

Running Head: FREED TO LEARN

Freed to Learn: Five Fundamental Concepts of Democratic Education

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### **Abstract**

Children are natural learners each with distinct interests, abilities and rates of cognitive, emotional and social growth. Democratic Education institutionalizes five key concepts to free these natural instincts and individual differences to drive community self-governance and individual self-directed learning within a formal schooling environment. This paper summarizes the five concepts fundamental to Democratic Education and suggests how they can be applied within a school setting.

Schooling's profound effects last until the grave. It is not the facts of history or the figures of math or the concepts of science which last, as they disappear quickly after their being encountered and most certainly immediately after each test. But it is the emotional impacts of the experiences of school imprinted on the personality which extend themselves through a life-time. "Traditional Education" pays close attention to things like "competitiveness" or "instilling a common, core knowledge". But it pays no attention to the emotional impacts of children's experience of school, not a bit on how the organization of itself affects the emotional realms of its children, and not at all on personality outcomes of thirteen to seventeen years of experience. Democratic Education, on the other hand, constructs its Free and Democratic Schools with the emotional being fully in mind. Indeed, the overarching goal of Democratic Education is the happy, healthy, well adjusted, self-directed, self-actualizing person. Democratic Education cultivates such outcomes by freeing the emotional predispositions of all children to be the natural inquirers they are born to be, freeing each to take full responsibility for their own immediate learning and for their own course of studies through schooling and over a life-time.

Democratic Education, defined as formal schooling controlled by the learning community collectively and by the learner individually where the specific community takes responsibility for governing itself and the individual within the community takes full responsibility for his and for her own course of learning, institutionalizes five fundamental concepts intended to liberate emotional realms and to create the freedom to learn in each and every child and young adult within its environments. The five fundamental concepts are (a) learning in a youngster's own way and in his and her own

time, (b) emotional readiness to accept a learning task coming well before the task, (c) maximizing choice in individual learning activities while minimizing or eliminating coercive structural relationships, (d) elevating “learning to learn” well above content mastery, and (e) creating community self-governance. This paper very briefly describes each foundational concept and gives structural examples of the implementation of each concept.

*1. Learning in a youngster’s own way and his and her own time.* All children and young adults, all humans for that matter, are natural learners with different abilities, interests, temperaments, information receiving, processing and communicating styles and rates of emotional, cognitive and social development. Healthy growth—mental and physical, emotional and intellectual—requires formal learning to be driven by these native instincts and inherent differences, fully allowing each individual to grow in his and her own way and in his and her own time. Structurally, this is the multi-age, ungraded environment where progress in cognitive, emotional and social development and in acquisition of learning skills and subject content unfolds as organic growth in a youngster’s maturation rather than through a lock step of grade level standards which must be met regardless of who a youngster is at the age he/she happens to be at the time.

*2. Emotional readiness to accept a learning task coming well before the task.* According to John Holt (1984, pp. 50-51), any learning first depends on how a youngster feels about herself, empowered or powerless, competent or stupid. Compelling a task when someone feels powerless or stupid just frightens, discourages and deepens helplessness. Democratic Education environments concentrate on providing a time for emotional development first, when youngsters come to feel safe in trusting their native

learning instincts and their unique ways of knowing. As well, it provides those injured by their prior schooling, a time of healing, a time of taking off the pressure, of reassurance, as in time they will gain the energy and the courage to accept any task.

Free and self-organized play is *the* readiness activity in Democratic Education. Youngsters engage in whatever play the environment supports for as long as they wish. Indeed, Democratic Education environments provide areas intended to stimulate imaginative play as well as individual and group physical play. There would be lots of materials like Lincoln Logs and blocks, toys and puzzles, sand and water tables, costumes and theatrical makeup, paints and crayons, newsprint and paper, hammers, nails, saws and wood, etc. There would be performance spaces and child friendly kitchens and appliances. There would also be indoor and outdoor playground equipment and open space. Even for the adolescents play can also be in wood or in metal or in performance with acting or music or in the arts with drawing, painting, sculpting. Or they too can take to the kitchen or the indoor/outdoor playground equipment and open space. Or, they can play in the outdoors, camping, hiking, backpacking, canoeing, rafting, skiing, biking, etc. Then, when in their own time children feel ready, each will engage in whatever formal learning is chosen.

*3. Maximizing choice while minimizing or eliminating coercive structural relationships.* Youngsters learn through a slow process of inquiry where, by way of natural intuitive observation, they form extremely tentative hunches which are self-tested against experiences (Holt, 1984, p. 138). “What we might call a 5 percent hunch becomes a 10 percent, the 10 percent a 20, and so, slowly, all the way to the point where they will say with conviction that they *know* that such and such is true” (Holt, 1984, p. 138).

Compelled by adults to constantly prove either they know or do not know, youngsters stop trying to self-test, confirm and strengthen their faint hunches and give up (Holt, 1984, p. 141). This is also the case when youngsters are compelled by adults to undertake objects of learning in which they have no interest or native inclination.

