, there is a different tolerance for behavior issues such as not doing homework or skipping class. Should such behaviors continue after a behavior contract is made, a student risks not being invited back to Delta and are sent back to the original high school. As of this writing there is a wait list for the Delta middle, and high school programs, which demonstrates a growing demand.

Delta defines democratic schools as “demonstrating respect and trust of students. These schools strive to create an environment of equity shared by students and teachers. Students, through the democratic process, become empowered to shape their own learning experience, developing essential leadership and problem-solving skills useful later in life” (Our Democratic Process). Their governance process involves a whole school meeting once each week, and the

school convenes in small groups to talk about various issues, most of which have to do with school governance. Representatives from the small groups are chosen to represent these groups on the advisory council. This council includes students, parents, teachers and the Director. They discuss, and make decisions about, governance and policy. Individual students make decisions about their schedule and goals three times a year at advisor team meetings -- these teams include parents, the student and a least one teacher. Being involved with this democratic system while in high school allows for students to decide what matters need to be addressed. I have been in meetings with the whole school that covered how to get students to quit smoking, how to decorate for the holidays, and what murals should be painted over in the school.

There are two teachers each for math, social studies, science, English, and special education at the high school program, along with a single health/gym teacher, a counselor and a Director. Teachers have their own office, but share all classrooms. These offices provide a space for students to easily find teachers when they need assistance. There is a board at the entrance of the school on which announcements are posted, allowing students to see if a teacher is not in the school for any reason. Students have input into what classes are taught based on interest and need. Classes are offered not to fulfill a range of various tracks, but instead by considerations of what subjects need to be offered and students' interest levels in particular offerings. Examples of classes offered in accordance with the interests of students are: horror literature, self-defense, domestic animal science, anthropology and women's studies.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This thesis investigates what a democratic school is, how they are set up, and why they exist. Today our education system is pushing towards uniformity in curriculum, wanting all students to have standardized knowledge when they graduate. The financial and legal pushes for adopting common core standards which emerged in 2009 have been many years in the making. Today only 8 states and Puerto Rico have not adopted Common Core standards into their public education (Standards in Yours State, 2017). I will not be arguing for or against the Common Core standards, only that they illustrate a push for sameness in education that is very much the opposite of the spirit of democratic schools. The democratic school philosophy calls for teachers to be personally involved in a high number of school decisions.

The values and philosophy of democratic schools, impact individuals on a personal level, and also have implications that resound at the societal level. On a larger scale, it is important for communities and school districts to know how their schools are running, and the ways in which the role of the teacher varies by school and by context. The teacher attrition rate is generally high and teacher turnover has been found to negatively affect student achievement, creating multiple disruptions, some of which are obvious and others of which are subtle, including "a disruptive effect of turnover beyond changing the distribution in teacher quality" (Ronfeldt, Lankford, Loeb & Wyckoff year, pg.1). Because of the importance of retaining teachers in our schools, how do we get teachers to stay? According to Sutchter, Darling-Hammond & Carver-Thomas (2016), "Two-thirds of leavers depart before retirement age, most because of dissatisfaction with aspects of their teaching conditions" (pg. 19). Knowing how democratic schools empower and retain

teachers could provide insight into how we can improve teaching conditions and retain teachers nationwide.

Democracy

The ambiguity of the term *democracy* has caused people to over generalize it to support almost anything they want to apply it to, such as the voucher systems offered by the "school choice" movement, which effectively defund many public schools and other dubious educational initiatives. Apple and Bean (2007) make the case that “Claims for democracy could be used to shore up movements for civil rights, expanded voting privileges, and protection of free speech. However, democracy is also used to further the causes of free market economic school-choice vouchers, and to defend the dominance of major political parties” (p.6). Apple and Bean argue that “We live in a democracy, right?” (p.6) it does not provide a suitable argument for many supposedly democratic initiatives, many of which are a direct challenge to democratic principles.

Democratic institutions are those guided by the principles of democracy. Apple (2007) outlines some of these principles. Choice and active participation are key elements of a democratic institution. These institutions are built for people within it to be participants, and have an active role in making choices; from laws to leaders. A representative democracy is the basis of the system of government in the United States.

A sub-type of democracy is consensus democracy, where a choice is not made until the whole population agrees. Fischer (2014) describes the process as involving a large amount of compromise in order for the voices of the minority to not be overshadowed by the opinion of the vote-winning majority. Part of the problem is that democracy often suffers from poor participation from the citizenry. If, all citizens in a society are not participating, then a true consensus cannot happen. Mandatory participation of all is needed for a “perfect” democracy.

The United States, what many consider the standard-bearer for democracy, is unable to secure full participation in its governance.

