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Laying the Foundations for Democratic Behavior – A Comparison of Two Different Approaches to Democratic Education

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Abstract

A democracy is a society in which everyone has equal rights and is able to participate in decision-making processes. Consequently, in a democratic society, democratic behavior is essential. This work investigates the question: In what ways and to what extent can alternative models of education support the development of democratic skills in children? To explore this question, the author analyzes and compares two different approaches to democratic education: The Sudbury approach and the democratic free school approach. The study is based on qualitative research – participant observation and open-ended interviews conducted at different Sudbury and democratic free schools in the US.

1.Introduction

On March 10th, 2009, US-president Barack Obama held a speech before the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce on a complete and competitive American education. In this speech,

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Obama explains in which way the school system in the United States has failed in the last few years and that extensive reforms have to be implemented to change the educational and – even more importantly – the economic situation: "For we know that economic progress and educational achievement have always gone hand in hand in America" ("President Obama on Education", 2009, p. 2). He realizes that the problematic situation is not due to a lack of resources, but, according to Obama, that new foci are necessary, as well as working ideas and reforms. In effect, the President wants to expand the school day and year, provide teachers and principals with better training and more money, and finally, give students more responsibility for their own education. He is also asking for higher standards and assessments, but at the same time for skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking and creativity to be expanded ("President Obama on Education", 2009). In addition to Obama's plans to change certain aspects of the educational system, the American government under George W. Bush, not long ago, introduced new standards a school has to fulfill in order to receive federal financial support ("No Child Left Behind", 2009). This is the reason why there is no more room for creativity, innovation or individuality; the only thing left to do is to study for standardized tests. Further, it is doubtful whether students actually learn anything in the public school system or whether they merely memorize facts and figures for a certain amount of time and forget about them soon after the examination (Ackoff & Greenberg, 2008, p. 23). At this point, I would argue that it is of significant importance to ask what education exactly means and what purpose it should have. Consequently, the question arises whether Obama's reforms towards longer school days, higher standards, higher assessments and standardized tests represent the right path to take or whether education should be more than that? After all, standardized tests only produce standardized minds.[1] But what is the solution to this problem? What kind of reform or alternative to traditional public schools supports the development of critical, creative, responsible and confident adults? Alexander Khost, parent, teacher and founder of a democratic free school

[1] At least, this is what Alexander Khost claims ("Reactions to Obama Speech", 2009).

claims that "[w]hat America must strive for is the removal of coercion and assumption in the American school system" ("Reactions to Obama Speech", 2009). He thinks that "[n]on-coercive educational alternatives have historically proven to produce responsible, astute, happy, and confident adults" ("Reactions to Obama Speech", 2009).

In order to investigate this idea more thoroughly, I will focus on two different models of democratic education. The first one is the Sudbury approach[2] and the second model is, what I will call, the democratic free school approach. Both approaches are fundamentally based on democracy where decisions are made in a weekly school meeting and where every member of the school community has a vote. Here, students are educationally free since the schools' philosophy is that if children are given respect and responsibility, they return respect and embrace this responsibility. This trust and the belief that children are free human beings qualify them to decide for themselves what, when and how they want to learn ("Sudbury Valley School", 2009). Consequently, at the schools I visited, rather than having an externally imposed curriculum – which is the case for most traditional public schools – the curriculum is created by the school community, depending on the community's needs and interests.

Considering that it is of significant importance to see the models in practice in order to fully understand them, I visited several Sudbury and democratic free schools in the United States. While visiting, I observed how the models operate and interviewed students, teachers, staff and parents. In the following paper, I will compare these two different approaches of establishing a more democratic way of learning. First, I will introduce both models, starting with their theoretical background, their educational ideal and their intention. That is, what do the

[2] Even though most Sudbury schools are based on the same philosophy and several democratic free schools agree on theoretical basics, every single school is unique depending on the community it is run by. Consequently my findings refer mainly to the schools I visited myself and do not apply to every Sudbury school or every democratic free school there is. Additionally, this paper is structured as a comparison of these two different approaches despite the finding that a clear differentiation between Sudbury and democratic free schools is not necessarily given. Instead, the relationship between Sudbury and democratic free schools could be described as a continuum, where in some cases a Sudbury school can have more in common with a democratic free school, than with another Sudbury school and vice versa. But again, most statements about the different school models in this paper can only be applied to those schools I visited.

different models aim for and what is their philosophy? Second, there will be a description of the realization of the models' theory, and how it is put into practice at school. Third, there will be a short report on my research procedure presenting, among other things, important characteristics, as well as advantages and disadvantages of this sort of research method, before concentrating on the results of my observations. These results will demonstrate how successful the different models of democratic education are in supporting students in becoming autonomous, self-reflecting and critical individuals focusing on how accessible certain methods are and where the limits lie, both from a pedagogical point of view as well as from a standpoint that takes into account the social problems and underlying social structures as a whole. Finally, I will reflect on the introduced approaches, compare them with traditional public schools and discuss both advantages and possible insufficiencies.

Before introducing the models in more detail, however, I think it apt to discuss what precisely is meant by the concept of *education*. In his speech, Obama claims that education goes hand in hand with the economy and that education should have the aim to create good and economically useful citizens for a country. Opposed to that, the social philosopher Theodor W. Adorno (1971) developed a stronger and broader concept of it, and argued that education should be the basis for people to become critical, autonomous and self-reflecting individuals. In addition, he argued that it is a sociological rather than a psychological phenomenon that a person develops in one way or another. In other words, a person is not born more democratic or focuses more on moral judgment by nature than another person, but the development of these skills rather depends on a person's environment and education. Here it is essential to avoid authority, strictness and toughness and instead give people freedom and the opportunity to be individuals rather than forcing them to be part of a collective. However, this does not mean that Adorno supports egoistic behavior or radical individualism but that he rather warns against blindly following the collective instead of being an individual *within* a community. Moreover,

according to Adorno, an efficient democracy – which the US claims to be[3] – is only possible with responsible and mature people who are critical and able to question the majority's opinion (Adorno, 1971). A related understanding of education can be found in John Dewey's book *Democracy and Education*. John Dewey (1968), who was a leading representative of the progressive movement in US schooling during the first half of the 20th century, warns that societies may use education as a way of social control. Further he explains that education itself has no clear meaning until people define the kind of society they want to have. According to that, an appropriate school system in a democracy would have to be democratic and non-autocratic, with clear rules and respect for the individual rights of students (Dewey, 1968; Kesson, 2004). This paper argues in favor of a broader concept of education and draws on Dewey and Adorno. It supports the idea that education should empower people in becoming critical, autonomous but also happy and satisfied rather than passive and economically useful people who blindly believe what authorities tell them. Consequently, Dewey's warning that education can be used to control people and that critical people may represent a threat for authorities, is a valid point. Therefore, it is even more important for a democracy to pursue an appropriate education, namely democratic education where students are provided freedom, responsibility and respect without coercion, authority or unnecessary strictness.

Now it is essential to step back even further and define the term *democracy*. According to Abraham Lincoln, a democracy is "a government by the people, of the people and for the people" (Vorländer, 2003, p. 10). Rousseau goes even further and identifies the people[4] with the constitution, which means that a law which was not created and passed by the people but by an authority or a representative is not a law at all. In other words, an essential feature of a democracy is the universal access to a share in decision-making (Vorländer, 2003). Therefore,

[3] Although the United States of America claim to be a democracy, it is questionable in which way their understanding of a democracy is consistent with this paper's and the schools' understanding of it.

