Developing a Culture of Citizenship in Elementary School Classrooms

How Democratic Schools Teach Children About Rules, Rights, and Responsibilities

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore development of civic participation in children in primary grade (K-2) classrooms. Young children are accorded neither the rights nor responsibilities of adolescents or adults, nor given many opportunities to participate meaningfully in the decisions that directly impact their lives. The public school classroom is, in a sense, the first opportunity for children to develop a sense of how to participate in a diverse community organized to address the needs of many. As such, it is a microcosm of the larger society within which children are learning to engage as active participants. The research had two interrelated goals: (1) to examine how teachers and administrators create a *culture of democratic participation* in primary grade classrooms that nurtures and sustains young children’s developing civic competence and embodiment of the rules, rights and responsibilities of democratic citizenship; and (2) to document how young children come to understand and embody these rules, rights and responsibilities embedded within the daily functioning of the classroom. This study also explored the obstacles and challenges faced by each of these schools in their attempts to achieve these goals within the current political and socioeconomic environment that frames education in the U.S.

Participants were the students, teachers and administrators of five classrooms in two New York City public schools that serve socioeconomically and ethnically diverse urban populations in two different communities: one an alternative progressive elementary (preK-6) school and the other a traditional early childhood (preK-2) school. Each school was dedicated to a democratic educational philosophy that emphasizes respect for the open flow of information and ideas, social justice and equal opportunity for all children, and committed to engaging students in inquiry-based experiential learning through the arts.
The methodological approach was drawn from the field of educational ethnography; that is, each of these schools—and each classroom within the schools—was viewed as a community of practice. The unit of analysis was the *enactment of democratic principles* in the classroom. Data included detailed observations of the daily activities in which teachers and children engaged over the course of the school year in primary grade (K-2) classrooms in these two schools, as well as informal interviews and conversations with students, teachers, administrators and parents within the school community. Observations and interviews were conducted over five months during the 2004-2005 school year at the progressive elementary school and over five months during the 2012-2013 school year at the traditional early childhood school.

Data were analyzed using an array of questions regarding the ideology and practices of democratic learning communities, as well as how these principles and practices are embodied within the activities of teachers and children. The analysis revealed multiple ways in which the children, teachers and administrators in these classrooms act together to create a classroom community that nurtures and sustains young children’s developing civic competence. Classroom practices that reinforce inequities and undermine the development of children’s civic awareness and participation were also identified.

Analysis of the data was used to generate a conceptual model of democratic practice that can be implemented in primary grade public school classrooms to create a culture of citizenship. This model would encompass nine broad themes: (1) a sense of community in which children learn to balance individual rights with community needs; (2) mutual respect among all participants in the learning community; (3) freedom of movement within the classroom; (4) collaboration among participants at all levels; (5) authentic choices for children within the classroom; (6) transparency into the hierarchy of power and authority; (7) authentic responsibility for children within the
classroom community; (8) teacher expectations support children’s independence and participation; and (9) the home/school connection supports participation of parents and guardians.