In *Creating and Managing the Democratic School* (1995) Chapman, Froumin & Aspin create a guild to create and keep a democratic system of education running. He is clear that democracy is not a perfect form of decision making, but argues that democracy is the best system that has been tried to date. A true democracy does not exist, but is a set of ideals that people strive to approximate.

Besides democracy being a system of governance, it also carries a set of values and attitudes. All decisions made in this system should also follow the democratic values. The system does not work if an initiative undermines those values, as seen in the case of school vouchers undermining the public education system in the United States. Working towards the common good is a democratic value, and in order for it to be met, critical thinking and literacy must be taught to the masses. Schools are a main vehicle for achieving the goals of our society.

Democratic Schools

There is broad agreement that in a Democratic School, choices are to be made with the common good in mind but there is no broad agreement about what might serve as a stable definition of what a democratic school is (Chapman, 1995). Many democratic schools incorporate consensus decision-making strategies. Mirroring the system employed by the United States government.

Chapman discuss the importance of values in the case of democratic schools. It is concluded, “democracy is possible only when education is built on democratic values - freedom of choice, self-determination, sovereignty of the personality in education” (1995, p.86). Democratic procedures, such as voting or providing choices are only one component among

many that constitute the project of implementing and supporting democratic schools. The clarity of a school's commitment to democratic values can be a tool for student, teachers, parents and other decision makers. The careful clarification of values allows for everyone within a school to understand the vision and goals shared by all within the school. Apple (2007) lists some democratic values and principles as they relate to public education:

Concern for the dignity and rights of individuals and minorities. Concern for the welfare of others and "the common good." Faith in the individual and collective capacity of people to create possibilities for resolving problems. The open flow of ideas, regardless of their popularity, that enables people to be as fully informed as possible. The use of critical reflection and analysis to evaluate ideas, problems, and policies. An understanding that democracy is not so much as "ideal" to be pursued as an "idealized" set of values that we must live and that must guide our life as a people. The organization of social institutions to promote and extend the democratic way of life. (p.7).

The principles of a school should reflect the intention of the school, which together form the foundation for a democratic school. A democratic education, in turn, creates informed citizens capable of upholding democratic principles, which ensures the continuing success of society as a whole: "In order for the will of the people to work for the common good and hold government officials accountable, the people must be literate, well-informed, and able to think critically about the issues of the day" (Jones, 2006, p.14).

In Chapman's (1995) guide for how to create and keep a democratic system of education running, he shows the relationship between the educational systems in Australia and Russia and how these relate to the systems of government in each country. Chapman proposes procedures and principles of democracies in general as distinct from democratic institutions. For instance, one such institution might be a democratic school, which might be constrained by larger

influences such as district regulations that prevent democratic values from flourishing throughout the school. This does not mean that such a school should not be considered a democratic institution, because nothing is fully democratic.

When Apple (2006) applies mandatory participation to schools, he is describing an educational culture in which all students and all teachers have their voices heard in decisions made within the school. In one of Apple's case studies, a school had only one classroom that was run democratically within a school, but he provided no example of any school that had fully instituted democracy across the entire student body. Fully democratic institutions are rare, and perhaps no school has accomplished this ideal, but this should not be a deterrent to those seeking to institute a democratic system. They could find encouragement in the fact that there is always room for improving and innovating towards increased democracy within schools, because a democracy is never finished developing.

Democratic Schools: Curriculum

In *Democratic Schools: Lessons in Powerful Education* (2007) Apple discusses a democratic curriculum. It should allow students to explore their own passions, and grow in a more than purely academic sense. Apple (2007) tells the story of a democratic curriculum that developed in a classroom in Chicago that was co-developed by students and the teacher. It was based off of students' personal questions about the world and community around them. This allows them to authenticity research and engage in issues that mattered to them. Apple does see that there are benefits to traditional classrooms that may be jeopardized by such a democratic curriculum: "There are certainly risks involved in trying to solve authentic curriculum problems and create democratic ideals in a classroom. Students are no longer protected by the conventional lesson plans" (2007, p.80). By the end of the case study, Apple writes that everyone in the school

including the principle would argue “the lessons and learning that resulted and continue to emerge from the project well exceeded anyone’s expectations” (2007, p.80). The students that were in this democratic class wrote reflections on their experiences. Along with the consensus that they learned personally relevant skills there was a pattern that the students felt as though the classroom functioned as a family, as well as a classroom.