[4] However, neither Rousseau nor the founding fathers included, for example, women's or non-whites' participation in their idea of *the people*.

every individual should have the possibility to participate in making decisions, independent of age, gender, race[5] or class. Last but not least, Dewey points out that a "[…] democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (Dewey, 1968, p. 87). Based on these ideas, this paper understands democracy as a form of society in which everyone has equal rights and is able to participate in all decision-making processes that will impact their life. Again, a democracy relies on the community and the people rather than on authorities or representatives.

2. Methodological Basics

In the following part, I will examine the philosophy and the theoretical background of both Sudbury and democratic free schools. Then, the focus will shift to the methods required to achieve these ideals and how they are realized.[6]

The sample of schools I visited consists of four different Sudbury schools and two different democratic free schools which are all located in the Northeast of the US. The number of students and staff varies from school to school. Regarding Sudbury schools, the smallest school in my sample counts seven students and four staff members, the biggest one has approximately 160 students and eleven staff members. The first school I visited is a suburban school which I consequently will call the Suburban School[7], the second Sudbury school I visited will be called the Forest School and the third school I will call the Small School. The fourth Sudbury school I visited was the original Sudbury Valley School, however, since I visited the original school only for two days, I mainly rely on literature published by the Sudbury Valley School rather than on my observations during the two days visiting. The two different

[5] In this paper, the notions *race* and *gender* are understood as socially constructed rather natural concepts. Nevertheless, even though socially constructed, these categories strongly influence the experiences, self-concepts and possibilities of individuals within society.

[6] Unless otherwise stated, all information concerning the models' structure, methods and routines etc. are based on my own observations and do only apply to those schools I visited.

[7] Names of schools and people have been changed.

democratic free schools I visited had 30 to 60 students, and three to ten teachers as well as additional volunteers or interns. I will call the first democratic free school the City School[8] and the second school will be called the Metro School. Similar to the Sudbury model, these schools also believe in the importance of age mixing. The City School, however, is separated into elementary school (4-12 year-olds) and high school levels (13-19 year-olds). Nevertheless, within the elementary or high school, there is no age segregation. Where democratic free schools are not separated into elementary school and high school, the youngest student can be four years old and the oldest one nineteen years.

2.1. Theoretical Background

Sudbury schools

The Sudbury model is named after the Sudbury Valley School, which was founded in 1968[9] in Framingham, Massachusetts. In this kind of school, students are educationally free, for the school's philosophy is that trust and the belief that children are free human beings qualify them to decide for themselves what, when and how they want to learn. Since children will have this responsibility to decide for themselves later on when living as adults in the "real world", becoming empowered early on allows for them to have "real world" practice which will eventually make them experts in handling such responsibility. Moreover, the responsibility and freedom for one's own education gives the students the opportunity to find an answer to the question why one has to learn things at all ("Sudbury Valley School", 2009).

The Sudbury philosophy is based on Aristotle, who argues that every human being is naturally curious. Consequently the Sudbury model relies on the belief that learning is an innate part of living and that people learn best when the motivation comes from within, and not from

[8] Names of schools and people have been changed.

[9] Even though the original Sudbury school was founded in 1968 and therefore in a time of political movement and change, it insists on being apolitical. This however, applies only to the original Sudbury Valley School, but not to all Sudbury schools in general (Greenberg, 1992c).

external incentives or influences like parents or teachers. Consequently, at most Sudbury schools there are no classes imposed by staff members or parents but rather need to be initiated or asked for by students themselves (Greenberg, 1995). This kind of learning is called "student initiated learning" (Collins, 2006, p. 47) and can be observed in childhood development already: A baby struggling to be able to walk and talk does not give up until it is finally able to take its first steps and pronounce its first words. According to the Sudbury philosophy, this inherent motivation to learn and develop does not end just by reaching school age (Collins, 2006).

The Sudbury model has a very unique understanding of learning. Boredom for example is not necessarily seen as a negative drive: Only when students are bored and struggling with themselves and nobody tells them what to do, are they forced to reflect on their life and their interests. In regards to learning, the model argues that children are learning constantly in everything they do. It is not automatically necessary to have a teacher who teaches students, but the main tool is the children's curiosity and the outside world.

> […] [I]n a Sudbury school, reading is seldom taught in the way we think of reading being taught. No teacher stands in front of 5 and 6 year olds and breaks down words into their phonetic elements. Instead, reading is part of the culture – just as talking is part of the culture (Collins, 2006, p. 46).

Further the model's philosophy also claims that children will learn all they need and even more as long as they are left being themselves. Therefore, students at Sudbury schools do not differentiate between play and work or learning and fun (Greenberg, 1995). "What is learned is the ability to concentrate and focus attention unsparingly on the task at hand, without regard for limitations – no tiredness, no rushing, no need to abandon a hot idea in the middle to go on to something else. This "lesson" is retained for life" (Greenberg, 1987, p. 81).

Democratic Free Schools

Democratic free schools share several ideals and beliefs with Sudbury schools but differ in many aspects as well. The City Elementary School[10], for instance, which was founded in a time of political and cultural transformation, defined itself as being part of the progressive movement and is influenced by several different alternative approaches like Summerhill or Montessori. This diversity of ideas and ideologies is therefore an important characteristic of democratic free schools[11] and is related to the position that there is not *one single* way to approach education but that approach and methodology depends on the school's community and its needs (Mercogliano, 1998). Consequently in contrast to, for example, Sudbury schools, democratic free schools do not necessarily have an underlying method but instead are "making it up as [they] go along" (Mercogliano, 1998). Despite several years of existence and after developing certain practices, the democratic free schools I visited were very flexible and open to change. Nevertheless, they do have an ideal they support, namely to "[…] raise a generation of children free of race and class prejudice, free of an overdependence on material things as the basis for the good life, and […] embracing education as a process that encourages learning for learning's sake and enables children to develop fully and authentically […]" (Mercogliano, 1998, p. 2).

Furthermore, democratic free schools believe that children learn permanently in everything they do and that every person is unique and learns at his or her own pace. Although many students[12] who graduated from a Sudbury or a democratic free school move on to college or university, and even though many staff members or teachers hold a university degree[13], academia is not the most important aspect at those schools. Instead, the academic world is often seen as artificial since education should rather be grounded in living experience and the belief

[10] Due to confidential reasons, I changed the names of the schools I visited as well as the names of the people I interviewed.
[11] Again, in this paper, my findings can merely be applied to those schools I actually visited.
[12] For a more detailed number of how many students move on to higher education, consult: Greenberg & Sadofsky, (1992); Greenberg, Sadofsky & Lempka, (2005).
[13] Further information on the staff's training will follow in later chapters.

that life creates its own lessons for everyone. Consequently for educators at democratic free schools "learning doesn't require experts, […] college entrance doesn't require prior formal schooling, and […] successful and satisfying lives don't require college training" (Mercogliano, 1998, p. xxiii).

