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# Practicing Democracy in the NCLB Elementary Classroom

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Practicing Democracy in the Classroom 1

Practicing Democracy in the NCLB Elementary Classroom

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Abstract

The practice of teaching democracy in school is diminishing. The implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has forced teachers to teach to the test, and has required some to follow scripted curriculum, leaving little time or incentive for teaching democracy.

This study examines the importance of practicing democracy and identifies ways in which it can be done in the NCLB classroom. The literature demonstrates the importance of teaching democracy through practice in schools. Ideas on how to accomplish this in the pre-NCLB classroom are well documented. By surveying public school teachers, this paper endeavors to bring awareness to its importance and to provide ways in which the NCLB classroom teacher can practice democracy.

Results indicated that teachers are interested in practicing democracy and believe it is important. The survey and interviews found specific areas of concern and ways for teachers to bring democracy into the NCLB classroom.

## Chapter 1 Introduction

American citizens are putting the U.S. at risk of losing its democracy by failing to educate new generations of citizens about their responsibilities and civic duties. An increasing number of U.S. citizens have very little, if any, tradition in understanding democracy (White, Van Scotter, Hartoonian, & Davis, 2007). In America, democracy means that citizens engage and participate in the continual process of guiding community, state and country. It requires keeping abreast of political issues and initiatives, educating self about political figures and candidates, maintaining good citizenship by following laws, paying taxes, and behaving responsibly; and voting in elections. However, educating citizens in the practice of democracy is not just a matter of teaching the facts and history of a civics course.

Becoming an engaged democratic citizen begins by practicing democracy in the classroom. It is in this first community that students should learn to exercise voice; to make choices and take responsibility for their own learning; and to understand, give, and receive fair, equitable and respectful treatment. It is in this environment that they should feel safe to express ideas, explore leadership, and to participate in guiding the classroom community. In the everyday life of the classroom, students should experience democracy at every opportunity, and should cultivate an appreciation of the democratic process.

With the institution of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, teaching methods have become more standardized, and sometimes even scripted. States, including territories or jurisdictions, who hope to receive Title 1 funding must now submit plans to the U. S. Department of Education showing that they have adopted challenging academic

content and achievement standards, as well as an accountability system (Smith, 2005) to measure student progress toward those standards. This emphasis on accountability has shifted the teaching focus in our schools.

Recent school reforms with the implementation of NCLB ignore the broader purposes of schooling, such as developing civil and civic character in a democratic society. “High test scores predict high test scores, but not much else: not problem-solving skills, not good work habits, not honesty . . . and not the dispositions and virtues embedded in our expectations for schooling” (Goodlad, 2002 p. 19).

#### Statement of Problem

The requirements of NCLB for more testing and more accountability, and the subsequent rewards and punishments tied to it, have put major constraints on the classroom teacher creating a situation where teachers are under enormous pressure to teach to the test. Some teachers are even required to teach scripted curriculum. As a result of this approach, teachers have no time left to teach other concepts or to enhance learning. The practice of democracy, one of the cornerstones of our society, is being pushed out of its rightful place in the classroom. Teachers need to bring democracy back to the classroom by setting up democratic classrooms.

#### Purpose

The purpose of my research is to bring awareness to the importance of practicing democracy and to identify ways in which teachers can set up a democratic classroom in today’s NCLB setting. Through this research I endeavor to establish practical suggestions for a democratic classroom model and provide encouragement for bringing democracy back to the classroom.



### Research Question

How can teachers create democratic classrooms through the practice of democracy in today's NCLB elementary classroom and why is it important? Do teachers believe in the importance of teaching democracy; and if so, how can they provide opportunities for students to learn democratic principles through practice, given restraints on time and emphasis on standards and accountability? Teaching democracy in the classroom means incorporating the values of democracy, using a democratic approach to teaching that enables students to practice democracy, and providing a safe environment where students can take risks and where they can actively participate in the learning process.

### Theoretical Rationale

Dewey, who is acknowledged as the Father of American Education, was influential in progressive theories of education and an advocate for teaching democracy. His philosophy of education was closely aligned with his belief in democracy. In his advocacy for teaching democracy, Dewey argued it is not possible for democracy to be taught or understood in institutions (such as schools) that are undemocratic (Mosher, Kenny & Garrod, 1994). He believed in child or student-centered learning as opposed to teacher-centered lecturing. The approach of child-centered learning was based on the work of Dewey, as well as that of the constructivist theory of Piaget and others, which held that children learn by building on their own learning experiences and by their reflections of those experiences.

Piaget was a developmental theorist. His ideas about democracy and citizenship were grounded in his work on how children learn and on the need for development of a general cognitive framework. Piaget wrote on democracy in education in terms of the importance of preparing children to be good citizens:

How are we to bring children to the spirit of citizenship and humanity which is postulated by democratic societies? By the actual practice of democracy at school. It is unbelievable that at a time when democratic ideas enter into every phase of life, they should have been so little utilized as instruments of education.

(Mosher et al., 1994, p. xi)

Piaget believed that because knowledge is constructed from within, it is an active process (Kamii, 1973). Without the opportunity to practice, the knowledge of democracy cannot be constructed.

Freire's (1973) philosophy of education was based on both classical approaches, such as Plato, and modern Marxist thinkers. Freire and other theorists developed critical pedagogies, which are teaching approaches, to empower students to question domination. The goal was to help students raise their critical consciousness by questioning such things as the relationship between teaching and learning. This aligned with Dewey's ideas about establishing a more equitable teacher-student relationship. Traditionally the role of teachers has been authoritarian and focused on lectures. Both Freire and Dewey believed that a shift in this role was necessary in order to promote more democratic critical thinking.

As an educational researcher and theorist, Goodlad (2002) conducted studies and published several influential books and papers on teacher education and institutional

reform. As the founder of the Center for Educational Renewal at the University of Washington, he designed school reform programs and promoted initiatives for simultaneously renewing schools and teacher education. He promoted education as essential to democracy and to developing democratic character.

Barber is a political theorist who has written about democracy for over 30 years. He has written extensively about the purpose of public education and its role in teaching democracy. He wrote that public schools are the foundation, the place where we begin to construct our democratic civic culture. He stated they are more than just schools for the public, they are “schools of publicness: institutions where we learn what it means to *be* a public and start down the road toward common national and civic identity” (Barber, 1998, p. 225).

Democracy is based on justice, equality and freedom. Its attributes include respect, fairness, rights, expression, responsibility, and participation in decisions. Teaching democracy in the classroom means incorporating the values of democracy, using a democratic approach to teaching that enables students to practice democracy, and providing a safe environment where students can take risks and where they can actively participate in the learning process.

#### Assumptions

Without a population educated in democracy and citizenship, our country faces the prospect of losing our hard-won democracy. We are losing sight of our democratic values and responsibilities, and this trend will continue if new generations are not taught these values and not given the chance to practice them in school.

It is my assumption that giving students the opportunity to practice democratic values in the elementary classroom is essential for continuing our democratic culture and for preparing students to be participating citizens. Since the NCLB Act of 2001 was passed, teachers have become focused on teaching to the test, to the exclusion of important ideals. The result has been a further movement away from practicing democracy in the classroom. Teachers no longer have the opportunity to create a democratic classroom. It is my assumption that there is a relationship between the implementation of NCLB in the classroom and the disappearance of a democratic approach to teaching; democracy is not being practiced in most classrooms.

#### Background and Need

The importance of practicing democracy has been well established throughout the literature. The theories of both Dewey and Piaget have been practiced and studied in the classroom and discussed by various authors (Beane, 2005; Kamii, 1993; Mosher et al., 1994; and Wirth, 1966). Several authors (Barber, 1998; Goodlad, 2002; Knight, 2001; Lappé, 2006; and White et al., 2007) articulated why it is important to practice democracy and how our democracy is now at risk. Some discussed the role of schools and teachers in a democratic education or what is needed in the classroom in terms of guiding teachers on the democratic path, mostly before NCLB (Beane, 2005; Goodlad, 2000).

Beane (2005) provides illustrations of involving students in classroom curriculum planning as a means for helping them to learn and understand the democratic way, and thereby creating a more democratic classroom in the process. In one illustration, a second-third grade teacher expanded on the Know-Want-Learn (KWL) approach in a unit

on the planets. The students used a three-part inquiry process of asking questions, gathering data, and then telling others about their discoveries. After making lists of what they “knew” about planets, students worked in small groups to find commonalities and unique or interesting facts. These facts were presented to the class.

In the first phase of the inquiry process, students again worked in small groups to generate questions about what they wanted to learn (e.g., what is the temperature on your planet?). During the second phase, students researched and gathered data on their planet. In the third phase, students designed ways to tell others about their planet, such as by making mobiles, or posters, or dioramas, in which they answered their original questions.

This student involvement in classroom curriculum planning served to build community, to give students voice, and to give them practice in making decisions, in addition to the learning about planets that took place and to the opportunities for extending that learning into other areas, such as a creative writing assignment. As Goodlad (2000) stated, “The challenge is to spell out and implement the role of education . . . in developing civil, civic and ecological democratic character” (p.88).

The literature also revealed recent studies on educational theory based on critical attributes of democracy, on teachers’ beliefs, and on learner-centered techniques (Kesici, 2008). One study by Kesici (2008) was based on a survey of sixth, seventh, and eighth grade teachers in Turkey to ascertain their views on themes of democratic values, teacher duties, fair behaviors, personal freedom and equality of opportunity. The purpose of the study was to determine how to build a democratic classroom according to teachers. The author determined it is important to explore basic principles of democracy, such as

justice, equality and freedom, and their relationship from the viewpoint of teachers in building a democratic classroom.

Literature pointing to the shortcomings of the NCLB lamented the approach of teaching to standardized tests and/or the lack of time or incentive for teachers to incorporate approaches such as teaching democracy (Abernathy, 2007; Apple, 2007; Rogers, 2008). The literature search exposes an absence of studies on how to teach democracy in the NCLB classroom. Research is needed that will provide teachers with ways to bring democracy back into the classroom. Therefore, the present study examines how elementary teachers practice democracy in their NCLB classrooms.

## Chapter 2 Review of the Literature

The focus of this literature review begins with a history of democracy in education and then moves on to the importance of teaching democracy. The literature also addresses the need for teachers to set up democratic classrooms. Specifically, much of the literature addresses the goal of educating students in citizenship, so that they will be informed and engaged citizens.

The review documents the ways that the recent emphasis on evaluation, measurement and accountability in our schools puts the teaching of democracy at stake. Next, the focus turns to democratic values, which serve as the guiding principles in a democratic classroom. The beliefs that a teacher holds influence the degree to which democracy is practiced in the classroom. An examination of teachers' beliefs leads to an examination of the role of educators. One of the most important considerations in the teaching of democracy is the educator's role, since it is the educator who develops the democratic teaching method to meet the needs of students and to build a democratic classroom. Next, the democratic environment is examined because it is a key to growing a democratic classroom. Finally, the focus turns to the implementation of No Child Left Behind, which standardizes the approach to teaching and diminishes the democratic approach. This leads to the question of how to practice democracy in the NCLB classroom

### History of Democracy in Education

The beginning of our rich tradition of connecting education to democratic self rule is attributed by Helfenbein and Shudak (2009) to the Massachusetts' *Olde Deuder Satan*

act of 1647, which claimed ignorance to be a satanic ill. Based on Calvinist Puritan ethos, and specifically the influence of the Reverend John Cotton, the law was written to ensure a literate population that would have knowledge of the scriptures and would also be able to read and understand the laws of the country. However, credit for the idea that education is necessary to ensuring democracy is more frequently attributed to the founding fathers, particularly Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson believed that people informed by education to exercise their control, would serve as a wall against the abuse of power. Dewey referred to this as “inward protection” from being purposely misled or manipulated by those seeking power (Helfenbein & Shudak, 2009).