Democratic Schools: Decision Making Systems

Along with the high level of connections to the community, the literature shows a pattern of parental and student collaboration in the school. In *Democratic School Accountability: A Model for School Improvement* (2006) Jones argues that democratic schools can create greater school accountability for student success and achievement. He creates an outline for doing so. Rather than taking the lead in parent teacher conferences himself, Jones (2006) has his students lead the conference. They are expected to lead the conversation about their work during the semester. They evaluate themselves and share this with the group, along with showing their best piece of work. Jones expressed that he had doubts that the process would be successful. In the end, he determined that this strategy increased effective conversations between students, parents and the teacher about student learning (2007, p.98). This is one system where decision making happens in a democratic school.

A veto vote can be incorporated into the decision-making process. This veto vote in schools may happen on multiple levels. A veto can be exercised in a classroom by a teacher, or in the school by the Director, or in the school district by the Superintendent. This power to veto becomes more complex in a school district such as Delta's, because the whole district is not run by a democratic system.

In order for an educational curriculum, and democratic goals to be effectively implemented in a school, proper systems must be put in place. This is how the school is governed. There can be classrooms that are run democratically, or schools that are run democratically as a whole. In a democracy every member has a say. In a school, students are often not members among the decision-making bodies. For the democratic organization of a school, students must be involved because they are members that have a stake in the decisions “all of those directly involved in the school, including young people, have the right to participate in the process of decision making” (Apple, 2007, p.5). As discussed earlier, this does not mean that all members will participate, although they have the opportunity to do so. There are usually different decision making bodies within a democratic school in accordance with the reach of the issue being decided on. A choice of teacher in-service days would not involve students in the decision making group because they do not have personal investment in the situation. Decisions can either be decided on based on majority or consensus. In order to make decisions, conversations and deliberation usually happen in advance of voting. Chapman (1995) defines what is meant by deliberation: “Decisions will be arrived at by rational discourse and on the grounds of the objective and convincing character of the arguments advanced to support them” (p.33). The argument being fought for should be based on character or values. This means that a decision which goes against democratic values should not be allowed. As mentioned before, it is not uncommon for undemocratic ideas to try and be pushed through a democratic system.

Chapter 3

Methods

In my case study of Delta, I interviewed three Delta teachers about their experiences teaching at a democratic school. In my selection of participants, I chose to interview teachers exclusively from the Delta high school program. I chose to exclude the middle school program because the middle school program is not explicitly a democratic school, even though it is housed in the same building and has the same director. In addition, I can draw upon my own experiences at the Delta high school.

In order to capture a range of experiences, I interviewed three teachers from three different subjects in person and recorded them on my laptop. One taught all levels of high school math, one taught all levels of high school English, and one supported students in all areas of high school special education. I made an electronic form on Google docs with six predetermined questions for the teacher interviews. The questions were open ended, and I followed up with other questions to elicit more details if necessary. Before the interviews, I discussed what level of confidentiality the teachers requested. Based on those conversation, I used first names of the teachers interviewed to reference them in the analysis. This was a natural way of identifying teachers because during the school day teachers go by their first names. The participants agreed to being references by their first names rather than a pseudonym. I typed in this form while I interviewed the teachers in order to keep track of their responsive. I also audio recorded the interviews in case there was a lapse in my typing and I needed to reference the audio file.

My six questions focused on what teaching at a democratic school is like.

- Did you choose to teach at Delta vs. a traditionally run school? If so why?

- If you've taught at a previous school, how has the democratic process at Delta changed the teaching experience?
- How are decisions about, and in, your classes made?
- How are you personally involved in the democratic process of the school?
- Has the democratic process influenced your day to day teaching? If so how?
- What else would you like to add about the experience of teaching at a democratic school?

If there was a point brought up that I wanted the teacher to expand on, I would add a question to elaborate on the topic.

The first interview was conducted at a coffee shop, and the second two in a classroom at Delta. When I was asked if I would interview all three teachers at the same time, I declined, reasoning that the teachers might unduly influence one another's responses.

The decision to make a qualitative study using interviewing as a method of data collection reflects my desire to gain an up-close, in-depth, and detailed understanding of a single site. The findings in this study are not meant to be generalizable and I will make no claims as to how my findings might transfer to the experiences of other teachers at other democratic schools.

I would have liked to interview many more teachers in order to achieve saturation, but lack of time made a project of that scope unfeasible. I made a choice given the constraints to interview three participants, in the same school, in depth. This gave me a sense of several teachers within a single context, to get a sense of how practitioners at a democratic school operate. I felt that three participants would offer sufficient data to add to the conversation around democratic schools. Within my literate review I found examples of democratically created and run classes, such as the class Apple (2007) used as a case study. The literature on how an

established democratic school influences its teachers was minimal. Therefore, although my case study is on a small scale, it adds a new dimension to the literature around democratic schools. Since the teachers were describing many of the same things, little would be gained by interviewing more teachers. I was also anxious not to make too many demands on the small number of staff at Delta.