Finally, truth, respect, freedom, personal power and responsibility are important values in a democratic free school. However, this does not mean that the schools impose those values on students, but rather provide for and maintain an environment where students can safely define those values for themselves which supports the belief that every individual's life belongs to him- or herself (Mercogliano, 1998).

2.2. Realization

Sudbury schools

The Sudbury philosophy is realized on several different levels: There are no grades, no rating, no recommendations or evaluation, aside from self-evaluation. Further, there is no higher authority or principal. Instead, students and staff[14] have an equal voice and vote in the decision-making processes. Since Sudbury schools are participatory democracies, everyone in such schools – students and staff – has an equal vote in weekly school meetings, which is chaired by a student who is elected for a certain period of time and where all of the school's decisions are made. Here, every student and staff member is allowed but not obliged to attend the school meeting. The procedure of the Judicial Committee (JC) – the process in which the school's rules are enforced – varies from school to school, depending on the size of the school, the number of students and staff, and the way it has been implemented by the school community.

[14] In a Sudbury school, teachers call themselves *staff members*, since the philosophy argues that students indeed learn but are not necessarily *taught*. Further, staff members do not see themselves as people who should teach someone else and who know more than others, just because they are older, but rather students and staff are on the same level. Also there are not necessarily traditional classes where a teacher is needed (John, personal communication). "Staff members are friends and playmates, sounding boards, counselors, parental figures, and most importantly, they hold the space that allows for freedom, trust, and responsibility to flourish in each and every student" (Collins & Van Burek, 2006, p. 27). Finally, "teachers can be other students at the school" (Greenberg, 1987, p. 20).

> The JC has the responsibility of ensuring that the School Meeting's laws and policies are followed. This body resolves issues through investigation, charges, and sentences. There are thorough reports, motions, and pleas. Students have responsibility to this body through membership, testimony and honesty (Collins & van Burek, 2006, p. 26).

When a student or staff member observes that a rule has been broken, this person writes a JC report and describes what, where and when something has happened and whether there are any witnesses. The JC investigates every report and then decides whether a rule has been violated or not. If the JC is convinced that a rule has been violated, the committee determines a sentence against the person (student or staff member) who violated the rule. Hereupon the accused can either plead guilty or innocent. If the person pleads guilty, he or she gets an appropriate sentence by the JC. If the person pleads innocent, a trial follows. Just as in school meetings, every JC member has an equal voice and vote, both students and staff (Collins, 2006). Ideally, the JC takes place every day and consists of three to five students (including two JC clerks[15]) and a staff member, with each age group represented. Students serve on a monthly basis and the staff member rotates on a daily basis (Collins, 2006; Collins & van Burek, 2006).[16] In contrast to the school meeting, where participation is voluntary, the JC requires every student and every staff member to serve for the JC at some point.

Sudbury schools do not have a coercive or pre-determined curriculum. Instead, students are responsible for their own education and decide themselves how to spend their time. In addition, students are also responsible for their learning methods, their learning environment and

[15] Usually, the JC clerks are students and are elected for two months by the school meeting (Greenberg, 1995).

[16] This, however, depends on the size of the school and the number of staff. If there are, for example, only two staff members, they rotate anyway, but the JC is not as diverse.

their evaluation. For Sudbury educators it is of particular importance that the environment is a fear-free one, which is why students are responsible for it themselves, and can develop their environment in a democratic process. Since the model has a strong focus on reality, students are as involved as staff members in making the decisions about the school and consequently have to face real conflicts that may appear in the school community (Collins, 2006; Collins & van Burek, 2006). Apart from the JC and the school meeting – which both happen at certain days and times – no other events are scheduled times at Sudbury schools. Consequently there are no bells, periods, traditional classrooms or classes – except for student-arranged-classes. Beyond that, it is possible to apply for the school all year long and start attending right away, instead of entering only at the beginning of a school year.

Students at Sudbury schools can be four years old, nineteen years old or any age in between. At Sudbury schools, the so-called "secret weapon" is age mixing, which relies on the belief that no two people are exactly the same and that every person learns at his or her own pace. Therefore it is an irrational idea for Sudbury schools to expect students to have the same interests or to learn at the same speed just because they have the same age. Also, age mixing represents real life, since after graduating from school one usually has to work with people of different ages. Therefore, in a Sudbury school students interact and work together with people of all ages as well as with the staff members and in no way see each other as enemies or competitors. Consequently, Sudbury schools are communities with different skills, abilities and interests. That is why in contrast to a traditional public school, there is no competition at a Sudbury school (Collins & van Burek, 2006). This implies that students want to help each other, so that they, as a group, do not fall behind but instead progress. The reasoning behind this is that it is fun as well as satisfying to work with people with skills of different levels. Furthermore, the social side of age mixing is very significant as well, since older children serve as role models for younger students or vice versa ("Sudbury Valley School", 2009) or as the Suburban School puts it on its website: "This enables every child to be both a learner and a teacher". Moreover,

responsibility is not a pedagogical tool to motivate students, but rather makes the students mature and ready for real life after school. Therefore, the model gives students full responsibility and freedom at the same time, so that every student is able to pursue his or her own path (Collins, 2006; Collins & van Burek, 2006). Finally, explanations from student to student are often more efficient, for there is less pressure and less judgment. Additionally students learn themselves through teaching other students, since they have to verbalize their prior knowledge, think it through and adjust their communication of it to the needs of the person they are teaching. Therefore, age mixing supports both learning- and teaching-skills. As a result, at a Sudbury school even little children look adults straight in the eye and talk openly (Greenberg, 1995).

Last but not least, since most Sudbury schools are not financially supported by the state[17], these schools depend on tuition fees and fundraising. Nevertheless, since the model's philosophy supports diversity, some Sudbury schools have sliding scales or financial aid in an attempt to enable students to attend regardless of family income. Therefore, in several Sudbury schools, students have to pay only as much as they are able to.

Democratic Free Schools

Similar to the Sudbury model, democratic free schools are run by democratic procedures, and every person has a vote in decision-making processes. There is a weekly school meeting, which differs insofar from school meetings at Sudbury schools, as it is mandatory. Also, at the democratic free schools I visited, there is no Judicial Committee (JC), but conflicts are solved through mediation or council meetings[18]. Mediation sessions are small group meetings involving individuals who are in a state of conflict with each other. In addition, there is a student

[17] Again, I am referring to those schools I visited myself and not to every single Sudbury or democratic free school.

[18] Although some of those schools initially started off with a JC, they realized that mediation and council meetings were more efficient for their community (Andy, personal communication).

present who facilitates the meeting – the chairperson or facilitator – as well as a teacher or intern; optionally friends of each party, as supporters, can be present as well. This group then tries to solve the conflict by discussing and mediating the issues surrounding it. However, if the conflict is not negotiable, that is if the person who called the meeting does not state that he or she is satisfied, the conflict goes to an all-school mediation, which is also known as a council meeting. A council meeting, in simple terms, is an emergency meeting, after other conflict solving alternatives have failed. In a council meeting one can also change a school policy, i.e. change old rules or introduce new rules, assuming this change is supported by a consensus. Such a meeting can be announced by anyone at any time. Whenever a meeting is called, everyone is obligated to stop doing what he or she is doing and has to make his or her way to the meeting room. Hereupon several people are nominated and a chairperson – usually a student – is elected. The chairperson then has to recognize speakers, keep the discussion going, and maintain order. The student who called the meeting presents his or her case and a discussion with a majority vote follows. The meeting ends when the meeting's initiator considers the problem to be solved (Suchak & Root, 2006). "[T]he council meeting structure serves a number of important functions in the day-to-day life of the school, but its real genius is the way it keeps aggression from turning into a toxic force" (Mercogliano, 1998, p. 30). Aside from the weekly school meeting and the council meeting, some schools have special meetings such as meetings for teenagers or a morning meeting to announce the day's schedule.