Indeed, youngsters need to take the responsibility for choosing the objects of learning and how they learn what they have chosen. The responsibility, the freedom, to choose that which affects the youngster individually, that which is of interest and inclination, is essential for only under this kind of responsibility/freedom can the youngster grow through his natural learning instincts and his native differences in how learning occurs. Freedom to choose means doing what you like, so long as it doesn't interfere with the freedom of others. Paraphrasing A.S. Neil:

Between compelling someone to stop hitting classmates and compelling him to learn Geography and to learn Geography in a prescribed manner lies the meaning of freedom. Hitting classmates involves others, but learning Geography and the manner by which the subject is learned involves only the individual. The community has the right to restrain the antisocial individual because he is interfering with the rights of others, but the community has no right to compel an individual to learn Geography or compel the manner by which Geography is learned, for learning Geography and the manner by which it is learned is a matter for the individual. (Neil, 1960)

But if the child freely chooses to study Geography she should be supported with all the highest quality assistance she is willing to accept.

Within the school building maximizing choice and minimizing coercion is the Open Classroom where youngsters choose whatever activity they wish. It is also the Montessori Prepared Environment where, again, children are free to explore whatever they wish. It is also an Open School where sets of Open Classrooms are available each with a different purpose, such as Art, Music, Literacy, Math, Science, History, etc., wherein youngsters can freely inquire after whatever objects of interest drive them. It is also the complete elimination of any and all assessment of learning and grading of student performance.

4. *Elevating “learning to learn” well above content mastery.* Content mastery focused learning cannot cultivate in youngsters the quick adaptability required of the wired life of the twenty-first century and beyond. Within an era of total social diffusion of information technologies and the information saturation these technologies have wrought, the ability or the desirability to store in one’s brain a set of Core Knowledge has become grossly irrelevant. Rather, the basic skills of learning itself, the abilities to define a question, to identify needed information to satisfy the question, to locate where and how to access the required information, to analyze the information according to the demands of the question, to synthesize the information with prior knowledge to create new knowledge to answer the question, then to generalize the new knowledge and the process itself across other questions, are the keys to preparing youngsters for the quick adaptability necessary for life today and in the future. These learning to learn skill sets are taken by Democratic Education to be the principal objectives of its education. Democratic Education accomplishes these objectives by allowing the native inquiry instincts, the natural curiosity, by which youngsters learn to drive ever more complex

questioning of ever more of the universe as youngsters mature. Thus, learning structures develop and explore self-selected questions appropriate to the developmental stage of the student. So, the youngest work through their instinctive wonder to explore Montessori or other manipulatives and the oldest work through their passion-to-know to explore Project-Based research questions.

5. *Creating community self-governance.* Freedom is necessary for children to learn in their own way and in their own time, but “You cannot have freedom unless children feel completely free to govern their own social life” (Neil, 1960, p. 52). In Democratic schools the community comes together in regular meetings of the whole community to decide all issues. Adults and children have equal rights to speak and to persuade within community forums. Each has a single vote on questions up for community decision. The community can decide policies on such as curriculum and instruction, projects and assignments, graduation requirements and ceremonies, expectant behaviors consistent and inconsistent with the norms of the school as well as the means by which inconsistent behaviors are resolved, and in some schools even hiring and firing of staff, accepting or rejecting student admissions, or suspending, expelling or re-instating troublesome students.

In sum it must be said that democratic learning communities abound with different ways of being Democratic. But, each community describing itself as Democratic or Free incorporates in their own way all five fundamental concepts within their structure and operation. And these learning communities stretch from the United Kingdom with Summerhill ([www.summerhillschool.co.uk](http://www.summerhillschool.co.uk)), the grandfather of Democratic Education, throughout the USA with Sudbury Valley School ([www.sudval.org](http://www.sudval.org)) in Massachusetts,

Liberty School ([www.liberty-school.org](http://www.liberty-school.org)) in Maine, Upattinas ([www.upattinas.org](http://www.upattinas.org)) in Pennsylvania, Albany Free School ([www.albanyfreeschool.com](http://www.albanyfreeschool.com)) and Brooklyn Free School ([www.brooklynfreeschool.org](http://www.brooklynfreeschool.org)) in New York to around the world with the School for Self-Determination ([www.734.com1.ru/eng](http://www.734.com1.ru/eng)) in Moscow, Russia, and the Nahoon Montessori School ([www.freedomtolearn.co.za](http://www.freedomtolearn.co.za)) in East London, South Africa. These few of note are only a small number of Democratic Education learning communities worldwide. (See Alternative Education Resource Organization at [www.educationrevolution.org](http://www.educationrevolution.org))

An argument can be made that Free and Democratic schools are not for everyone. Maybe that is true. But as Democratic Education starts with the native learning instincts of all humans, it is hard to ignore the universality Democratic Education has for growing every youngster in his and her own way and in his and her own time to be a happy, healthy, well-adjusted, self-actualizing adult.

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