After all of the interviews were conducted, I analyzed teachers' responses and coded for patterns within each transcript. This was done by recording the different themes reflected in each of the teachers' responses. For example, when asked a teacher how his teaching experience at Delta differed from a non-democratic school he said "My job is to be a role model as much as a teacher. I have a bond with my students". This response was coded *rapport with students*.

I then combined the recurring codes into themes the participants had in common. There were three themes that were referenced five or more times in each interview. This resulted in two three pervasive patterns across the interviews: teacher voice, autonomy and rapport with students. There were also less pervasive patterns such as teacher disposition, and relationships with families and the community.

Chapter 4

Findings

Although the teachers that were interviewed about the experience of teaching at a democratic school taught in different subject areas, there was a high level of consistency in the spirit of their answers. There were differences in how they end up teaching the classes they do; based off of IEP (individualized education plan) goals or interdepartmental collaboration. When all of the teachers talked about their day-to-day experiences, and the overall atmosphere of the school they reflected on their role outside of the classroom. The curriculum is flexible and adapts to the various needs of the school's students. Teachers take on multiple roles, working as academic advisors, and overseeing both the community service requirement and the exercise of student self-governance.

I will identify the teachers I interviewed by their first names: Deb, Nick and Gary. Deb is a special education teacher. Deb, and her co-teacher, service all students with IEPs at the Delta high school program. The students have a wide range of disabilities and intrusion is based on each students individual needs. She taught special education for 11 years before coming to Delta.

Nick is one of two math teachers at the Delta high school program. He previously taught in South Maryland at a traditionally run school where the lack of parental participation caused roadblocks in student's education.

Lastly I interviewed Gary, one of the two English teachers at the high school Delta program. Gary previously taught in other areas in Pennsylvania before coming to Delta, including a private Christian school in Bethel Park.

Democracy at Delta

As described on Delta's website "democratic schools can be governed in a variety of ways, but all allow students, parents, and teachers to collaborate on important decisions" (Our Democratic Process). Democracy can be seen on the micro level by the orientation of each classroom. Gary described "Classes are set up in a circle, instead of a sage on the stage. Students challenge me on stuff.". This layout promotes equality among all students and the teachers. The sharing of ideas by all de-emphasizes transmission of information from teacher to students. He mentioned that prospective students and student teachers have often complimented Gary after they visit his classroom "after she came and visited during one of my classes, she said wow! The students in your room actually discuss. It's not a fake discussion of their book". Gary pushes past the traditional IRE (initiate, response, evaluate) form of teacher-directed questioning by the democratic arrangement of the desks.

On a larger level, democracy is part of the day to day schedule at Delta. Gary and Nick discussed the small group of students called "clumps" for which they act as advisors. In this group, one student is elected to represent them at advisory council meetings. Three times a year, the teachers meeting individually with the students in their clumps, along with parents and anyone else with a vested interest in the student's school experience. These meetings are called ATMs (advisory team meetings). I asked Deb how students who receive special education services pick their classes during their ATMs. She said "Students make their schedules, they come to me for open periods at least every other day". Deb will talk with one of her students if a class they have chosen doesn't match their personal goals. "I bring my knowledge about the student and curriculum to inform my decision. It's a one on one, case by case basis". She doesn't want to set any students up for failure, but keeps her vetoes of classes to a minimum. "No classes are off limits (for students who receive special education services)". Deb describes her IEP

meetings as “collaborative and student centered”. At other schools, students typically do not even attend their IEP meetings, much less collaborate on the appropriateness of decisions being made about them. The theme of the embedded democratic process at Delta is that the student should have the final say, and especially so when decisions are being made that affect them in significant ways.

Voice

Through my analysis and reflection of these teacher interviews I found three very clear repetitions in themes. These patterns were brought up directly as well as through personal stories and reflections. These patterns give us insight into what it is like to teach at a democratic school.

There was agreement across teacher interviews that everyone in the Delta community has a voice. This voice worked across two main constituencies; teachers having their voice heard, and teachers empowering students to have their own voices. Together there were fifteen direct or indirect references to each individual having a voice within the school. The majority of these references were to teachers supporting students be speak up, and be self-advocates. When asking Nick about how he was hired at Delta he said “The (Delta) interview has parents, students, staff and the director of the time. It had similar questions as the high school interview. I was asked to show how I would teach a specific math concept. I can’t remember exactly what it was. I think I appealed to the students who argued for me. Generally, students have the same weight or input”. Gary discussed his interview as well. He got a call from Delta “they said the high school suggested we talk to you. I interviewed with kids that were all very positive about their school (Delta). There are meant to be three students, three teachers and three parents at the interviews who vote. Over the summer there are 2 of each. The director has a voice not a vote”.