In contrast to Sudbury schools, most democratic free schools have a principal who is responsible for administrative matters but has the same voice and vote as anyone else. Beyond that, although democratic free school staff members call themselves *teachers* instead of *staff members*, they are not an authority but "the teacher in the Free School is equally student, for leading children requires a fluid openness to the continually changing needs of the child, and a recognition of the great variation every child displays" (Mercogliano, 1998, p. xii).

In a democratic free school – as in the Sudbury model – there are no bells or grades. However, a variety of non-coercive and non-graded classes are offered which students are allowed but not obliged to choose from. These classes are either initiated by a teacher, a community member or by the students themselves. Some classes are offered by full-time teachers, but there are also several classes offered by interns or volunteers who are otherwise not involved in the school. Further, students have the possibility to go out into the world and complete intern- or apprenticeships. Consequently students are not isolated from the outside world and parents are welcome at the school to help out, volunteer or offer classes. However, beyond that every student has to be left to do and to be whatever he or she wants to do or to be (Mercogliano, 1998).

Generally, the graduation requirement is that every student has to be prepared for his or her next step in life; what this next step in life is, however, is determined by the students themselves. Consequently every student has to set his or her own goals and the school gives the students the opportunity to achieve these goals. The City High School, for instance, provides three different graduation tracks. The first graduation track is a portfolio based on independent study where students write a plan about their goals and how they want to achieve these goals. If students take this track, they get a *certificate of graduation*, which is not an official diploma but which is – according to the teachers' experiences – still recognized by most colleges within and outside the US (Ian, personal communication). The second track of graduation requires credit. This track fits students who are used to the traditional public school system and need more guidance. In this track, students have a schedule and are required to take a certain amount of classes in a certain number of subjects or to carry out independent studies for some of those classes. The last graduation track is very similar to the credit-required track, but goes beyond in that students have to take several state tests, which are equivalent to the tests that are taken in all traditional public schools. After taking this graduation track, students receive an official state diploma (Ian, personal communication).

Since the democratic free schools I visited are not or only minimally supported by the government, they are a form of private school. Similarly to Sudbury schools, democratic free schools are mainly financed by tuition fees and fundraising. However, this does not mean that only privileged children with sufficient funds can attend this kind of school. On the contrary, these schools try to work with as little money as possible, and again have a sliding scale for tuition fees. Therefore, children only pay as much as they can, which often depends on their parents' income. Beyond that, students receive a free breakfast or lunch at democratic free schools to ensure that every student has enough to eat, since there are people with various social backgrounds at the schools, sometimes including students who cannot afford sufficient amounts of healthy food themselves.

3. Research Procedure

To understand the different models of democratic education, it is crucial to observe the methods first-hand. Consequently I went to the US for several weeks and visited four different Sudbury schools and two democratic free schools. By visiting schools which follow the same approach, it was possible to see how different schools and different communities try to achieve the same educational ideal.

Due to the schools' system and the paper's subject matter, I decided not to use quantitative research and standardized questionnaires to compile statistics. Instead, I chose qualitative research – participant observation with open-ended research and expert interviews in particular (Flick, 2006). Again, suiting the paper's question, participant observation "[…] focuses on human interaction and meaning viewed from the insiders' viewpoint in everyday life situations and settings. It aims to generate practical and theoretical truths formulated as interpretative theories" (Jorgensen, 1989, p. 23). However, the data I collected cannot be generalized, since in contrast to quantitative data, qualitative research and especially participant

observation enables the researcher merely to describe or interpret everyday experiences. Therefore, in this case the data applies mostly to the schools I visited but cannot prove general coherence for every Sudbury or democratic free school (Flick, 2006; Lamnek, 2005). Furthermore, open-endedness is an important part of being a participant observer in that the researcher should neither work with prefabricated hypotheses, nor be rigidly structured (Jorgensen, 1989). At the same time, it is important not to be naïve, unprepared or without knowledge of the models' theories, but rather to stay conscious of the necessity to reflect one's expectations in order to receive reasonable results from the observation (Jorgensen, 1989, p. 26 - 40). Consequently, knowing the philosophies of the different models and experiencing them in practice expanded my already existing list of questions during the research.

4. Results:

After introducing the basics about the two different approaches to democratic education[19], I will focus on the results of my observations according to the definition of democracy and education discussed in the introduction.

Autonomy: First of all I will focus on whether or not the two models support the students' autonomy and democratic judgment. Further, I will investigate the students' participation in each model, which includes decision-making processes and how communication and interaction works in these models.

Diversity: Second, I will analyze the racial diversity at democratic schools as well as the socioeconomic make up and gender constellation, since democracy represents a society where every individual should have equal rights, and be able to participate in the society no matter where they come from or how much material wealth they possess.

[19] If not explicitly stated that I am talking about either the Sudbury model *or* the democratic free school model, my observations apply to both models.

Academic and Integrative Education: Third, I will focus my attention on whether the models support academic and integrative education. Integrative education means that moral education is practiced within the regular academic education. Traditional public schools usually focus merely on academic aspects in education, while the social and moral aspects lack attention. This again can lead to anti-social or anti-democratic behavior, which is why moral education is essential for democratic approaches to education.

Training of staff: The training of the staff members, as well as their behavior in general, is important to be analyzed since, apart from the students, they are a very important part of democratic education.

Comprehensive, independent studies and evaluation: The last criterion is whether there are comprehensive and independent studies of the students' learning progress. This is because people's concern in today's society is whether or not students learn enough and become successful adults after graduating from school. Finally, I will ask if the particular method suits every child or if there are certain children these methods are not appropriate for.

Autonomy: Both the Sudbury school model and the democratic free school model support the students' ability to be autonomous and independent while being responsible at the same time. One example for supporting these skills is the Judicial Committee (JC). Even though rules at Sudbury schools are made by the entire school community and can be changed at any time, they are broken as well and people receive sanctions for breaking them. What is different compared to traditional public schools, however, is that the whole school community – represented by the rotating JC members – decides for every individual case what the sentence for a broken rule should be. Furthermore, the sentence depends on the rule which was broken, so that the person who broke it realizes why this certain rule is necessary, and why he or she should not break it again. Usually, the JC takes place once a day. JC members go through the different complaints one after the other, trying to find solutions, note everything that happens

and recapitulate all JC decisions during the weekly school meeting. These decisions are either approved or changed by the school community. If the JC cannot reconstruct the conflict which is described on the complaint, it tries to find out what exactly had happened by asking those being involved. A JC can last a couple of minutes or several hours depending on the number and difficulty of the complaints. This procedure sometimes asks students and staff for a lot of patience, since they strive to reach a just verdict, which again supports the development of students' moral judgment. One example of a JC sentence was when a staff member at a Sudbury school left the coffee maker switched on after leaving school. Consequently, he was found guilty, since he violated one of the school's "policy and procedure" rules. Thus, he received a sentence that forbade him to use the coffee maker for the next three days during which he attended the school. Another time, a student was found guilty for leaving food in the kitchen overnight. For this violation of the "littering" rule he had to complete additional cleaning chores. According to my experience, a sentence can be anything from a warning to a suspension. If a student breaks certain rules again and again and does not learn from his or her sentences, he or she would most likely be suspended for a certain amount of time before he or she would be granted another chance to be reinstated into the school. In other words, students have to prove that they want to be part of the school community and consequently have to show that they are capable of taking responsibility for their actions. All in all, the JC has been an efficient way of solving conflicts for many Sudbury schools. However, the system has to be learned first before it can work properly, which is why even very young children are JC members. Even though they may not understand every single step that is happening in the meeting, they observe and understand the system after a while. Also, it represents the Sudbury philosophy of learning very well, since it affirms that children learn through experience and that they indeed can *learn* what a democracy is about, but that it is not necessarily possible to *teach* them how a democracy works (Greenberg, 1995).