Dewey’s (1915) progressive education ideas were in contrast to what had been the traditional method of teaching, that is, authoritarian and focused on delivering knowledge. These ideas were demonstrated in several of his books such as *Schools of Tomorrow* (1915) and *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (1916). The themes of these books emphasized ideas such as the educational importance of practicing democracy in the schools, of nurturing communication, of promoting student-centered learning based on experience, or constructivism, of developing community, and of implementing an approach to teaching in which information is not teacher-delivered but based rather on a more equitable teacher-student relationship involving inquiry.

In 1930 The Commission on the Relation of School and College of The Progressive Education Association was established to conduct an eight-year study on progressive methodology versus traditional education. The scope of the study was designed to compare students taught in a traditional, mainstream way with students



taught in progressive programs throughout their four years of high school. Findings from this historical study indicated that students who had been in experimental programs were stronger in terms of success in college in specific outcomes including grades, honors, leadership, extracurricular participation, dropout rates, intellectual curiosity, resourcefulness and self satisfaction, as compared to students taught in traditional formats. Furthermore, students from the most unstructured experimental programs, in which students designed their own programs, performed the best.

Like Dewey's writings on inward protection, Paulo Freire also wrote in 1973 about the phenomenon of abuse of power whereby people allow someone else to take over their critically evaluative faculties (Helfenbein & Shudak, 2009). In response to this concern he and others developed critical pedagogies aimed at linking theory to practice. These pedagogies were built on early revolutionary efforts to link education to community, such as calls made by Karl Marx for integrated education that would create "full human beings" (Ochoa & Lassalle, 2008). Freire is best known for his opposition to what he called the "banking" concept of education in which teachers make "deposits" of information into the "empty accounts" which are the students. Under the "banking" scenario, students are only allowed to act in the receiving, filing, and storing of these informational deposits (Sartor, 2004).

The tone of the 1960s with civil rights, antiwar and campus free movements set the stage for a more active and politicized scholar to emerge (Ochoa & Lassalle, 2008). This led some scholars to attempt to democratize the classroom and to challenge hierarchies. By the 1970s and 1980s, academia had tamed their radical approaches and incorporated them into the conservative fabric of the university structure. Courses on

ethnic studies and women's studies are a result of this incorporation. Ochoa and Lassalle (2008) argue, however, that few actual structural changes were made in the universities to create an equitable balance among teaching, research and community.

The 1980s and 1990s brought about "neoliberal" universities (Ochoa & Lassalle, 2008). Suffering from budget cuts, searching for private funding, and shifting tax structures, these universities have made some progress towards democratizing curricula, however, hierarchies in education and in the classroom are still reinforced and are still inequitable. In the K-12 system, budget crises have been used to push efforts to defund and privatize schools and to micromanage the educational system by imposing uniform curricula. The result, according to Ochoa and Lassalle (2008), "has been a growing emphasis on testing, accountability, and efficiency and a near abandonment of critical thinking and creative teaching and learning" (p. 3). In essence, much of the progress made previously toward practicing democracy in the schools has been reversed.

#### Review of Previous Research

##### *Importance of Teaching Democracy*

Lappé (2006) identifies challenges to democracy in America as issues of poverty, hunger, economic disaster, war, and disparity. She explains that the U.S. has undergone a degradation of democracy's core institutions and values through events and actions such as torture carried out in the name of the U.S.; elections in recent years that fail internationally recognized fairness standards; and eroding ethics exemplified by reports of cheating in schools, corporate greed, top-down and money-driven politics, and putting ends over means. According to Lappé, the lack of honest dialogue, fair play and mutual respect combined with ordinary citizens' feelings of powerlessness have made our

democracy fragile. The only way for Americans to meet such challenges is by having an informed and engaged citizenry (White, Van Scotter, Hartoonian, & Davis, 2007).

A review of the literature on democracy in education exposed the idea from the founding fathers (Barber, 1998; Goodlad, 2002; Knight, 2007; Ogden, 2007; Pangle & Pangle, 2000) to John Dewey (Barber, 1998; Pangle & Pangle, 2000) to contemporary thinkers and educators (Barber, 1998; Lappé, 2006; Mosher et al., 1994), that awareness of the importance of democracy is key to the survival of our democracy. “The rights and freedoms of all Americans depend on the survival of democracy. There is only one road to democracy: education” (Barber, 1998, p. 232).

The challenges facing America require new generations to be able to work towards solutions within a democratic framework. Schools should concern themselves with civic education because a democratic society needs to have the capacity for dealing with political disagreements among citizens. In a democratic society, a citizenry without these skills and civic virtues does not bode well for the future of its democracy (Gutmann, 2000).

In discussing problems that faced the people of his nation 25 years ago, Freire (1973) asserts that the people of Brazil can learn democracy through the exercise of democracy. Freire believes that this particular knowledge can only be assimilated experientially. He criticizes their traditional curriculum, which he states is disconnected from life, explaining that by giving students formulas, schools have not offered a means for authentic thought. He suggests education is needed, implying that real education is not what is happening in their schools (Freire, 1973).

It is easy to underestimate the need to continually educate for democracy. Lappé (2006) uses this quote, “The most serious threat to democracy is the notion that it has already been achieved – Anonymous” (p. 309) to assert that our willingness to take democracy for granted is what puts our nation at risk today. Lappé also points to the false idea that political democracy can meet today’s challenges by working on its own, without us. She insists that democracy is an art that must be learned, and suggests that democracy should be consciously taught in our schools (2006). “To be equipped to come together to address the complex problems of today’s world—to be democracy makers—young people need the opportunity to learn in the classroom” (Lappé, 2006, p. 251). This echoes Phil Gang’s observation that, “The principles of a democratic society have to be ‘lived’ in the classroom if students are going to understand the full impact of their meaning. You cannot teach democracy through non-democratic methods” (as cited in Sartor & Brown, 2004, p. 64).

#### Administrative Records

Perhaps the most immediate reason for acknowledging the importance of teaching democracy is its inclusion in the California History-Social Science Frameworks. The 2005 Edition of the frameworks is distinguished from previous versions because it encourages the development of civic and democratic values, supports frequent study and discussion of the fundamental principles of the Constitution and Bill of Rights, and proposes that critical thinking skills should be included in every grade level. One of the goals for grades K-12 is that of democratic understanding and civic values. Another goal is that of skills attainment and social participation, which includes critical thinking skills and promoting skills that lead to civic competence.

## Citizenship

Citizenship is one of the most frequently cited reasons for teaching democracy in schools. The logical place for preparation of competent citizens is in the schools (Knight, 2001). Only individuals who have been enlightened through an education in democracy are capable of both being engaged citizens and of carrying out the duties of a citizen (White et al., 2007). Many contemporary writers note that the founding fathers addressed the importance of teaching citizenship in the schools (Knight, 2001; Mosher, 1994; Ogden, 2007; Pangle & Pangle, 2000; White et al., 2007). John Dewey emphasized it in his writings (Dewey, 1915) and through the schools he established (Wirth, 1966). One of the goals in schools should be the preparation of “an informed, responsible and involved democratic citizen” (Knight, 2001, p. 253).

## Statistics

When examining the teaching and practicing of democracy it is important to consider who is and who is not participating in our democratic society. The right to vote is an essential element of our democracy. Participation in the process is our civic duty; yet in the past voter turnout has often been low and has run along the lines of older, whiter, richer, and more educated, according to the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) (August 2008). Recent PPIC population statistics indicate a growing change in California’s racial makeup from white to brown, with growth in the Latino population now having reached 33%, which notably includes the largest population group under the age of 30. Currently, almost half the births in California are Latino. California’s shift in population will also have an impact on educational attainment levels. PPIC (September

2008) projects the shift in population is towards those groups that usually have lower educational attainment levels.

According to the California Voter Foundation, the fourth most underrepresented population group is young people. A 1998 opinion poll conducted by the National Association of Secretaries of State found that there is a lack of good understanding of citizenship among young people and that one of their main reasons for not voting is that they don't believe their vote counts.

Education appears to be a key a factor in the profiles of those who vote or who are likely to vote as well as a motivator for voting. Those who are educated tend to pay more attention to and take more interest in elections and voting issues. Roberts (2006) reported that PPIC had pressed for reducing ethnic gaps through comprehensive improvements in economic conditions and educational attainment. Marri (2003) identifies multicultural democracy as a sub-type of democracy that incorporates socio-economic, cultural and political diversity. Marri's findings focus on the intersection of democratic and multicultural education, and demonstrate the benefits of including those people in our society who are marginalized.

One of the most important steps that California can take is to improve civic education within the schools. Roberts (2006) reported that the National Association of Secretaries of State recommends high school government and civics classes should be designed to be increasingly participatory and engaging for students. For teachers, this means not only teaching students about democracy and civic responsibilities, but also means engaging and involving them in civic issues, activating interest in social issues,

and allowing students the opportunity to exercise democracy within the classroom. Other groups recognize the importance of doing this for primary students also.

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), based in Stockholm, Sweden, combined with the University of Montreal to conduct a five-year research project on civic education and to set up a civic education research database. Stating that studies have shown that individuals are more likely to participate in public affairs if they have greater civic knowledge, they developed a 15-page questionnaire on civic education, which was distributed to 35 countries. Eighty-one percent of the primary level schools reported they had some form of civic education. At these schools, an average of 1.71 hours per week was given to teaching civic education.

A successful curriculum is one that engenders affection for the nation's history and for civic responsibility (White et al., 2007). Although examining Australian history, Knight (2001) cautions that there is a difference between what has been meant by civics and actual citizenship education. For example, the study of civics often emphasizes facts and events based on requirements outlined in grade-level frameworks, and neglects themes and trends, in addition to minimizing critical thought (White et al., 2007). The authors propose that a successful curriculum is one in which students develop citizenship skills through theory and practice built into every school day (2007). Mosher, Kenny and Garrod (1994) suggest complementing traditional curricula with direct experience in democratic values and the democratic process. Meier (2009) believes that we need to infuse the practice of democracy into our classrooms and schools, so that it becomes a "habit of the mind" (p. 2). The problems facing society in the future need to be solved by

an educated citizenry who are willing and able to make value-based choices (Yinger, 2005).

### Democracy at Stake

The authors of “The Problem: Democracy at Risk” believe that, “American citizens have endangered the republic by failing to educate new generations of citizens about civic responsibility” (White et al., 2007, p. 228). The only way to ensure continuance of democracy in the view of the founding fathers was with a foundation of educated citizenry (Ogden, 2007).

The focus on accountability rife in the No Child Left Behind setting puts the practice of democracy in the classroom at stake. The widespread nature of the pressures of evaluation and measurement is in part to blame because these pressures crowd out other ideas about democracy and effective teaching. The reforms of NCLB have not resulted in much improvement in education, but they have “marked a dangerous shift in our very idea of democracy” (Apple, 2007, p. 112).

### Democratic Values

Values serve as guiding principles for the approaches and goals that should be promoted in practicing democracy. Garrison (2003) makes the case that not only is education important to democracy, but that the values of democracy, for example, freedom and self-governance, are essential to the process of learning. He stresses that it is the practice of these values in the classroom that makes a rich learning environment possible and evolves the approach to curriculum. The basic values of democracy are equality, freedom, and justice (Beane, 2005; Goodlad, 2000; Kesici, 2008; Shechtman,



2002). These values are manifested in a democratic classroom (Shechtman, 2002), and in order to build a democratic classroom, teachers should promote them (Kesici, 2008).

Kesici's (2008) study of teachers' opinions identifies themes that expanded on the basic values mentioned above. These teachers believed that building a democratic classroom included such themes as being fair; being a humanist, described as making students feel valuable and meeting their needs to belong; being open to communication; being consistent; treating each student as equal; being open to innovations, such as providing students with new information; and showing respect for differences (Kesici, 2008).