All staff attend weekly staff meetings where all decisions are made by consensus, and all participants have a voice in how the school operates and how the staff responsibilities are divided. Gary discussed how staff responsibilities are decided each year at a staff meeting “Someone is in charge of middle school liaison, social events like the picnic, hiring committee, Spirit of Claire (award) and many more I can’t think of”. These jobs change based on the evolving needs of the school, and are dropped when teachers no longer view them as productive. “I used to be the HEARTS program (program for at risk students) liaison but the program is so different. I’d go over and want to talk about what books they were teaching, and they just didn’t do that so I’d sit there for an hour. That position has been phased out”.

“All of the decisions are made through consensus. It can be tough but it’s the basis of Delta. There have been decisions made without the consensus of the staff before but that’s not what we’re about. It really upset some teachers”. Staff meetings are run by consensus, and teachers nominate themselves for these responsibilities. Gary said, “I love being that advisory council rep. There has only been one year I was challenged enough to give it up”. In this case consensus didn’t work in Gary’s favor. He explained it clearly enough: "If you are here at the Delta program, you have to be involved in democracy. From the circular set up of our chairs in the classroom to the day to day schedule of Delta; the ASMs (all school meetings) are staff meetings”.

Another built in democratic system at Delta are the advisory team meetings. Nick’s priority during these meetings is for the student’s voice to be heard. He finds that some parents are not used to having a student take charge of their educational planning. He said “what’s the point of parents, or teacher making all of the decisions, then why are they (the student) at Delta”? Nick encourages students to have their own voice in their education like he has in his educational

planning. When discussing average class size Nick said “max is usually 20, but we can allow extra students. They just have to ask, make an argument for why they should be in the class”. Nick’s voice is heard if there is the need to expand his class size, if students use their voice to advocate for themselves. Democracy influences Deb’s day to day by “Keeping me aware of the need to empower student to be stronger self-advocates. Allowing opportunities to do that with support”.

This pattern best reflects the following principles of democracy as stated by Jones (2006): “Concern for the dignity and rights of individuals and minorities. Concern for the welfare of others and “the common good” (pg.7). Teacher advocacy and the effort to involve students in decision-making reflects values drawn from different educational theories including Care Theory (Trout, 2012) and Sociocultural Theory (Gee, 2008). In both of these theories, education is thought to extend beyond the classroom, and they consider many of the activities of a student life as a valued extension of the curriculum.

Autonomy

The second most pervasive pattern is teacher autonomy within the school. There were ten instances in the interviews directly referencing or alluding to autonomy within their teaching position. This autonomy was found within classes taught, curriculum and responsibilities outside of the classroom. “Here I can teach what I love. I’m trusted to do that, We’re autonomous. Amy (the other English teacher) and I talk. We have a colloquial relationship with the department head. Gives us materials needed”. Teachers found that the autonomy allowed them to thrive as teachers, and authentically engage students. Gary directly referenced the faith that is put in him to choose what he teaches.

When it comes to being a teacher, Gary and Nick touched on what makes teaching at Delta a particular challenge. Nick reflected on the autonomy that teachers at Delta have. It allows for effective teachers to thrive and experiment with new curriculums and ideas. “It’s a little dangerous, if a staff member is not motivated to teach well, It’s (the autonomy) good and bad. I think that I’m an active teacher who does a good job, modifying how I teach to reach my students”.

Gary, in an effort to keep the literature he teaches fresh and interesting to him and his students, will move onto another text instead of teaching the same book he's been teaching for years, even if the book was in his original plan. “I’m encouraged to teach my passions. I also have to follow state standards. I can teach multiple texts”. “We’re encouraged to develop a new curriculum. I took in the generic classes the previous teacher taught before developing my own. In the classes I decide the curriculum usually. Student input matters”. Due to this high demand of preparation, Gary said, “It takes a very talented teacher to be an effective first-year teacher at Delta”. Whenever Deb was hired at Delta, others told her that she seemed a good fit, and they could see her succeeding in her teaching there. “The position opened up, I transitioned and jumped at the chance. I know the teacher with the job previously so I knew the values match me as a human and as an educator”. Participants were in agreement that teaching at a school with a high level of autonomy requires extra demands on a teacher. All of the teachers I interviewed also mentioned that they wouldn’t have it any other way. Nick said “I don’t think I’d like teaching elsewhere. It may have to do with the fact that it’s democratic. The amount of autonomy is fantastic”.