Another methodology that supports autonomy is the democratic school meeting at both Sudbury schools as well as democratic free schools, where students of all ages are interacting with adults without being afraid of them or viewing them as authorities. Since everyone is allowed to run such a meeting regardless of age, it is considered an excellent way to practice leadership (Mercogliano, 1998). This method helps students develop self-esteem, but at the same time makes students sensitive towards other people's needs and makes them aware of one's own behavior while talking to others. Consequently, the school meeting provides students with practice for democratic and considerate behavior of discussing conflicts and other issues. A regular school meeting at a Sudbury school takes place once a week. Prior to the meeting, there is an agenda, which consists of the weekly JC cases and topics students and staff want to address. The person responsible for the agenda collects all topics and photocopies the agenda, which is then accessible to every community member a couple of hours before the meeting starts so that students know what will be discussed and in which order. Based on this agenda, students and staff can decide if and when to join the meeting. Everyone is free to enter and exit the meeting as long as they do not disturb others. The chairperson – a student – reads the agenda and makes sure that everyone who wants to say something has the chance to express her- or himself. Then, the meeting goes through each point separately. First, there are announcements, then JC cases are discussed, and finally there are motions where students or staff can ask the meeting to, for example, change rules or to introduce new ideas. A school meeting may be over within a couple of minutes, but it can also last several hours depending on the agenda. At one Sudbury school I visited, there were some concerns raised about the qualification of a staff member by some parents and other staff. Hereupon, almost all of the students were present and participated actively during the discussion about this very staff member and defended him fiercely, since they wanted to make sure that he would remain on staff at the school. The discussion took more than an hour. After the case was resolved, many students left the meeting since the following items were not of their interest. Another example of high student

participation in a school meeting at a Sudbury school was when new JC clerks were elected. JC clerks are important individuals in such a school, since they are the ones who are responsible for the judicial system to work in a fair manner. Since it was a significant decision who became JC clerk, many students participated in the meeting, waited patiently until the topic came up and interviewed the candidates. After the case was decided, and there were no more agenda items which interested them, they left and went on with what they were doing before they made their way to the meeting. Another time students at the Suburban School thought there were too many rules at the school and felt they were oppressed and controlled by the adults. Thereupon, the school meeting decided to eliminate all rules for a non-determined time, which caused chaos shortly after. Finally there was an emergency meeting where the community – especially the students – reintroduced all their rules. This is why this specific school goes through their current rules on a regular basis to ensure that the entire community still agrees with the existing rules (Martin, personal communication). These examples demonstrate how democracy works at a Sudbury school: Everybody has the chance to participate in decision-making processes, and everybody has an equal voice while nobody is forced to participate. Also, this reveals that students are very motivated when they are interested in a particular issue. Therefore, at a Sudbury school students decide for themselves what they are interested in. Beyond that, it also shows that students participate in school meetings when realizing that the decisions which are made can influence their lives. This exemplifies the idea of a democracy in that students are able to be an active part of the decision-making, while being free to decide which issues are important to them. Contrary to a Sudbury school, the weekly school meeting at a democratic free school is mandatory to make the students understand that each and every one is extremely important for the school community, and that everybody has certain tasks and responsibilities. At some school meetings I attended, it was noticeable that some students were easily bored if things were discussed which were not interesting or relevant to them. However, since the school meeting decides on consensus, a voluntary school meeting is impossible. A very important topic

in a school meeting at the Metro School – a democratic free school – while I was visiting, was the attendance policy. The Metro School is a registered high school authorized to hand out state high school diplomas; this is as long as students fulfill the state's requirements, which includes attending the school for at least five hours a day, five days a week. During my visit, some students did not fulfill this particular requirement, which was then discussed at the school meeting. Several students understood this discussion as a personal offense, while others were able to relate to the problem and tried to explain how important it is that the school keeps being registered, since otherwise students would not have the opportunity to graduate with a state diploma. This incident shows that students are able to make reasonable rules which go along with requirements that are put upon schools from the outside and that students are not only able to understand the necessity of these requirements, but can relate to them as well. Further, on a different occasion at a democratic free school, money was stolen from a student and a council meeting was called because of this incident. Even though the students condemned the theft, they found a way to solve the conflict creatively and gave the perpetrator an opportunity to return the money without having to reveal him- or herself.

What stood out at both Sudbury schools and democratic free schools, was the fact that students come to school, sign themselves in (as a way to monitor the attendance which is required by the state) and even though there are no coercive classes or schedules, students know what to do with their time without any instructions by staff members or teachers. Instead students are aware of their responsibility for choosing a class, asking for a class, for initiating study groups with other students, or to study all by themselves. Consequently students must and want to find their own way of learning, which supports the students' ability of being autonomous. However, at the City High School, for example, once a student has signed up for a class, he or she is expected to attend that class on a regular basis. Also, if a student decides to pursue a certain graduation track in order to receive a state diploma, he or she has to take certain tests and classes that prepare students for receiving a diploma. Nevertheless, whether or not to

take these classes or tests is the student's individual decision and nobody urges students to take classes or tests. Beyond that, students have a say in putting up a class and a schedule: Students and teachers are rather flexible which leads to students and teachers discussing together when to do a class, what kind of class it should be and how it should be structured. This procedure also helps to establish an atmosphere where teachers and students, but also students among themselves know that there is a lot of respect for each other since every single individual is extremely important for the entire community (Liza, personal communication). Thus, on the one hand, students are free to choose what they want to do and all classes are non-coercive. On the other hand, classes might not be required by the school, but by outside standards, depending on what students want to achieve. If students decide to go to college, they have to have proof of certain academic knowledge. Therefore, non-coerciveness asks for more responsibility than traditional public schools do where students are merely asked to study what they are told. At democratic free schools it is the students' choice and therefore their responsibility to make a decision and eventually achieve their goal. This is why students at democratic free schools are more motivated and interested in classes than students generally are at traditional public schools, since they decide for themselves whether or not to participate.