Knight (2001) develops six critical attributes, based on practical understandings of classroom life and on democratic theory. The attributes identified in the study were: nature of authority, inclusiveness, important knowledge, defined as specific knowledge for everyone that can be used in solving problems, rights, participation, and equality. According to Knight, this list of attributes should also include making an environment where all students are encouraged to reach their full potential. Knight calls this attribute optimal learning environment, but says that no important research has been done to establish it as founding theory.

Kesici (2008) emphasizes one distinction with regard to the basic value of equality. He feels it is important to note that the basic democratic value of equality does not mean that teachers should treat all students the same way. It means teachers should give equal opportunity to all students, and should also "meet the needs of all students" (para 6).

### Teacher Beliefs and Role

The teaching of democracy by promoting its values and by creating the appropriate classroom environment in which students can practice is influenced by the teachers' beliefs in democracy. Shechtman (2002) developed a scale to measure the degree of democracy in teachers' educational beliefs related to the three central principles of democracy, that is, equality, freedom, and justice, on issues manifested in the classroom experience. In a previous study reported in 1996, Shechtman and Or found that intervention challenging teachers' beliefs with respect to democracy and education was accompanied by significant improvement in their students' achievement. The results of the new study suggest that the scale developed and used is an important tool for measuring democratic beliefs. The findings of this study also have important implications for the training of teachers: "The relationship found between effective teaching and democratic beliefs suggests that more should be done in teacher education to develop such beliefs" (Shechtman, 2002, p. 374).

Kesici (2008) also suggests that teachers who want to practice democracy should demonstrate their beliefs by giving importance to democratic values in their classrooms. He feels that a democratic teacher should hold democratic values in high esteem and adopt appropriate teaching methods in accordance with those values. Shechtman (2002) sums up this line of thought by stating that, "If democracy is to become a way of life in western societies, we certainly need teachers with a strong commitment to democratic education" (p. 365).

The educator's role is to bring a commitment to the importance of teaching democracy, through practicing citizenship and democratic values in the classroom.

Democratic education and citizenship understanding will not develop without strong democratic leadership (Knight, 2001). According to Gutmann (2000), it takes effective teachers to convey the importance and substance of the skills and virtues of citizenship (McDonnell et al eds., 2000). The more a teacher understands democracy and incorporates it in the classroom the more it will be understood by students (Knight, 2001). Kesici (2008) states, “The teacher is the key factor in the process of building a democratic classroom” (para 26).

Research has shown that classrooms are more effective when teachers are facilitators for active learning, rather than just filling the role of transmitters of knowledge (Vega & Tayler, 2005). Kamii describes the teacher in a Piagetian school as one who has high personal standards and is a resourceful professional, but as one who does not need standards that are enforced from the outside (Schwebel & Raph, Eds., 1973). In the same book on Piaget, Wickens suggests that rather than communicating prescribed content as in a closed system, the teacher’s role is to create an environment in an open system that engages the learner relevant to his/her interests (Schwebel, Raph, eds., 1973). A democratic teacher also meets other needs of students described as needs for “belonging, power, freedom, and fun” (Kesici, 2008, para 4).

According to Kesici’s (2008) findings, the role of educators in fostering democratic classrooms includes: shared decision-making, equality, effective communication, student-centered learning, cultivating student self-worth, fairness, and freedom of expression. Kesici believed that the underlying value in a democratic classroom was freedom. Citing Hepburn (1983) and Selvi (2006), he suggests that teachers should use appropriate teaching methods so that students can easily express

themselves and their thoughts and ideas. A democratic teacher also needs to be fair, applying rules uniformly and listening to student explanations for misbehavior before making decisions. With respect to rights, Kesici cites McEwen (1994) in stating that teachers should help students understand about their right to make a choice for themselves and teach them how to use this right. Kesici explains that one of the duties of the teacher in a democratic classroom is to develop a positive education process, which includes creating a cooperative learning environment, respecting students, and motivating them to develop their social relations sufficiently.

Yinger (2005) states, “A good education embodies the promise of one generation to the next. Teachers are stewards of that promise” (p. 308). No teacher can instantly transform a classroom into a democracy. However, every teacher can take meaningful steps towards making the class more democratic by applying any or all of the principles of democracy (Knight, 2001).

#### Special Collection

An example of such democratic beliefs was found in the special collection of a first grade classroom in Northern California. The class collection on democracy and government consisted of 22 books, a video, a multi-page display chart on citizenship, a set of flash cards, and a set of picture vocabulary cards. The items were a permanent part of the classroom. This much information and material on democracy is a rare find in an elementary classroom, and is a direct reflection of the beliefs of this teacher in addition to its contribution to the democratic classroom environment.

## Democratic Environment

A democratic climate is essential to growing and nurturing democratic values and practices. “Democracy cannot be mass delivered to classrooms but must emerge in the classroom and develop from classroom to classroom” (Knight, 2001, p. 251). In order for a classroom to be considered democratic, Kesici states that students must feel free to think and be creative and be comfortable enough to conduct discussions openly. In other words, the environment must be safe enough for students to take risks. A democratic classroom provides a safe and active learning environment where student rights are guaranteed (Kesici, 2008).

One of the goals of developing a democratic classroom is to reconstruct the culture so that it welcomes diversity and incorporates a sense of belonging. Knight (2001) believes that students can achieve more if the classroom environment is designed in such a way that it encourages a sense of competence and of ownership, and a feeling of belonging.

An optimum learning environment can be achieved when the classroom environment provides for: 1) encouragement to risk opinions and challenge authority; 2) relief from unnecessary pain and public humiliation including boredom and loneliness; 3) meaning; 4) a sense of competence; 5) a feeling of belonging; 6) awareness of one’s usefulness; 7) excitement; 8) creativity; 9) ownership; and 10) equality. Democratic education should bring these together in a coherent and integrated fashion (Knight, 2001).

Students learn in ways that are more enduring and applicable to life when they become stakeholders in the process. In a democratic classroom, students feel the sense of ownership that comes with being a stakeholder. Shifting from teacher-centered to

student-centered learning requires students to think and participate more and to take control of their learning (Vega & Tayler, 2005). A student-centered, democratic classroom aligns well with the theory of constructivism. One principle of constructivism, knowledge constructed from within, is that learning has to be an active process. Wickens (1973) states that, “Active involvement in the learning process depends on the child’s interest in exploring the learning environment” (p. 190).

#### No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

In discussing how we can sustain the democratic way, Beane (2005) laments NCLB, which he likens to “a death struggle to meet the requirements of what may go down as the most mean-spirited and antidemocratic law in education history” (p. 115). The law behind this new shift in education is the *No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act* of 2001. Signed into law in 2002, it requires states to adopt plans consisting of challenging academic content and achievement standards and an accountability measure system to ensure their enforcement (Smith, 2005). Apple refers to Meier and Woods’ depiction of the constant call for more accountability and more testing as creating a situation in which “the tail of the test wags the dog of the teacher” (2007, p. 109). According to Rose (2009) however, there are clearly democratic aspects to NCLB, such as assumptions that all children are capable of learning and developing; that public institutions should be responsible to their citizenry; and that institutions can be improved. Rose believes that we should explore the “degree to which these tenets are invested in an accountability mechanism that might restrict their full realization” (2009, p. 45).

Standardized education suggests that a common approach must be used to meet standards, which are mandated by external sources (Rogers, 2008). NCLB is a

dangerously short-sighted and simplistic approach stressing the importance of the test, which is tied to rewards and punishments. It ignores the premise of the founding fathers and subsequent educational scholars, such as Dewey, that schools should educate for democracy (Ogden, 2007). Education is being privatized and marketed as a product rather than the ultimate goal of schooling being focused on creating critically democratic citizenship (Apple, 2007). Teaching democracy has long been a tradition, but it has fallen out of fashion under NCLB (Beane, 2005).

In response to reform solutions and in search of ways to cope, some educators wonder about the role of educational professionals with respect to shaping our democratic future in the U.S. (Yinger, 2005). We are attempting to fix the achievement gap with no thought for the impact these stringent requirements have on important aspects of education, such as democracy.

Apple (2007) states that emphasis on the importance of measurement and accountability in these educational reforms threatens some of the most creative and critical efforts in education. “Very little is gained if equality is achieved in useless, destructive or trivial knowledge—such as substantial improvement by historically underachieving populations on some standardized test” (Knight, 2001, p. 253).

In this era of NCLB, standardized testing has resulted in the plundering of instructional time, and teachers have resorted to accessible materials and content that can be fit into the little remaining time. Rogers (2008) describes the restraining effect that NCLB has had on classroom instruction as evidenced by a veteran teacher who felt the need to keep marching through the textbook even though she recognized the benefits kids get from hands-on activities. The time pressure issue was reiterated by another teacher,

whose classes are no longer project-based because there just isn't time now (Rogers, 2008). According to Sartor and Brown (2004), the increase of high-stakes standardized testing in U.S. has created schools in which, "teachers find themselves under increasing pressure" (p. 85). Schools are so focused on teaching to these standards and delivering knowledge, that teachers under pressure are abandoning the teaching of democratic values, as demonstrated by one teacher's comment that, "Some of us trade in the pedagogy of teaching for social justice for a pedagogy of self-preservation" (Rogers, 2008, p. 48). Beane (2005) suggests that it is naïve to believe that the standards movement would not dictate methods.

NCLB has fallen short of its claims for reform, however well intentioned. "With its combination of aggressive blame and shame policies and its opening toward marketization, NCLB doesn't come close to enabling an education worth its name" (Apple, 2007, p. 115). By treating education as a product to be marketed, we lose sight of our goal of creating a critically democratic citizenship in our schools.

#### Summary of Major Themes

The literature review establishes the importance of practicing democracy in schools. There is ample evidence supporting the need for practicing democratic values and creating an informed and active citizenry. It is also clear that educators who believe in democratic values must take the leadership role in promoting those values, facilitating active learning, meeting the needs of the students, using appropriate teaching methods, and creating an optimal learning environment. Our democracy is at stake, and at the same time, the implementation of NCLB has shifted our focus away from practicing



democracy. Importance has instead been placed on test measurements and accountability, with rewards and punishments tied to it.

#### How Present Study Will Extend Literature

The present study intends to bring awareness back to practicing democracy. The directed research will extend the literature by identifying and describing ways teachers are finding to once again teach democracy through practice, even in the NCLB classroom.

## Chapter 3 Method

### Sample and Site

The focus was on elementary grade teachers in a public school district in Northern California. The sample of teachers was derived from elementary school teachers in a medium-sized suburban school district serving about 3,887 students in grades K-8. The sample was comprised of approximately 133 elementary and 40 middle school teachers, although no responses were received from any of the middle school teachers. Additional research consisted of interviews and informal conversations with survey respondents who agreed to follow-up discussions.

### Access and Permissions

The superintendent of the school district gave permission for emails to be sent to all the elementary teachers in the district inviting them to participate in an online survey. The superintendent reviewed the description of the thesis, the purpose of the survey, and the survey questions. Teachers received an invitation to participate in an online survey, including information on the general purpose and concepts of the online survey, participants' rights to privacy, and any potential benefit(s) or potential for harm.

### Data Gathering Strategies

Research for this paper consisted of using both survey questions and interviews. For convenience and in an effort to minimize the time expenditure required to participate, teachers accessed the survey on a website and their responses were emailed directly to me. Initial questions were structured to obtain demographic information, such as, number of years teaching, grade level, and so on. The survey questions consisted of several direct

questions containing multiple answer quantified choices about the approaches and methods these teachers use in the classroom. At the end of the survey, participants were asked if they would agree to an interview. This combination of methods, survey and follow-up interviews, were helpful to me in gathering information, particularly as I am a novice interviewer. Participation was voluntary.

#### Data Analysis Approach

A combination of both surveys and interviews were used to achieve methods triangulation. The data from the survey generated percentage charts for each answer. This information was reviewed together with the findings from the interviews to draw conclusions.