All of the participants responded that they enjoyed considerable autonomy in the choices they make. When I asked Gary, an English teacher at Delta, how he is assigned to the classes

he teaches. He responded by saying, “I teach five classes a semester. I don’t teach what books bore me anymore. I read *How to Kill a Mocking Bird* to the point where I needed a break. The classics will always come back (into the curriculum)”. Maintaining his own interest helps keep his students engaged. When Gary started at Delta, he took over the classes that the previous English teacher had taught. Over time, he has developed five classes a semester based off his passions and student input. Nick collaborates with the other math teacher at Delta to decide who will teach what class each semester. There is little or no Director input on this decision, or on the math curriculum. Nick emphasized that he is trusted to cover what he needs to cover in class. The district has a whole as recently pushed standardizing math instruction. When asked when outside of Delta he collaborates with others he said “just at department meetings (math), not too often. It’s how do you make sure that you’re covering what you need to be covering. Trying to tie in more with what the high school is doing. It’s not a big shift (to match the new curricular documents)”. When the math department compared their lesson plans with the standardized curriculum, they noticed that there was little change that needed to be made in order to comply. Outside of traditional math classes (algebra, calculus, geometry, etc.), Nick noted that he is welcome to teach extracurricular courses (such as the History of Math) should he be interested in doing so.

This good faith trust in teachers echoes one of Apple’s (2007) essential principles of democracy: “Faith in the individual and collective capacity of people to create possibilities for resolving problems” (p.7). This faith in the individual was expressed in the autonomy of teacher to choose their own curriculum, class schedules and class size. Delta allowing and expecting, a high level of autonomy from their teachers shows that they view their teachers as competent experts at their professions. Bucelli argues that as a society we say that teachers are experts, but

do not treat them as such. “The fact that teachers, while acknowledged as ‘experts’, seem to be fundamentally marginalized in these debates shows a particular understanding of their expertise, of what teachers are for and hence of what forms of knowledge and abilities should be developed” (207, pg.682). Allowing teachers autonomy shows that Delta views their teachers as experts, possibly creating higher teacher satisfaction.

Rapport

Another pattern across teachers was an especially personal, kind, and generous regard for the students in the school. Several times within the interviews, teacher used some form of the phrase "students as people" in their discourse. As Deb reminded me, all of the teachers have four years with students rather than one. “At the high school students get passed on (to a new special education teacher) from year to year. We keep them for their full time at Delta, giving us a longer time to get to know them and make a plan each year”. Deb explained that since students are not tracked based on grade at Delta, special education teachers service students through all four years of high school. Deb discussed how this continued connection allows her to teach her students more holistically, and to have deeper, more effective conversations with the students and their families. Even as a special education teacher, where she does not serve the majority of the school as a teacher, students see her as a person and part of the school by all. As a future special educator myself, I see the vital importance in her statements. Her acceptance by the entire school community desegregates and reduces the stigma around students with special needs and the room in which specialized instruction happens.

All of the participants described a student-centered approach in their teaching philosophy. Nick believes that enabling students to make decisions about their education is the most important approach he has as a teacher. Teaching students to be an advocate for their own needs

and priorities goes hand in hand with his traditional math instruction. He allows opportunities for students to be their own advocate and then provides teacher support. "If a student does advocate for themselves you have to schedule a meeting time. I need to be available to them. I don't think I would do as much at a traditional school. Today there was a kid who's not doing great, caught me heating up coffee. We met right then. Being ready to be there for your students". Nick demonstrates going out of his way to work with his students. When asked, has the democratic process influenced your day to day of teaching, if so how? Gary said "I have much more interaction with students. They come in and seek help, and just to chat." "Much more empathy both ways".

When asked the same question Deb reflected "A student was afraid to approach another teacher (about an assignment). I told him I will go with him but not say anything. All I did was stand outside of the teacher's office in silent support. That was enough to bring him confidence to communicate his needs. Students need to communicate with teachers like out in the real world here (at Delta)". Building this rapport with students allows teachers to feel comfortable too. Deb concludes "kids and teachers feel like they can just be themselves here. We're all a little goofy. It's a smaller family type environment. You know how you're different with your families. It's developing relationships with kids".