Furthermore, students at both Sudbury schools and democratic free schools are very proactive: I experienced students initiating events themselves, organizing fundraisers in order to get new equipment for the school, or fighting for equal rights and social justice. At the Small School for instance – a Sudbury school – students initiated a lobby for equal rights for teenage drivers by standing up for fair driving laws, having viewed the driving laws in their specific state as unfair and discriminating against teenagers.[20] Another example of students being proactive was when students from the Forest School planned on visiting the original Sudbury Valley School in Framingham, Massachusetts. Through organizing fundraisers, as milkshake or

[20] This example also shows that even though, the original Sudbury school considers itself apolitical, other Sudbury schools which are based on the original philosophy do not necessarily hold the same view.

pizza sales, they managed to raise enough money to cover all of their travel expenses. At the same time, several democratic free schools planned on going to Washington D.C. on January 20th, 2009 in order to see Obama's inauguration. Consequently, they organized several activities, for instance cookie sales, to make sure everybody who wanted to go was able to do so regardless of their parents' income (Andy, personal communication), which again emphasizes that students at Sudbury schools as well as at democratic free schools are extremely autonomous and proactive.

Beyond, students realize that they are responsible for their own lives and for finding their own paths which, however, can be challenging not only for students, but also for staff, teachers and parents: At Sudbury schools, staff members do not give grades or feedback, which consequently means that students have to evaluate themselves and parents have to rely on what their children tell them and trust them while staff members have to take themselves back. Another responsibility the students have is the maintenance of the school. There is, for example, no cleaning staff at the Sudbury schools in my sample, meaning that every student has a cleaning chore which rotates on a weekly basis. Here students learn to respect school property and are careful with handling things which do not belong to them. Also, if they need new equipment, students and staff have to find a way of raising money in order to purchase it, which is why they have a good understanding of the value of things. The Sudbury philosophy also supports the students' autonomy in everyday occurrences such as eating: The belief that every student learns in his or her own pace also implies that every student has individual needs, such as hunger. This is why everybody brings one's own lunch or buys it at the school store, and is free to eat at anytime and anywhere he or she wants to. Consequently there are no set times at which all students are required to eat together. This again makes the students sensitive to their own needs and therefore responsible for their own good.

Students learn how the school system works by experiencing it for themselves, through observing or by asking older students. After experiencing the system for a while, students take

on considerable responsibility themselves and make the system work because they *want* the system to work. Scarcely do students want to depend on staff members or be passive community members. Since the school system supports the students' autonomy and their taking responsibility, it consequently supports the students' moral judgment. Students apprehend to take responsibility for themselves but also for their peers and other people in general, which is why they develop the urge to act in a morally correct manner and want to be fair and just. Still, at Sudbury schools there are representative bodies, examples being the school meeting chairperson, the JC clerks or other school clerks, who are responsible for certain tasks. Nevertheless, these representatives are elected by the school meeting and rotate on a regular basis. In contrast to Sudbury schools, staff members at democratic free schools call themselves *teachers* instead of *staff members* and their students depend on the teachers to a certain degree to get a state diploma. However, teachers generally do not have more power than their students. Instead, students and teachers are on the same level and have the same voice and vote. Their common goal is to support the students to achieve what they want for their lives (Ian, personal communication).

Diversity: Both school models aim for diversity in several aspects: Diversity in social class, race, gender and religion. In regards to social class, many Sudbury as well as democratic free schools offer financial aid or have a sliding scale for tuition fees, so that everybody can afford to attend such a school if they wish to, regardless of their parents' income and therefore regardless of their class affiliation. At the Metro School, for example, 80% of the students receive tuition assistance and 35% of the students pay less than 10% of the full tuition. Also, at democratic free schools every student gets a free lunch or breakfast every day to make sure, every student has something to eat during the day (Andy, personal communication).

Beyond, the schools are extremely open to every kind of religion, try to eliminate racism – at least at their school – and support gender equality. At the schools I visited, I met students

who described themselves, for example, as Atheist, Protestant, Catholic, Buddhist, Muslim, Jew or Hindu. Also, I met students who were, for instance, of North, Middle or South American, European or Asian heritage. In addition, I also met Native Americans, African Americans, students of mixed heritage and many more. Further, in my sample, teachers at democratic free schools had American, Taiwanese, European or African background and who have lived, studied and worked both in North America and in the rest of the world. Diversity, therefore, does not only rely on a person's birthplace but also on people's perspectives and their different living conditions. Consequently, the advantage of diversity is that it offers a variety of interests and ideas and broadens students' horizon, which again supports the idea of a democracy where everybody has the same rights and is not discriminated against or disadvantaged because of their social or racial background.

Concerning gender, there was no discrimination noticeable: I witnessed both a female as well as a male chairperson at a school meeting, JC clerks of both sexes and cleaning chores were everyone's responsibility. Also, at all schools I visited, there were both male and female staff members and teachers. All in all, I could not see any difference in behavior or respect towards female students or staff. Nevertheless, since I observed the schools only for a couple of weeks and the gender aspect was not my primary interest, my observations cannot be considered as reliable findings. Consequently I would think it useful to conduct in-depth studies regarding gender. Nevertheless, at all schools I visited, it was difficult to find a majority concerning heritage or race, class or gender.

Academic and Integrative Education: If it is possible to talk about "teaching"[21] at a Sudbury school, then it is neither standardized nor can it be compared to the way it is practiced

[21] In the Sudbury philosophy there is only few *teaching* but rather *learning*. According to John of the Forest School, who does not believe in the idea of *teaching*, the ultimate learning does not come from someone telling you something, it comes from understanding and experiencing (John, personal communication).

in traditional public schools. The way something is taught or rather learned at a Sudbury school, entirely depends on the student. Students can study on their own independently with the help of books and computers, or by asking friends or other students at the school to help them. Also, students can always ask staff members to give them a hint regarding a problem they are facing, they can ask them to help them or even conduct a class in the traditional way with the teacher in the front. At democratic free schools there are no mandatory classes, tests or evaluations, but students are offered classes and have the opportunity to initiate or ask for classes themselves which they, according to my observations, regularly do. At the Metro School, for instance, I experienced students and teachers discussing a class on conspiracy theories. Before they discussed what to do in this very class, they figured out a time together where everybody who was interested, was able to participate and decided on the approach they would like to pursue in this very class. Further classes offered at democratic free schools include among others *English Basics*, *World History*, *Debate*, *Criminal Justice*, *Literature*, *Spanish*, *Craft Arts*, *Physical Education*, *Math*, *Religious Studies*, *Women's Studies*, *Alternative Energy*, and *Music*. Beyond that, students often choose to learn things by practicing them, as for instance cooking, playing music, or doing arts and crafts. Therefore, at all schools I visited, students have the possibility to do internships or apprenticeships where they can learn things theoretically and practically from experts (Greenberg, 1995).

Concerning moral education, students at Sudbury schools as well as students at democratic free schools are confronted with real conflicts and have a (personal) need to solve those which supports students' moral judgment for they have to deal with conflicts that will actually have an effect on their own lives and their behavior. Real conflicts give students the opportunity to practice democratic behavior or to see how it works, instead of seeing democracy just as a theoretical system of rules. Further, the school meeting, the JC, mediation and other clerkships are a good way of learning to judge and behave morally correct and responsible.