#### Ethical Standards

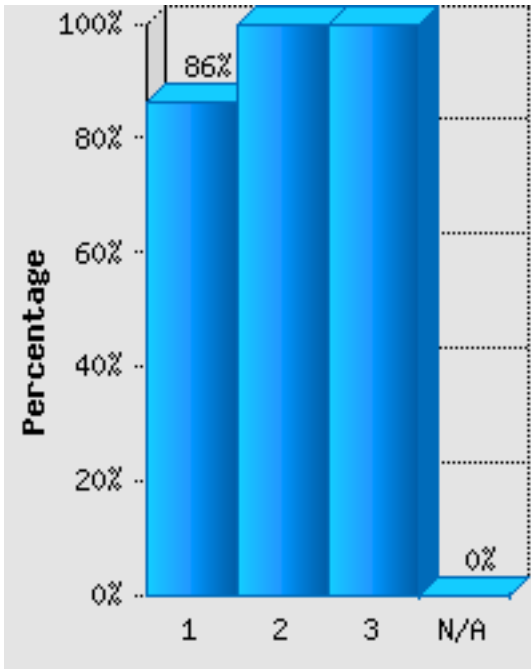
This study adheres to the guidelines of the American Psychological Association for the protection of human subjects. The research proposal was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board at Dominican University and approved, IRB #8047.

Follow-up interviews with interested participants were scheduled at the teacher's convenience and allowed time for debriefing. It also helped in giving voice to teachers, who may not usually have a voice, with respect to the issue of practicing democracy in the NCLB classroom. Interviewees were given copies of notes from their respective interview for verification. In addition, participants were assured of their privacy rights and any potential benefits(s) or potential for harm. They had the option to withdraw from the research project at any time without ramification. My contact information was provided to them and they were encouraged to contact me with any questions or concerns.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

The online survey was conducted from February 24 through March 17, 2010. There were 29 responses from teachers in the sample district. Over 48% of these teachers have taught for more than ten years. None of the sixth through eighth grade teachers who received the email invitation actually participated in the online survey. The 29 responses were almost evenly distributed between the categories of kindergarten through second grade teachers and third through fifth grade teachers. While 10% of the teachers neither agreed nor disagreed, the majority (62%) strongly agreed that creating a democratic classroom is important. There was some variation in the democratic values deemed important by the response group.

**Democratic Values**



**Legend:**

1: Freedom (includes rights, respect, expression, choice, student-centered learning)

2: Equality (includes meeting needs of all students, equality of opportunity to participate, activating and engaging students, open communication, and respect of differences)

3: Justice (includes being consistent, listening to students, applying rules fairly, shared decision-making, and shared responsibility)

N/A: No Answer

**# of Results:**

25

29

29

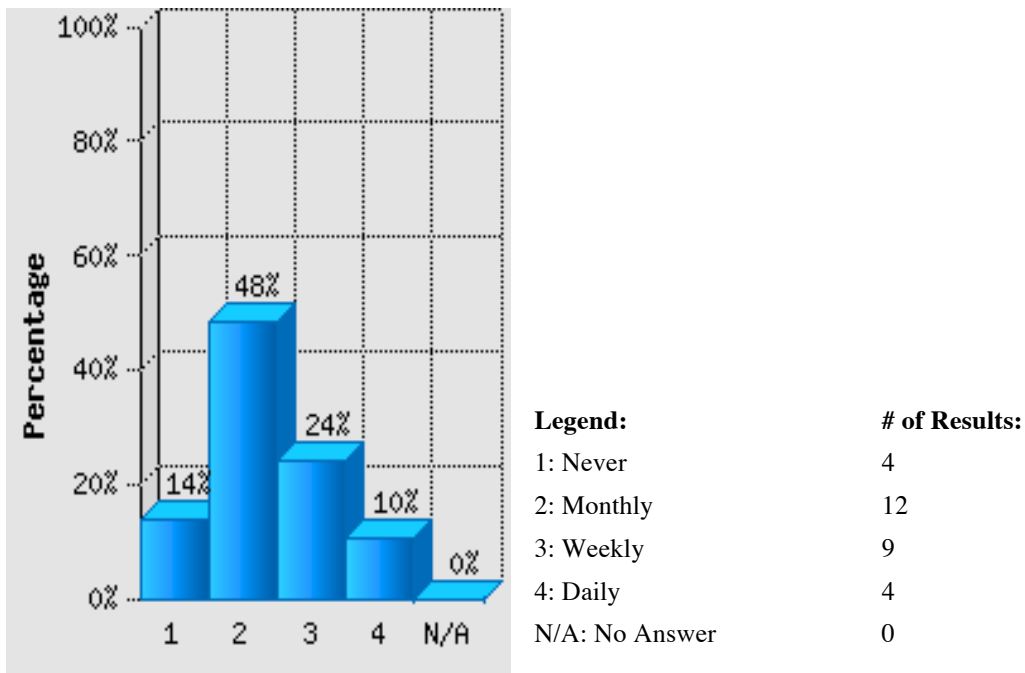
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Survey participants were given the opportunity to select any or all of the three democratic values of Freedom, Equality and Justice. One hundred percent of the respondents chose Equality and Justice, while only 86% chose Freedom.

Asked about the strategies teachers use in their classroom environments or procedures, 10% never involve students in deciding class rules or consequences; 31% never involve students in planning or facilitating class meetings or circles; and seven percent never provide forums for discussing class problems. Furthermore, 17% never involve students in planning class events.

Teachers were in agreement about providing students opportunities to choose work partners or teams in the classroom. About 52% of the teachers surveyed said they provided opportunities for student choice of work partner or team on a daily basis.

Two of the key questions about what teachers do in their classrooms also involved allowing choice. Teachers were asked how often they allow choice of topic in specific areas of study. Over half of the teachers either never allowed choice in this respect or allowed it to be practiced only on a monthly basis.

**Allow choice of method for projects**

The other key question about choice asked how often teachers allowed students to choose the method for completing projects. About 14% of the teachers responded that they never allow students this choice, and over 48% said they only allow choice of method on a monthly basis.

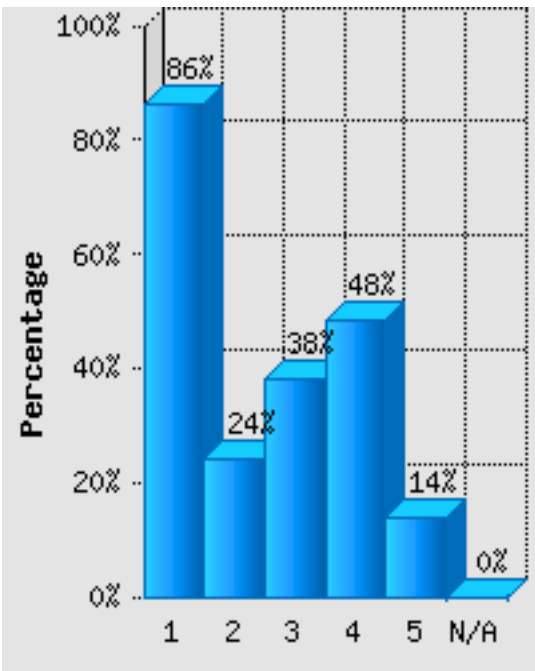
The teachers were asked about the benefits and the obstacles or challenges to implementing a democratic environment in the classroom. They were given the opportunity to both select from any of the choices provided for these questions and to also make additional comments to them.

Of the 29 respondents, 28 felt that one benefit was that of increased ownership by students. This was followed by the benefits of increased engagement and increased participation, each of which were selected by 25 of the teachers. One teacher commented that increased self-confidence was a benefit. Another commented that awareness of other points of views and awareness and compassion for those in need were also benefits of implementing a democratic environment.

The most frequently selected obstacle or challenge of those provided in the survey was the issue of time. Time was selected by 86% of the teachers taking the survey. Teachers' responses suggested that the challenge of other curricular objectives was next with 48% choosing it as an obstacle to implementing democracy in the classroom.



**What do you think are the obstacles or challenges to implementing a democratic classroom environment? (Check all that apply)**



**Legend:**

- 1: Time
- 2: Understanding how to implement
- 3: Other focus directed by school leadership
- 4: Other curricular objectives
- 5: Other
- N/A: No Answer

**# of Results:**

- 25
- 7
- 11
- 14
- 4
- 0

One teacher commented, “Time in a classroom is the most limiting factor. There is never enough!”

### Interview With An Expert

On Monday, October 12, 2009, I interviewed Julie Huson, a fifth grade teacher in a multiage program at an elementary school in Northern California. Ms. Huson is a graduate of Dominican's masters program and has worked on the most recent version of the Social Studies Frameworks for California. She not only teaches democratic principles as part of her social studies curriculum, she incorporates several democratic approaches in her classroom. Fairness is one of the principles she emphasizes by developing systems that are fair to all students, by anticipating what might cause students to feel something was unjust, and by giving students voice. In the beginning of each year, the class discusses George Washington's Rules for Civility after which students formulate and institute classroom rules and procedures.

Democracy is also evidenced in her classroom in other ways. Ms. Huson encourages students to generate discussions about concepts or areas/interests of study, offers a "homework menu" in which students can choose to do an optional assignment, and provides choice in method or topic of long-term projects. Three times per year they have elections for classroom officers. Students give speeches and voting is done by ballot.

Ms. Huson believes that one of the main benefits of implementing a democratic environment is that students will seek what they need. However, she notes one exception to this kind of teaching approach is that certain skills have to be taught and learned, and she does not feel there can be any choice about this. Ms. Huson gave the example of a lesson she had just done on cause and effect. She said the procedure and format for the

lesson had to be followed precisely. She added that once such a lesson is learned, students could then be given the reward of choice in other formats.

Ms. Huson says that over the years she has come to realize that she has to balance her efforts at being completely fair with meeting the different needs of students. She believes that in order to ensure an equitable education some students need more of her time and effort than others. In addition to the teaching challenges presented by a multiage program, there are also many students identified as being on the spectrum. There is a real push by the district for a Professional Learning Community in which the whole school is focused on meeting the needs of these students.

Julie identifies the challenges to implementing a democratic approach or environment as time, assessment, and management of various personalities. She says that infusing democracy in the classroom provides the opportunity to help students find their particular gift. She suggests that teachers who are interested in fostering a democratic classroom check with their principal and with class parents to make sure that everyone involved understands and agrees with this approach.

#### Follow-up Interviews

In the online survey, Angela Hood indicated her willingness to participate in a face-to-face interview. The interview was conducted after school on March 3, 2010. Ms. Hood has taught grades three through five for the past 24 years. This year she is teaching a combination third and fourth grades class. Her interest in pursuing a more democratic classroom environment began with the book *Tribes*. Many years ago she also took a weeklong workshop on Jeffersonian thinking. In addition, she has taken training classes on creating community. She noted that the GLAD trainings currently taking place in the

schools incorporate many democratic strategies. Rewards of academic cards and table points are given for making good decisions, showing respect and solving problems.

The demands of meeting the needs of and adjusting the lessons for her range of students has limited the extent to which she normally practices democracy in the classroom. For example, in the past she has set up a mini society in the classroom whereby students earn “paychecks” by demonstrating behaviors of listening, kindness, and respect which they can use to “pay for” forgotten books, free drawing time, no homework pass, etc. This mini society helps students understand concepts, such as paychecks, responsibility, and individual choices that are part of society outside the classroom. However, the accounting necessary for this mini society to function in the classroom takes time and has prohibited her from implementing it in recent years. Another aspect of practicing democracy in the classroom that has fallen victim to time is that of her weekly classroom meetings.

One way that Ms. Hood has provided students the opportunity for equal participation in the classroom is by setting up table groups with jobs assigned to specific seats. Students move to a new seat each month. The seat determines their job and where they sit at the rug. The table and seat (e.g. Blue Two) are used when she randomly calls on students to respond or participate during the day.