The relationship between teachers and students is an important aspect of socio-cultural theory, and the communities of practice. As expressed by Gee a community of practice is a group that works together towards a common endeavor or goal. "The role of leaders is to design communities of practice, continually resource them, and keep members turn their tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge to be used to further develop the community of practice" (Gee, 2008, pg.93). The emphasis of rapport between teachers and students that extends outside of the

classroom shows that there is a community of practice at Delta including students and teachers that extends outside of the classroom as well. At Delta there is a common endeavor between students and teachers outside of class time. Vygotsky, another sociocultural theorist “assumed that all aspects of human life are interrelated, including what goes on *within* a person” (Smargorinsky, 2013, pg.194). The high number of a rapport with students being mentioned means that teachers think about their students in multiple contexts. Teachers find importance from talking with, and being there for students outside of class time. Teachers at Delta have taken on the view that what goes on within a student cannot be separated from their academic achievement like Vygotsky.

Chapter 5

Discussion

How do teachers in a democratic school, describe their feelings about the opportunities they have to have their voice heard? How do the same teachers describe their satisfaction with their working conditions? I found that teachers at Delta, are overall satisfied with their working conditions. The final sentiments of all the teachers was positive, about their position as a teacher, and place of work. The patterns of voice and autonomy within the interviews shows that there is an extra demand on teachers at a democratic school. They need to develop and manage their own curriculum, schedules and extra responsibilities outside of teaching. This is without the guidelines that administrators set at a traditional school. The teachers from this inquiry also showed that along with this independence in school management, they balanced keeping a positive rapport with students. From the high number of instances, this positive rapport with students was an integral part of their teaching experience at Delta. The patterns of voice within my interviews, was seen in teachers having their voices heard, and in teachers encouraging students to have a voice in their own education. The teachers experience of being heard at this democratic school lead, to them encouraging their students to do the same. There was a value found in having a voice within the school. The only negatively coded comment in my interviews was about an incidence when consensus was not used to make a decision. This dissatisfaction with the job happened when the teacher's voice was not heard.

When teachers are satisfied they are less likely to leave the teaching field prematurely. This leads to schools having more experienced teachers with in schools. There are many studies that show that a lower teacher attrition rates leads to higher student achievement (Sutcher, 2016).

When the school aged children in a society are meeting the goals of the schools, and the goals out our schools match the goals of our society then schools are doing their jobs (Jones, 2006).

In my initial predictions of what I would find in my inquiry of teaching at a democratic school, I expected to hear a large amount about autonomy, and this was indeed the case. I also predicted that there would be some teacher resentment based on the considerable amount of choices they have to make. This was not reflected in any of my interviews. There is a possibility that the teachers I interviewed may have unconsciously, or consciously shifted their answers because of our relationship. I am a past student of the teachers I interviewed, and I have a positive rapport with all of them. I don't know if they curated their responses and the degree to which they might have skirted various positive or negative aspects of their teaching experiences.

Further study on the influence that democratic schools have on student achievement and attitudes are necessary. The majority of what was discussed in my teacher interviews was student-centered, making me wonder what might be learned about how this student-centered instruction is experienced from the students' perspectives. A study comparing the level of student self-advocacy behaviors at a democratic school vs. a traditionally run school would provide data on the affordances and liabilities of efforts to promote student self-advocacy, or the lack thereof. Questioning the effectiveness of what we are doing produces better teachers and better schools, which in turn create, more successful and fulfilled students. The degree to which students are engaged in their society has implications for our democracy as a whole.

Expanding this inquiry in a study with more teachers at other democratic schools would provide more data on the experience that teachers have teaching at a democratic school. Preliminary findings indicate that teaching at a democratic school may indeed create the conditions for teachers to feel effective and fulfilled in their careers. Teachers being satisfied

with their working conditions is important for students, and the education system as a whole, because the turnover of unfulfilled teachers negatively impacts student achievement (Ronfeldt, 2012).

When reminiscing on my experience at the Delta program as a student, I felt the majority of the points that were made rang true with my personal experiences. All of the teachers interviewed discussed the bond that teachers have the chance to develop with their students at Delta. As a student, I valued knowing that my teachers enjoyed what they did. It makes students feel as though they share the school with teachers, rather than being a burden on the teachers.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

How do teachers describe their feelings about the opportunities they have to have their voice heard? Voice was a pervasive pattern within the teachers' transcripts. It was referenced in terms of curriculum, class size, staff meetings and encouraging students to have their own voice. It was embedded in a negative reference when Gary was talking about an isolated incidence when a teacher voice was not heard. This leads me to the conclusion that at Delta, a democratic school, teachers are happier with the opportunity to have their voices heard. Pulling from Nick and Gary discussing the extra challenges of a first-year teacher to be effective and at Delta, means that there is something extra on the teachers' plates, but they are not unhappy with it.