Training of staff: The staff members or teachers at both Sudbury schools and democratic free schools do not need to have a special training. They are, however, required to understand and respect the school's philosophy, and empower the students through freedom and responsibility. In other words, staff members and teachers have to take themselves back and let students be what they want to be but at the same time, they have to be there if the students need them (Greenberg, 1995). Further, teachers or staff members need to have good communication skills and need to be willing to learn from others – children and adults – and finally need to be fairly self-confident and know who they are (Andy, personal communication). This is a specifically important skill since the teacher at a democratic free school is an advisor simultaneously. At the schools I visited, for example, every teacher advises a certain group of students, either depending on the students' age or on sympathy between teacher and student. This advisee system helps to create a more personal atmosphere since students are actually seen as individuals rather than a mass of people. Further, students can be sure that there is at least one specific person – which is the advisor – for every student at the school they can always go to. Also, since every teacher at a democratic free school has to advise a couple of students personally and academically, teachers are very involved in the school and students feel less left behind academically and socially. At traditional public schools on the other hand, there may be – if at all – one person who advises the entire student body (Lucy; Ian, personal communication). In regards to academic training, staff members or teachers at these schools can have any kind of academic background. In my sample several staff members at Sudbury schools held official teaching degrees and were able to demonstrate a lot of teaching experiences, others held Ivy League degrees in, for example, Computer Science or Theoretical Physics and were able to make experiences outside of education before they became a staff member at a Sudbury school. Teachers at democratic free schools in my sample held degrees in English Literature, History, Fine Arts for film and television production and Philosophy.

Consequently staff members and teachers do not have to have a background in education or are restricted to any other specific or preconditioned field, which provides a broader variety of subject matters students can learn at these schools.

Comprehensive, independent studies and evaluation: As mentioned before, at Sudbury schools there is no evaluation of the students' learning progress aside from self-evaluation. Since there are no grades, tests or evaluations at Sudbury schools, there is no regular documentation of the students' learning progress either. Also, such documentation would be contradictory to the schools' philosophy, since students indeed learn constantly, but in their own individual pace (Martin, personal communication). Therefore, it would not be possible to document the learning progress, for there are no two people alike or following the same path. This is precisely why students usually evaluate themselves. Even though there are no regular comprehensive independent studies on the Sudbury model, there have been some studies on Sudbury alumni, conducted by the original Sudbury Valley School. The first study was conducted in 1972, the second one three years later in 1975. A more recent survey for the study in 1981-1982 was designed independently by two school community members. These results were published in 1986. In 1992, the Sudbury Valley School Press published a study on Sudbury alumni "Legacy of Trust – Life After the Sudbury Valley School Experience". The most current study "The Pursuit of Happiness – The Lives of Sudbury Valley Alumni" was published in 2005. In "Legacy of Trust" the authors consciously avoided questions which dealt with the opinions, character traits or beliefs of the interviewees, since the interviewers were too personally involved for such a purpose. In "The Pursuit of Happiness", however, questions about values were intentionally included in the study. Both studies represent interviews using standardized questionnaires with open questions about the alumni's situation after having attended Sudbury Valley School (Greenberg & Sadofsky, 1992; Greenberg, Sadofsky & Lempka, 2005). The principal conclusion of these studies is that Sudbury students

> […] including both, those who started the school early in their primary years and those who started in their secondary years have not suffered as a result of attending such a school. They have gone on to good colleges and good jobs. […] They are taking responsible positions in business, music and art, science and technology, social services, skilled crafts and academia (Greenberg & Sadofsky, 1992, p. 9).

In other words, Sudbury Valley School graduates have gone on to all kinds of further education or occupations (Greenberg & Sadofsky, 1992, p. 15; p. 241-243). Also, Sudbury school students do not have fewer skills than students from traditional public schools – they may simply have different social skills. Examples of those social skills being listening to others, being aware of their speaking habits or even more basic ones, since they know how to discuss and work out a solution democratically and non-confrontationally without interrupting others (Greenberg & Sadofsky, 1992; Greenberg, Sadofsky & Lempka, 2005).

Even though, there is no regular, externally-imposed evaluation of the students' learning progress at democratic free schools either, there are ways for students to evaluate themselves on the basis of classes, tests and feedback (Mercogliano, 1998). At the City High School, there are two parent-teacher conferences during the year, where teachers inform parents how their children are doing academically and socially. Further, there is a mid-year and an end-of-the-year evaluation for parents, which is similar to the parent-teacher conference, but in written form. These evaluations and conferences, however, are discussed with the particular student beforehand in order to ensure that he or she agrees with the teacher's evaluation (Ian, personal communication). At the Metro School there is a descriptive evaluation process which includes objective observation by the staff according to five categories. These categories are the students' physical presence and gesture, their thinking and learning process, their communication with

others, their strong interests and preferences and finally their disposition and temperament. Teachers observe students according to these categories throughout the year and try to gain a deeper understanding of who a particular child is and how he or she can be supported. Beyond, there is a staff evaluation as well in that all the staff members give each other feedback, which automatically requires a lot of interaction between the staff. Also, since students are part of the hiring committee, they indirectly evaluate the staff members as well (Andy, personal communication).

Finally, it is important to establish whether the introduced models are appropriate for every kind of child or if there are some people this model may not work for. Generally speaking, both school models can be attended by anybody: There are so-called troublemakers but also A-students as well as students who do not agree with the public school system or who do not accept the status quo. Moreover, democratic free schools as well as Sudbury schools are open to anybody except to people who do not want to be at the school. This is, students need to be willing to participate in the community and need to be respectful and follow the rules which maintain the community (Ian, personal communication). However, some staff members I talked to think that there are indeed people for whom these models may not work.[22] These are children who do not have the desire or ability to be responsible for the community, children who only think about their own rights without respecting those of others. Furthermore, children at these schools not only have to be responsible for others, but also for themselves. This means that it has to be possible to leave students by themselves without being afraid they may hurt themselves or others for it is neither possible nor intended to supervise students all the time.

5. Reflection

[22] Although it could be argued that in general every child fits into a democratic school. If a child cannot deal with a democratic system, the child's social environment and its past may be responsible for that.

Since Obama's critique does not intend to reform the traditional public school system per se but merely intend to implement longer school days, higher standards, higher assessments and standardized tests, I would like to return to the question of whether these reforms represent the right path to take or whether there are other alternatives to the existing school system which support the development of critical, creative, responsible and confident adults. Based on the aforementioned definition of *democracy*, this paper argues that most traditional public schools are indeed not democratic. Instead they are autocratic, lack clear rules and guidelines which apply for every individual equally, and have no respect for the rights of young people. Also, traditional public schools in the US do not prepare students for their lives after school, since the public school system does not reflect the "real world" (Greenberg, 1992a, p. 15-16). Beyond that, students usually are not able to choose – or only in a very limited way – whether they want to study a certain subject area or not. Instead, students are put into closed rooms with other students of their age, forced to learn what everybody is supposed to know – also known as the curriculum. In addition, even if there is a decision-making process that involves students, the final say is still with the teachers, which shows that students and teachers do not have the same rights and instead a strict hierarchy is in place within the school system. According to Greenberg and Ackhoff (2008), the educational system is not realistic or even suited to prepare students for society later on: Students at traditional public schools are, for example, supposed to complete tests or examinations in complete isolation with no access to any resource other than their own mind and memory, which is the opposite of what will be expected of them in society (Ackhoff & Greenberg, 2008). This position corresponds with Dewey's (1968) demand that schools must stop isolating themselves and their students from society and therefore from reality. Since, even in democratic societies, traditional public schools are not democratic, people cannot be expected to become democratic or to understand the idea of a democracy. Democratic schools[23], however, do give students the opportunity to learn how a democracy works, and how to behave