Ms. Hood suggested that student councils are an excellent way to provide students opportunities to practice democracy. She noted that students have specific roles in the student council. She said they get training and information on how to make decisions, as well as the opportunity to practice decision-making there.

Ms. Hood's advice to teachers who are interested in fostering a democratic classroom environment was to recognize that everyone is a leader in some way. Students have self-awareness and know their strengths. A teacher's job is to give them the tools to help foster ways in which they can demonstrate leadership. She also suggested involving students in looking at ways to create systems to improve class functions.

Tree McIntyre-Bader also agreed to be interviewed. She has taught for the last five years, and was a special education assistant prior to this. Her school has a multiage program. One of the philosophies in multiage education is for the teacher to be the "facilitator" rather than the "expert." Ms. McIntyre-Bader's class is a fourth-fifth multiage class. She also teaches English Language Development (ELD) to all fifth grade English Language Learners together with those from her own fourth-fifth multiage class.

Much of her philosophy about practicing democracy in the classroom has come from her work with special education students and the awareness that everyone has something to contribute. She has set up her class to promote student-centered and project-based learning, and to engage students through lots of group work. Groups have sometimes been determined by choice, and at other times have been assigned. She said it is important to make sure everyone in the group is involved and participates and that decisions are made together. Her class is also allowed to run classroom procedures, such as changing job assignments.

Recently students were given the opportunity to teach the class about a topic of their choice. Students had to determine everything from what materials they needed, to their objectives for the lesson, to methods for assessing the lesson. She said the results were amazing.

Ms. McIntyre-Bader noted that training in Teaching Collaborative Algebra Accessibility (TCAAP) was helpful to her in finding ways to create a democratic environment. TCAAP was a two-year professional growth program offered through her school district. Just as Ms. Hood mentioned in her interview, Ms. McIntyre-Bader also commented on the democratic strategies being taught in the GLAD training program.

One of the key elements to fostering a democratic classroom environment according to Ms. McIntyre-Bader is to listen to students. She said students drive learning if they are given the opportunity. She noted it is also important to facilitate group work from the periphery to ensure that group leaders do not bowl over other group members.

## Chapter 5 Discussion

### Summary of Major Findings or Results

The online survey found that 90% of the teachers either “strongly agreed” (62%) or “agreed” (28%) on the importance of a democratic classroom. A teacher’s belief in the importance of practicing democracy is key to its implementation. This positive indicator suggests that there are many teachers who would be willing to cultivate a more democratic classroom environment if they were given ways in which to accomplish it. All of the teachers responded that they emphasize “equality” and “justice” in their classrooms, however only 86% said they emphasize freedom. This is a concern because of the close connection between the practice of freedom and of democracy.

According to the teachers surveyed, teachers are using strategies to promote democratic classroom environments and procedures, particularly with respect to sharing space and materials and to promoting positive social relationships and a sense of community. Not as many teachers, however, are using the strategy of providing forums for discussing or resolving class problems. The survey found that 38% of these teachers provide no such forum for students. It is important to the practice of democracy that students be given opportunities to learn how to discuss issues, make decisions and solve problems in the classroom so that they will have the experience and tools necessary to resolve issues later in life.

Teachers responded that they are using teaching strategies or approaches on a daily basis that promote equal participation, promote expression of diverse viewpoints, create opportunities to collaborate, and provide validation to students and their

contributions. All of these strategies are necessary for a democratic classroom. The survey found that teachers use the strategy of providing opportunities for students to choose work partners or teams and the strategy of changing composition of groups and group leaders on a much less frequent basis, and sometimes never. It is important for students to experience working with different students and groups, and to have opportunities to choose these. It is particularly important to the practice of democracy that every student has opportunities to practice and experience leadership.

With respect to curriculum and activities, most teachers are frequently providing information to students on the purpose and learning objectives and are developing activities that encourage critical thinking. However 14% of these teachers never allow choice of topic in a specific area of study or choice of method for projects. Allowing choice in these two areas promotes student-centered learning to take place, which is a premise of practicing democracy in the classroom. Furthermore, although most teachers responded that they are connecting learning in the classroom to the world and developing social awareness, 38% stated they never provide students opportunities to do service learning, which is an integral part of a democratic experience.

The teachers agreed that the benefits of implementing a democratic environment included increased engagement, increased participation, increased critical thinking, and citizenship. The most cited benefit was ownership of learning (97%). One teacher added increasing self-confidence as a benefit. Another noted the benefits of increased awareness of other points of view and ways of doing things, and awareness and compassion for others in need. One teacher commented, “When I first became a teacher, I did so much



more than I am allowed to do now. We had class meetings, did projects for the environment and the community. But now, all time must be spent on raising test scores.”

Time was the most often cited obstacle or challenge (97%) to implementing a democratic classroom environment. This was followed by the obstacles/challenges of other curricular objectives (48%) and other focus directed by school leadership (38%). Another teacher commented, “As always, mandates from state and feds to teach what they deem important supersedes all else. The students do not have a choice, and I don't have a choice. We are a ‘low performing’ school. NCLB has ruined democracy in our classrooms.”

The interviews provided suggestions and ideas for ways to practice democracy in the NCLB elementary classroom. These teachers offered ideas on how to allow students to institute and run classroom rules, systems and procedures. They stressed the importance of providing choice. They suggested that teachers recognize that everyone is a leader and that they should facilitate the leadership experience by providing students with the necessary tools. They advised listening to students and encouraging discussions about areas or interests of study. They stressed the importance of engaging students through group work, and promoting student-centered and project-based learning.

#### Comparison of Findings/Results with Existing Studies

The online survey found that most teachers strongly believe in the importance of a democratic classroom. The significance of this finding relates to Shechtman’s study (2002) in which he found a relationship between a teacher’s democratic beliefs and effective teaching. All the teachers participating in the online survey indicated that they emphasize “equality” and “justice” in their classrooms. The value of freedom was less

emphasized in their classrooms, only 86%. In comparison, Kesici (2008) emphasized the importance of freedom as an underlying value in a democratic classroom. He stressed the need to allow students to easily express themselves and their thoughts and ideas. In that study Kesici also noted that equality does not simply mean treating students the same way, but rather giving them equal opportunity as well as meeting all their needs. This conflicts with one measure of equality in the online survey in which teachers indicated they are changing group leaders less frequently or never. In reference to choice, 14% of teachers in the online survey said they never allow choice of topic in a specific area of study and do not allow choice of method for projects. Research demonstrates the importance of choice in a student's learning. In the historical Eight Year Study (1930), it was found that students who were allowed to design their own programs in high school had a higher success rate in college. Surprisingly, only 79% of teachers surveyed believed that citizenship was a benefit of practicing democracy. This is in contrast to the beliefs held by IDEA. They conducted a five-year civic education research project and developed a civic education database because studies have shown that individuals are likely to be more engaged in civic affairs if they have more civic knowledge.

#### Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study include sample size and geographic limitations resulting in a homogeneous sample. There are also the issues associated with volunteerism, since both survey participants and interviews were done on a voluntary basis.

### Implications for Future Research

One challenge to practicing democracy in the classroom that has not yet been resolved is that of time. I hope that raising awareness about the need to practice democracy helps raise its priority, and therefore perhaps more time might be allocated to ensuring its practice. One teacher in the survey commented that cross-curricular links might be helpful in making better use of time and allowing more time for the practice of democracy. Future research might examine this and other ways to use time more efficiently to make time for the implementation of democratic practices.

Another challenge mentioned in the survey comments was that of the maturity level of students. Future research might focus on age-appropriate ways to bring the practice of democracy into the classroom.

### Overall Significance of the Study

Results from the online survey demonstrate a strong interest in practicing democracy in the elementary classroom. Survey responses reveal areas in which teachers need to do a better job in order to foster a democratic environment. Survey results highlight teaching approaches and strategies that need to be implemented for a more democratic classroom. The results also show a need to educate teachers about the importance of the democratic value of freedom and how it can be practiced in the classroom.

The interviews demonstrate that it is possible to infuse classrooms with democracy even in the NCLB elementary classroom. The teachers interviewed provided strategies, suggestions, and advice to help other teachers implement the practice of democracy in their own classrooms.

The survey itself helped to raise awareness about the importance of practicing democracy in the classroom for survey participants. One teacher participating in the survey commented, “Thanks for reminding us of the value of a democratic environment.”

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Appendix A Survey

**Survey for Dominican University of CA M.S. Thesis**

Welcome teachers!

The purpose of this survey is to learn what teachers are doing to cultivate the practice of democracy in their classrooms. Components of practicing democracy include classroom structure and procedures, environment, strategies and approaches, lesson design, and choices or options provided students regarding their own learning.

As defined by Shechtman (2002) democracy is based on justice, equality and freedom. Its attributes include respect, fairness, rights, expression, responsibility and participation in decisions.

Photo: [http://www.freefoto.com/images/1210/11/1210\\_11\\_58\\_prev.jpg](http://www.freefoto.com/images/1210/11/1210_11_58_prev.jpg)

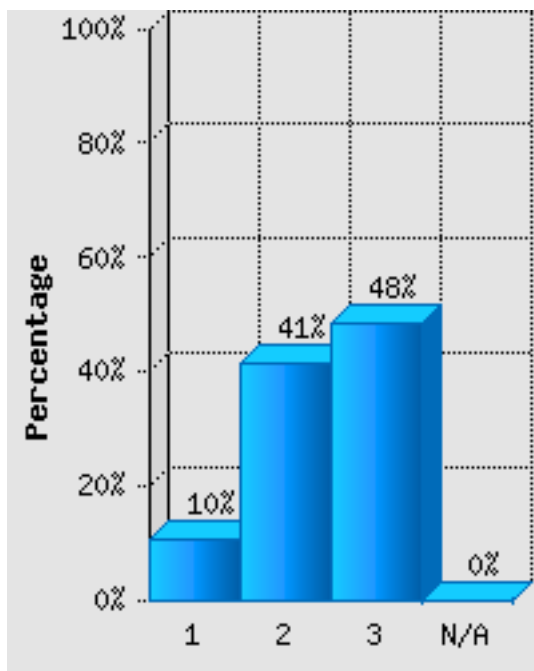


**Number of Questions: 11**

**Number of respondents: 29**

**Q1:**

**How many years have you been teaching?**



**Legend:**

1: Less than 2

2: 3-10

3: 10+

N/A: No Answer

**# of Results:**

3

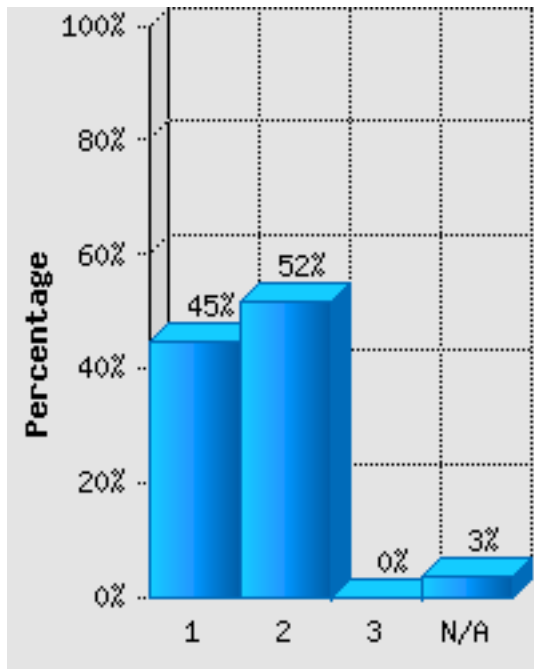
12

14

0

Q2:

What grade level do you currently teach?