How do teachers describe their satisfaction with their working conditions? The last question in my teacher interviews was, what else would you like to add about the experience of teaching at a democratic school? In all of the interviews the teachers ended with a positive statement about their current teaching experiences. Deb "kids and teachers feel like they can just be themselves here". Nick "I don't think I'd like teaching elsewhere". Gary warned me that what he was about to say was a platitude, he went on "I love teaching more and more every year. Everyone my age is thinking about retiring, not me. I love what I do and love my kids like crazy. I love what I do".

These teachers love what they do, and are willing to put extra responsibilities on their plate. How do we as a society find a way to create this kind of environment for all teachers? The patterns of teacher voice, autonomy and rapport with student is a starting point for how to craft a school that creates an environment that fosters teacher fulfillment and eagerness to take on tasks and responsibilities that will benefit their students, teaching and school as a whole. Banerjee,

Stearns, Moller & Mickelson researched the effects of teacher job satisfaction and student achievement “school culture and teacher job satisfaction interactively affect student achievement in both math and reading. We argue that future education reforms should place special emphasis on improving teacher job satisfaction and school culture” (2017, pg.203)

Through my interviews, it’s clear that democracy still lives on in some societal institutions, which is reassuring, since many democratic institutions in our country, and our system of government itself struggles to function in line with its democratic principles. Within Delta, there is no question that the teachers are enacting multiple aspects of democracy. The choices they make and their philosophies line up with the ideals and ethics of democracy. Through my interviews, not a single teacher resented the democratic systems they functioned within, and all embraced the shared love and fulfillment that came with teaching at a democratic school.

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ACADEMIC VITA

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EDUCATION

The Pennsylvania State University
College of Education: Schreyer Honors College
Special Education BS
Curriculum & Instruction M.Ed

University Park, PA
Class of 2018
Dean's List

Certifications (May 2018)

Pennsylvania Special Education K-12
Pennsylvania Reading Specialist K-12

FIELD EXPERIENCE & PRACTICUMS

Student Teaching: Juniata Elementary School, Altoona PA

Student Teacher, Life Skills classroom, Grades K-2, January-May 2018

- Deliver individual and specially designed lessons using direct instruction programs and teacher generated lesson plans
- Produce and implement supplemental materials to assist students in reaching IEP goals in math, reading and writing
- Create and apply behavior intervention programs driven by data

Summer Reading Camp, The Pennsylvania State University, Grades 1-4, June-August 2017

- Instituted alternative informative practices to gather and respond to data related to literacy skills
- Provided optimal opportunities to learn and view self as a competent reader and writer

Mount Nittany Elementary School, State College PA, Gen. Ed, Grade 3, September-December 2016

- Cultivated screening and direct instruction implementation progress for math, reading, writing, and behavior
- Used Precision Teaching and method of data collection and charting

Ferguson Township Elementary, State College PA, Learning Support, Grades K-5, March-May 2015

- Supplemented instruction with content specific assignments and direct instruction lessons
- Taught direct instruction lessons to small groups and supported students in the general education setting

School Without Walls, Washington DC, DC Social Justice Fellowship, Grades 9-12, March-May 2016

- Partnered with Georgetown Law, Street Law program to instruct about abilities bias to high school extracurricular class
- Planned and co-taught interactive lessons to two periods of general education students

EMPLOYMENT

Transition Coach

Strawberry Fields & State College Area School District

March 2016-Present

- Teach and monitor daily life skills to high school students receiving special education services
- Collect data on cooking, cleaning, safety and social skills progress to inform their IEP goals

Job Coach

State College Area School District

Sept 2015-Present

- Accompany students who have a disability at their place of employment
- Monitor students' behaviors, skills, accomplishments and provide instruction as required

Support Service Worker, Habilitation Aide

United Cerebral Palsy

Aug 2015-May 2017

- Provide habilitation services to meet individual's ISP goals
- Engage in companion time outside of the home to meet client's social needs

Centre Region Down Syndrome Society, Buddy Walk

Intern

June-Oct 2016

- Partnered with community to increase Down Syndrome awareness and fundraise

CAMPUS ACTIVITIES AND COMMUNITY SERVICE

President, PSU Student Council for Exceptional Children

Board Member, PA Student Council for Exceptional Children

Member, PA State Education Association

Mentor, Life Link PSU, Road to Independence

Volunteer, Youth Service Bureau, Big Brother Big Sister

Volunteer, Centre County PAWS, animal shelter

AWARDS & CERTIFICATIONS

- B. & M. Prybutok Honors Scholarship
- Bruce Knox Award, Youth Service Bureau
- Joseph R. Cardenuto Memorial Award
- Adult First Aid/CPR/AED certified
- Safety Care crisis prevention trained
- Mandated Reporter certified by Penn State University & University of Pittsburg