[23] Both Sudbury schools and democratic free schools.

democratically themselves. In contrast to traditional public schools, democratic schools try to achieve their ideal of education in offering an environment where students are active members of a participatory democracy and have a say of their own. Similar to traditional public schools, there are several rules and restrictions at democratic schools – sometimes even more than in public schools – the difference, however, is that students at democratic schools generally understand and respect rules in their schools, since they are the ones who implement the rules in the first place. In the case of a rule being broken, both mediation and JC intend to find out *why* a rule was broken. Also, mediators and JC members try to find logical and comprehensible consequences for people who violated rules. Both aspects – asking why a rule was broken and finding a reasonable consequence – are usually missing at traditional public schools. Beyond that, at democratic schools, there are all-school law-books made by the entire community, which applies for the whole school community. At traditional public schools, there may be all-school law-books as well, but in addition there are individual – sometimes unwritten and also random – rules made by the individual teacher or authority. Consequently, students cannot know which rules are enforced by which authority and cannot understand why there are certain additional rules, for students do not have a voice in making rules, nor are they in the position of questioning existing regulations (Gabbert, 2005). Another contrast between traditional public schools and democratic schools arises around the idea of the drive to learn. Traditional public schools are based on the belief that children do not want to learn and that they need to be forced and rewarded in order to learn (Gabbert 2005). Democratic schools on the other hand believe that children do want to learn themselves and that they learn all the time by everything they do, since they realize themselves that they have to have certain knowledge in order to become what they aim to be (Gabbert 2005; Suchak & Root, 2006). Beyond, people also want to decide themselves what is worth learning and how they want to learn. Finally, by providing this freedom and this choice, democratic schools evoke involvement, enthusiasm, excitement and interest. Consequently, democratic education supports the development of democratic skills and

helps students to become autonomous, self-reflecting and critical individuals but also happy, pleased and eventually ready to take their next step in life.

Despite different approaches and ideals, both Sudbury schools and democratic free schools support a similar ideal of education: Providing an environment for children where they can become happy and effective individuals during and after school and where they can become successful according to their own individual definition of success. Beyond that, these schools want their students to be prepared for their next step in life – what this step will be, however, is still determined by the students themselves. Furthermore, according to these schools, students do not need to know an externally imposed curriculum, however, there are important skills students should develop as for example responsibility, critical thinking and autonomy. Finally students should be able to evaluate themselves and reflect on what they want from life and last but not least learn from and about others (Mercogliano, 1998). Consequently, democratic education may represent an alternative to the traditional public school system. However, does one model have advantages over the other and are there any additional challenges the political and economic system poses on democratic schools?

As mentioned before, the original Sudbury Valley School in Framingham, Massachussetts explicitly claims to be apolitical and separates itself from the larger political context (Greenberg, 1995). This is, there is no evidence of efforts to account for social change nor has the school defined a specific political orientation.[24] In contrast to that, several democratic free schools in the alternative education movement – as for example the City Elementary School – support a more radical pedagogy, political critique of schooling and fight for social justice through education. Beyond that, the latter believe that democratic education should be inclusive and accessible to every student. According to Peter – former teacher and

[24] Again, this only applies to the original Sudbury Valley School. Other Sudbury schools consider themselves political and support progressive social change.

director at the City Elementary School – the non-transformative, apolitical attitude like that exemplified by Greenberg's Sudbury Valley School risks that students are not able to take responsibilities and do not see the need for social change but rather live in a white privileged vacuum. Although the Sudbury approach to education gives certain students the opportunity to be free and have a happy and fulfilled childhood and adolescence, it does not necessarily represent a space where critical minds for injustice in society and the urge to act for social change and problems along the lines of race, gender, sexuality and class are developed.

It is further arguable whether or not there are informal or unintended hierarchies at democratic schools. Even though these schools are democratic in that everyone has the same rights, there are always people who are more dominant or more noticeable. The same applies to teachers or staff members: Although they try not to be more dominant than the students, it may happen – even unnoticed or unintended by both students and staff – that the staff members are more powerful than the students in regards to, for example, communication skills for the staff having more experience and practice. Beyond that, the schools are still part of a society which is less democratic than the schools themselves. This can lead to both positive and negative consequences: The negative part is that these dependencies on the society may cause a hierarchy in the democratic schools despite their democratic system. Some schools, for instance, do not have enough money to realize all their ideals perfectly, since they may have to rely on rented space, are limited in hiring enough staff or are unable to pay the staff enough money so that the staff is forced to have several jobs in order to make a living. Additionally, as mentioned before, some schools have to fulfill certain state requirements in order to be recognized as a school, which necessarily cannot be handled democratically since the schools are forced to deal with these issues. Therefore, democratic schools always depend on non-democratic issues put upon them by the society. Consequently, holding democratic skills can be an asset, nevertheless, the society is not organized entirely democratically which leads to limits these schools have to face.

Here the question is what these limits can mean for the students if they are not reflected in the schools since

> [e]ven anti-authoritarian schools have to prepare children for a hierarchical, often brutal achievement-oriented society and at the same time, they need to live up to their standard to educate people "who are able to stand the contradictions in this society without suffering neurotic and character-deformations and change them collectively in active resistance" (Dermitzel, 1969, p. 180; Schroedter, 2007, p. 151).[25]

In other words, if these contradictions between a democratic approach to education and the society itself are not reflected at school, students may get in conflict with society, since they are not used to a system, in which they do not have any power or a say. Therefore, students may not be able to become a part of the society because of this conflict, or they may not know how to compete with others. On the other hand, students may resign and accept the society the way it is, with having a choice in some aspects, but being unable to vote in other parts of the society. A positive result this conflict could have, however, is that students may become aware of the fact that they only live in a democratic community rather than in a democratic society, which may empower them to question and oppose inequalities, hierarchies and undemocratic structures in society. In summary, I think education should include a transformative aspect and I, therefore, find it essential to not only offer students an alternative approach to traditional schooling and give them the chance to become critical and independent individuals but also to point out what is wrong in our society and offer them tools to contribute to positive social change.

[25] My own translation: „Auch antiautoritäre Erziehungseinrichtungen müssen die Kinder auf eine hierarchisierte, oft brutale Leistungsgesellschaft vorbereiten und gleichzeitig ihrem Anspruch gerecht werden, Menschen zu erziehen, „die fähig sind, die Widersprüche dieser Gesellschaft ohne neurotische und Charakterdeformationen *auszuhalten* und kollektiv die Verhältnisse im aktiven Widerstand zu verändern" (Dermitzel, 1969, S. 180; Schroedter, 2007, S. 151).

This paper tried to introduce two models of democratic education, its advantages and disadvantages in comparison with traditional public schools but also in comparison with one another. However, due to the size of this paper, it merely fulfills an exploratory and introductory purpose. Consequently this issue should be researched in more depth in order to find the most effective alternative to traditional public schooling. This is, a more systematic investigation – quantitative and qualitative – of the actual outcome would be valuable and further research on students' democratic competence would be necessary in order to improve the school system for both students and society.

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