**Legend:**

1: K-2

2: 3-5

3: 6-8

N/A: No Answer

**# of Results:**

13

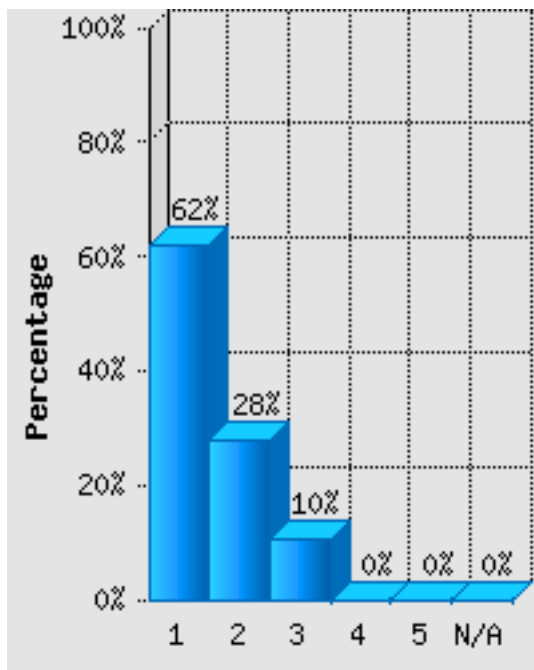
15

0

1

Q3:

Creating a democratic classroom environment is important.



**Legend:**

1: Strongly Agree

2: Agree

3: Neither Agree nor Disagree

4: Disagree

5: Strongly Disagree

N/A: No Answer

**# of Results:**

18

8

3

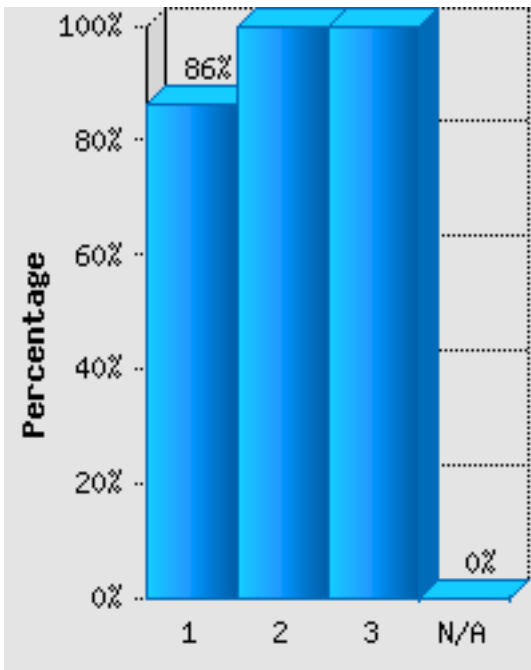
0

0

0

Q4:

Please indicate any of the following values you emphasize in your classroom: (Check all that apply)



**Legend:**

1: Freedom (includes rights, respect, expression, choice, student-centered learning)

2: Equality (includes meeting needs of all students, equality of opportunity to participate, activating and engaging students, open communication, and respect of differences)

3: Justice (includes being consistent, listening to students, applying rules fairly, shared decision-making, and shared responsibility)

N/A: No Answer

**# of Results:**

25

29

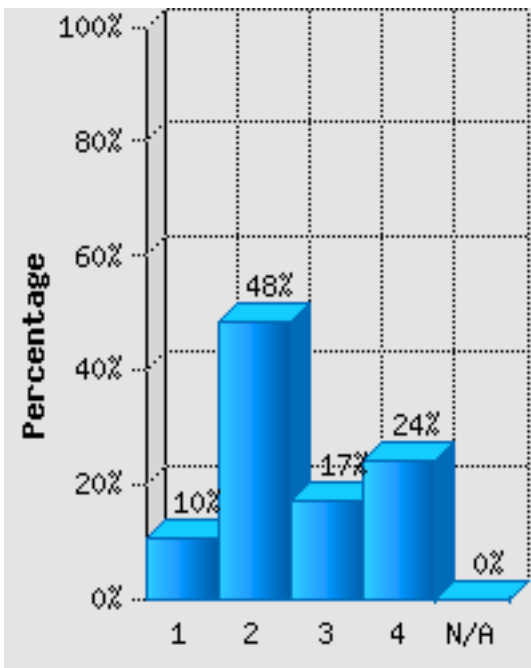
29

0

Q5:

Please indicate any of the following strategies you currently use in your classroom environment/procedures:

- *Involve students in deciding class rules and/or consequences*



**Legend:**

1: Never

2: Monthly

3: Weekly

4: Daily

N/A: No Answer

**# of Results:**

3

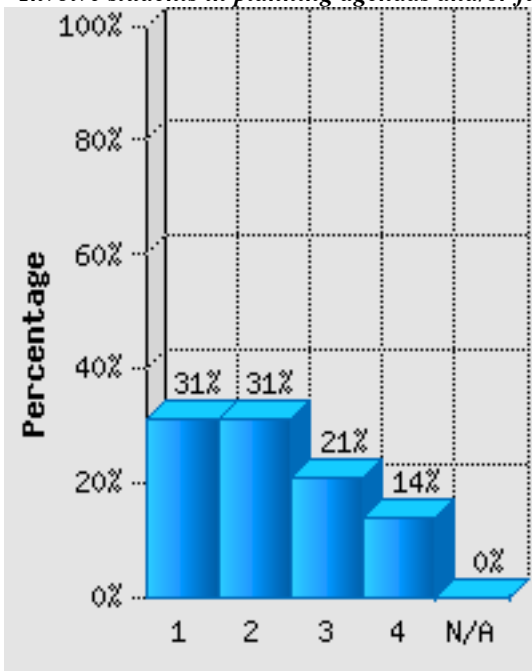
14

5

7

0

• *Involve students in planning agendas and/or facilitation of class meetings or circles*



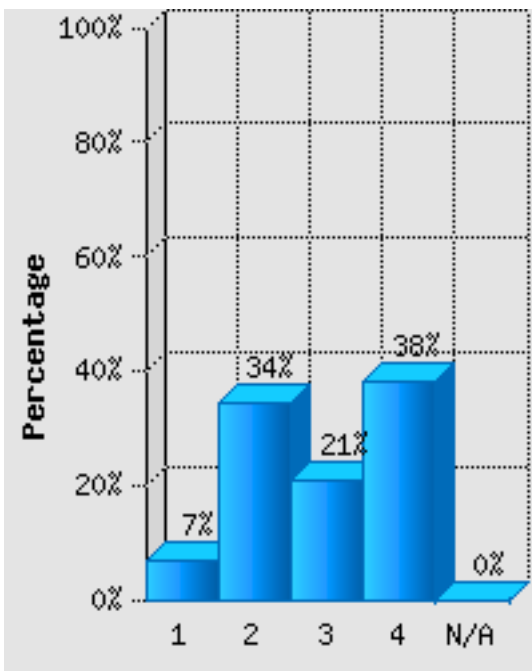
**Legend:**

- 1: Never
- 2: Monthly
- 3: Weekly
- 4: Daily
- N/A: No Answer

**# of Results:**

- 9
- 9
- 6
- 4
- 0

• *Provide forums for discussing/resolving classroom problems*



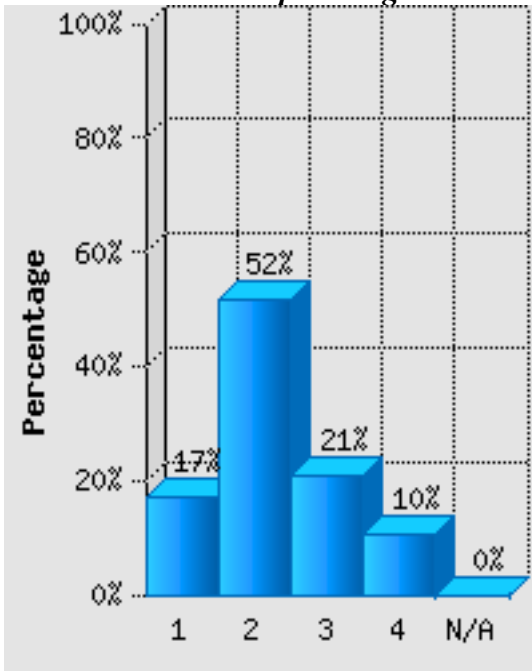
**Legend:**

- 1: Never
- 2: Monthly
- 3: Weekly
- 4: Daily
- N/A: No Answer

**# of Results:**

- 2
- 10
- 6
- 11
- 0

• *Involve students in planning classroom events*



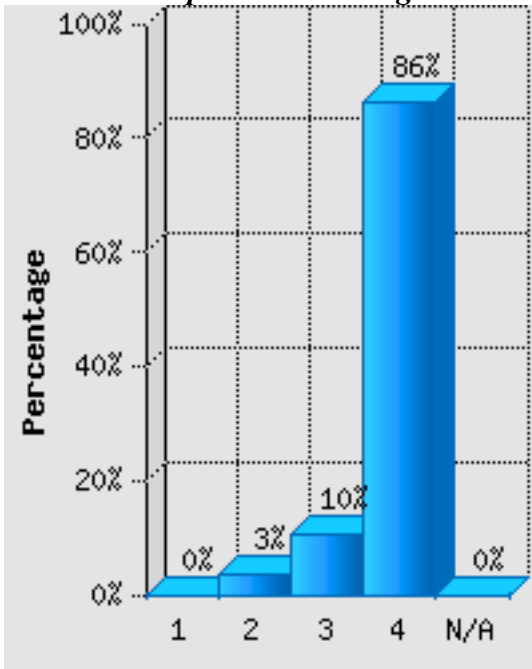
**Legend:**

- 1: Never
- 2: Monthly
- 3: Weekly
- 4: Daily
- N/A: No Answer

**# of Results:**

- 5
- 15
- 6
- 3
- 0

• *Create a cooperative learning environment*



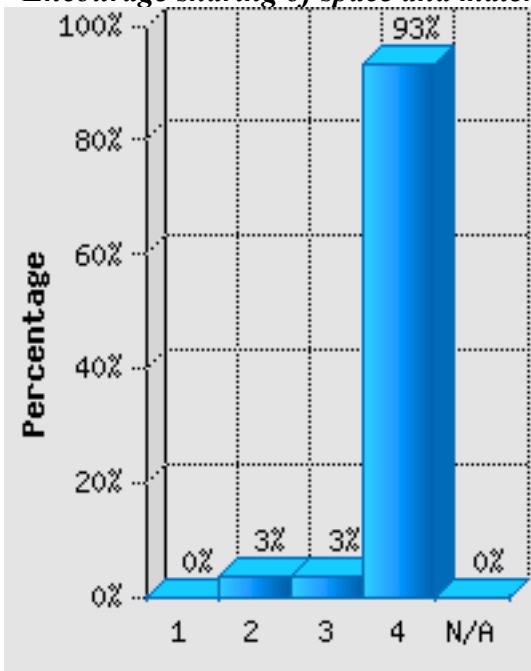
**Legend:**

- 1: Never
- 2: Monthly
- 3: Weekly
- 4: Daily
- N/A: No Answer

**# of Results:**

- 0
- 1
- 3
- 25
- 0

• *Encourage sharing of space and materials*



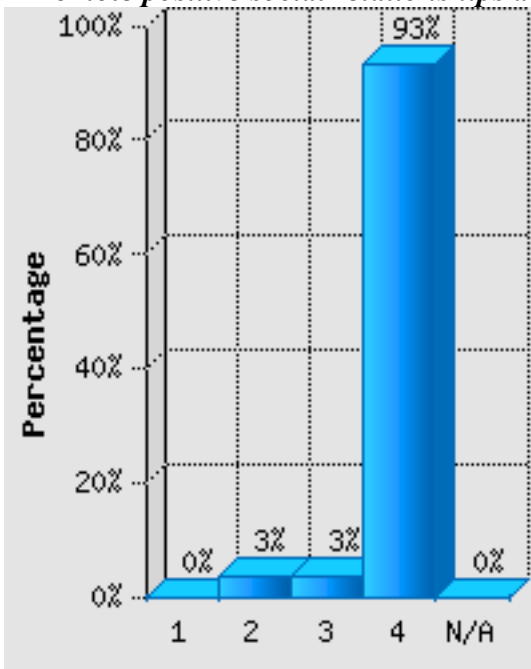
**Legend:**

- 1: Never
- 2: Monthly
- 3: Weekly
- 4: Daily
- N/A: No Answer

**# of Results:**

- 0
- 1
- 1
- 27
- 0

• *Promote positive social relationships and a sense of community*



**Legend:**

- 1: Never
- 2: Monthly
- 3: Weekly
- 4: Daily
- N/A: No Answer

**# of Results:**

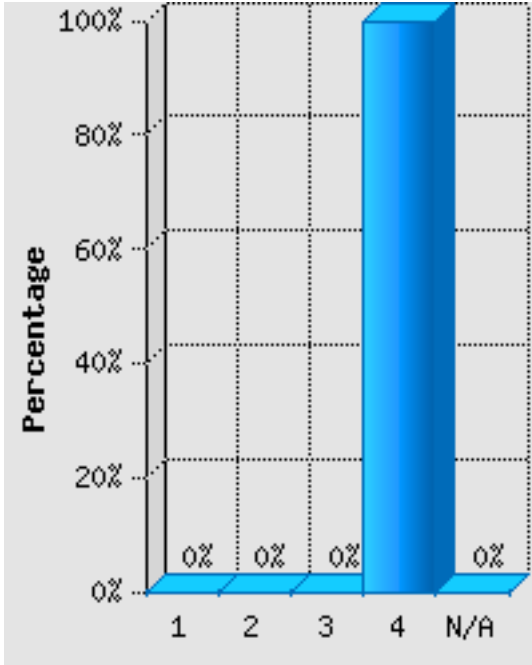
- 0
- 1
- 1
- 27
- 0



Q6:

Please indicate any of the following teaching strategies/approaches you currently use in your classroom:

- *Provide equal opportunity for participation (using popsicle sticks, taking turns, etc.)*



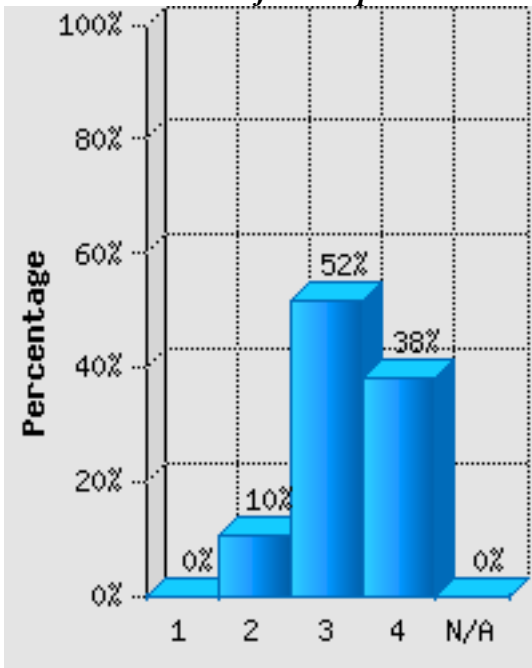
**Legend:**

- 1: Never
- 2: Monthly
- 3: Weekly
- 4: Daily
- N/A: No Answer

**# of Results:**

- 0
- 0
- 0
- 29
- 0

- *Rotate classroom jobs/responsibilities*



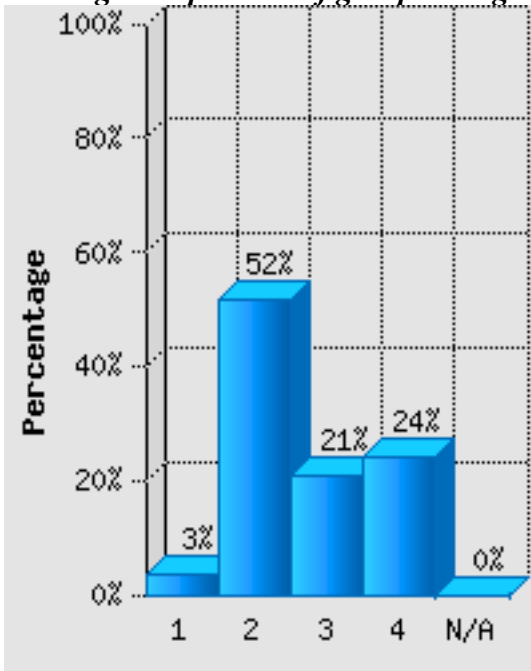
**Legend:**

- 1: Never
- 2: Monthly
- 3: Weekly
- 4: Daily
- N/A: No Answer

**# of Results:**

- 0
- 3
- 15
- 11
- 0

• *Change composition of groups and group leaders*



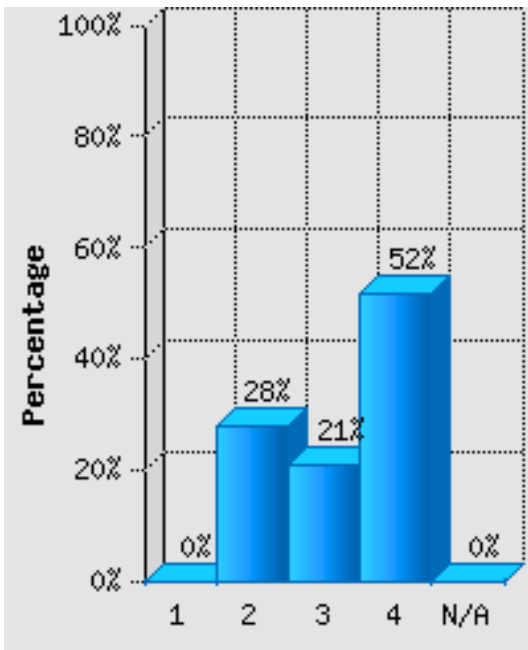
**Legend:**

- 1: Never
- 2: Monthly
- 3: Weekly
- 4: Daily
- N/A: No Answer

**# of Results:**

- 1
- 15
- 6
- 7
- 0

• *Provide students opportunities to choose work partners/teams*



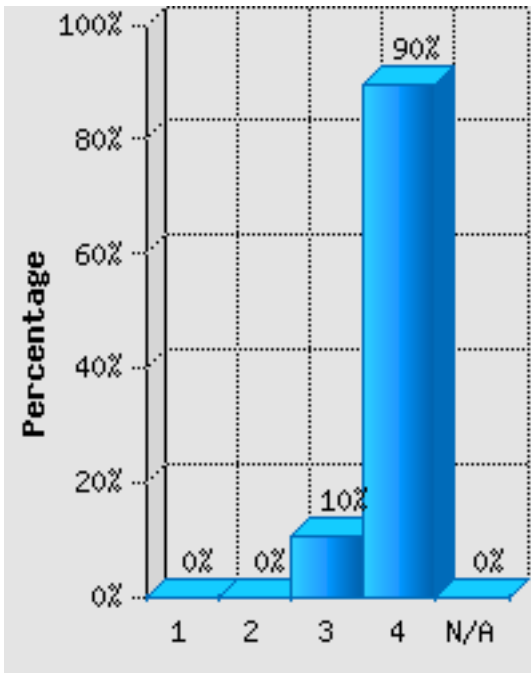
**Legend:**

- 1: Never
- 2: Monthly
- 3: Weekly
- 4: Daily
- N/A: No Answer

**# of Results:**

- 0
- 8
- 6
- 15
- 0

• *Promote expression of diverse viewpoints*



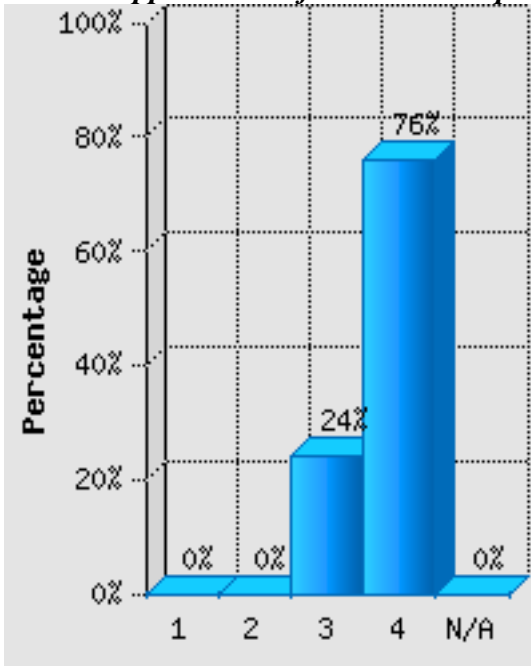
**Legend:**

- 1: Never
- 2: Monthly
- 3: Weekly
- 4: Daily
- N/A: No Answer

**# of Results:**

- 0
- 0
- 3
- 26
- 0

• *Create opportunities for students to practice collaboration*



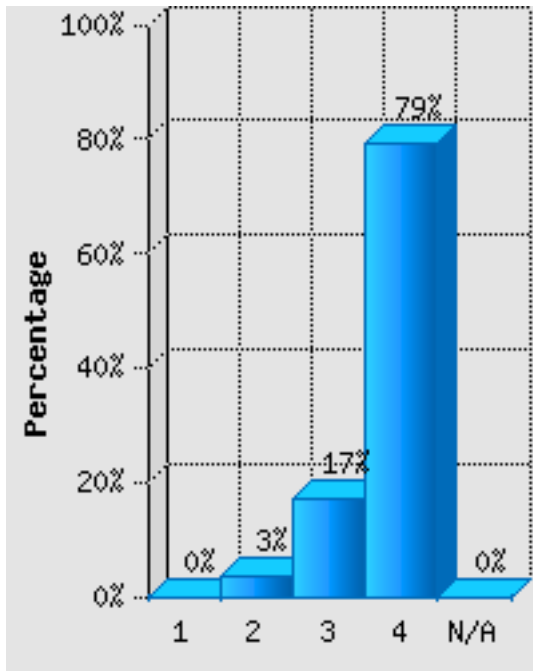
**Legend:**

- 1: Never
- 2: Monthly
- 3: Weekly
- 4: Daily
- N/A: No Answer

**# of Results:**

- 0
- 0
- 7
- 22
- 0

• *Teach inclusion and respect for differences*



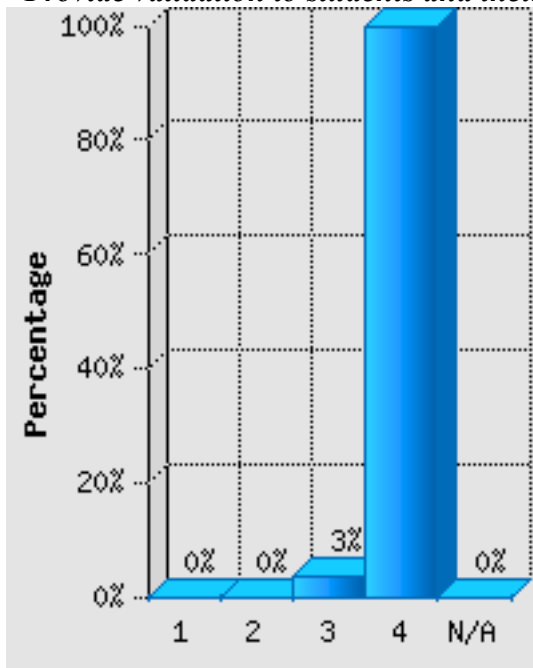
**Legend:**

- 1: Never
- 2: Monthly
- 3: Weekly
- 4: Daily
- N/A: No Answer

**# of Results:**

- 0
- 1
- 5
- 23
- 0

• *Provide validation to students and their contributions*



**Legend:**

- 1: Never
- 2: Monthly
- 3: Weekly
- 4: Daily
- N/A: No Answer

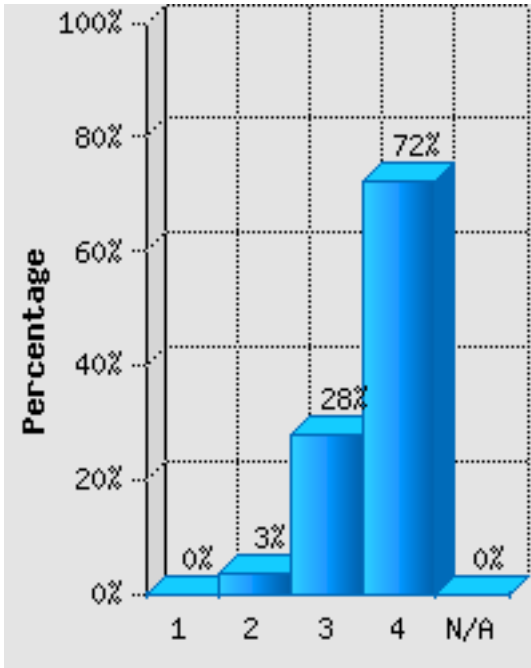
**# of Results:**

- 0
- 0
- 1
- 29
- 0

Q7:

Please indicate any of the following you currently use relative to curriculum or activities:

• *Provide information about purpose/learning objectives of activities*



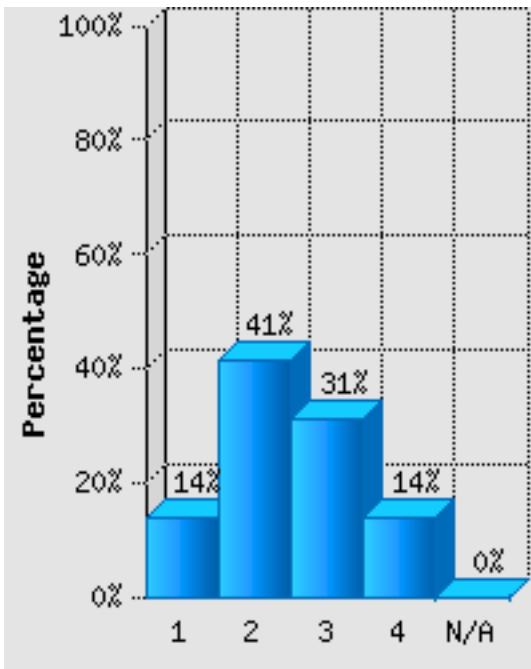
**Legend:**

1: Never  
 2: Monthly  
 3: Weekly  
 4: Daily  
 N/A: No Answer

**# of Results:**

0  
 1  
 8  
 21  
 0

• *As appropriate, allow choice of topic in specific areas of study*



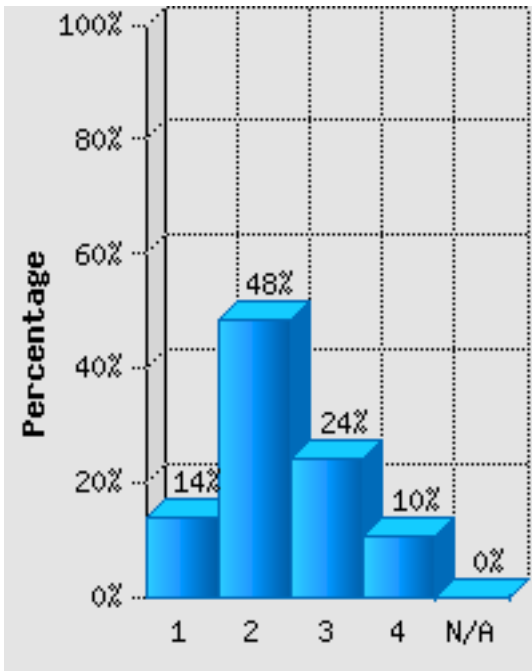
**Legend:**

1: Never  
 2: Monthly  
 3: Weekly  
 4: Daily  
 N/A: No Answer

**# of Results:**

4  
 12  
 9  
 4  
 0

• *As appropriate, allow choice of method for projects*



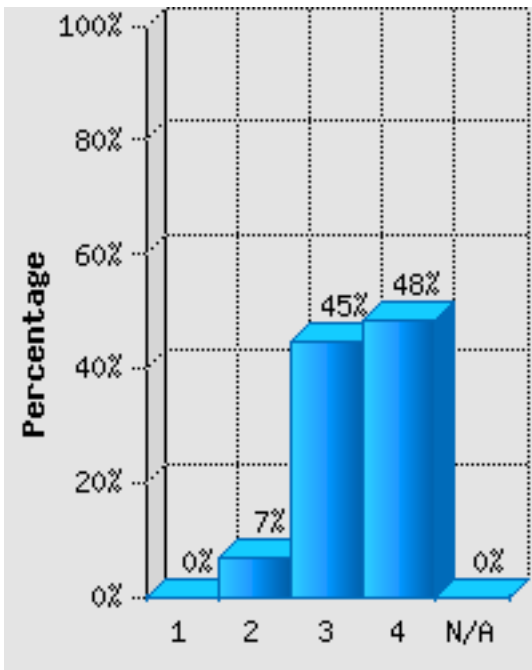
**Legend:**

- 1: Never
- 2: Monthly
- 3: Weekly
- 4: Daily
- N/A: No Answer

**# of Results:**

- 4
- 14
- 7
- 3
- 0

• *Develop activities that encourage critical thinking*



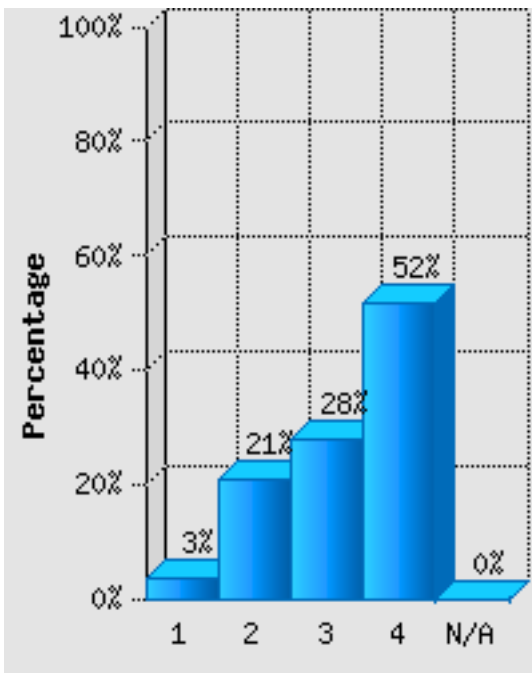
**Legend:**

- 1: Never
- 2: Monthly
- 3: Weekly
- 4: Daily
- N/A: No Answer

**# of Results:**

- 0
- 2
- 13
- 14
- 0

• *Connect learning in classroom to world (democratize curriculum content)*



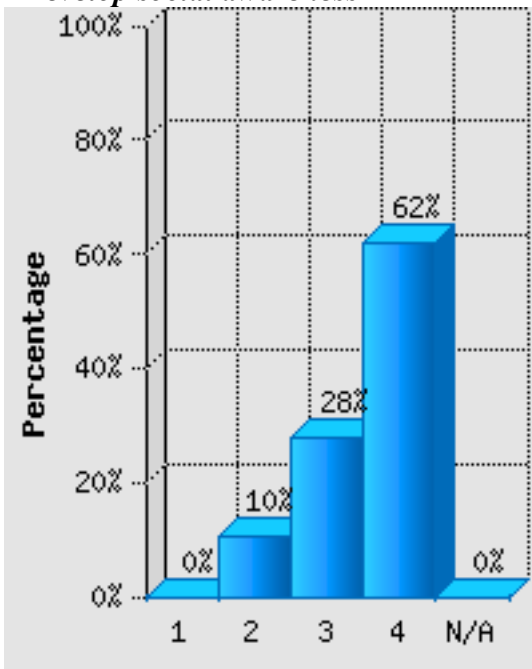
**Legend:**

- 1: Never
- 2: Monthly
- 3: Weekly
- 4: Daily
- N/A: No Answer

**# of Results:**

- 1
- 6
- 8
- 15
- 0

• *Develop social awareness*



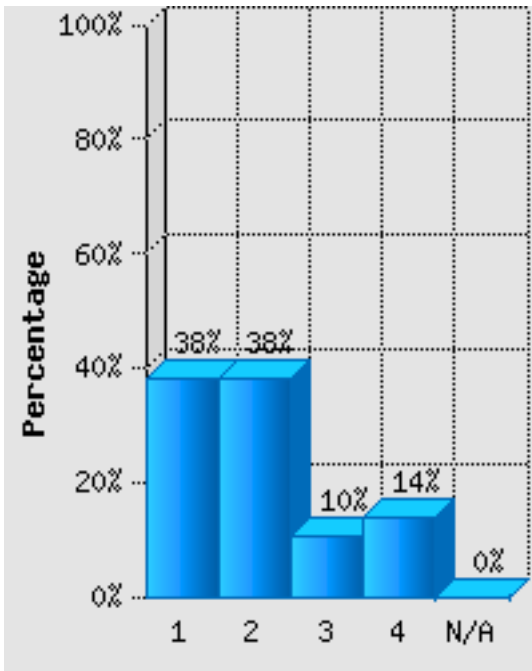
**Legend:**

- 1: Never
- 2: Monthly
- 3: Weekly
- 4: Daily
- N/A: No Answer

**# of Results:**

- 0
- 3
- 8
- 18
- 0

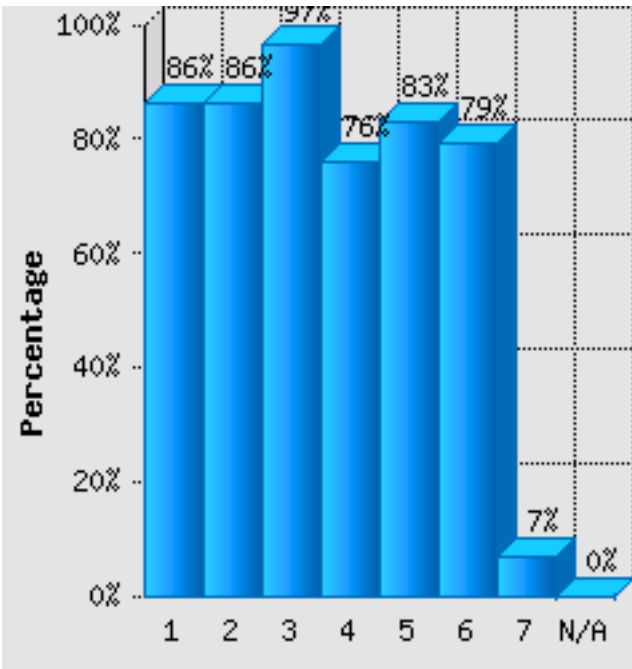
*Provide students opportunities to do service activities*



Legend:	# of Results:
1: Never	11
2: Monthly	11
3: Weekly	3
4: Daily	4
N/A: No Answer	0

**Q8:**

**What do you think are the benefits of implementing a democratic environment? (Check all that apply)**



Legend:	# of Results:
1: Increased engagement	25
2: Increased participation	25
3: Increased ownership of learning	28
4: Increased expressions of mutual respect	22
5: Increased critical thinking	24
6: Citizenship	23
7: Other	2
N/A: No Answer	0

**Additional Comments:**

10) Increased self-confidence

15) Thanks for reminding us of the value of a democratic environment. When I first



became a teacher, I did so much more than I am allowed to do now. We had class meetings, did projects for the environment and the community. But now , all time must be spent on raising test scores.

16) Increased awareness of other points of view and ways of doing things.

Increased awareness and compassion for others who are need.

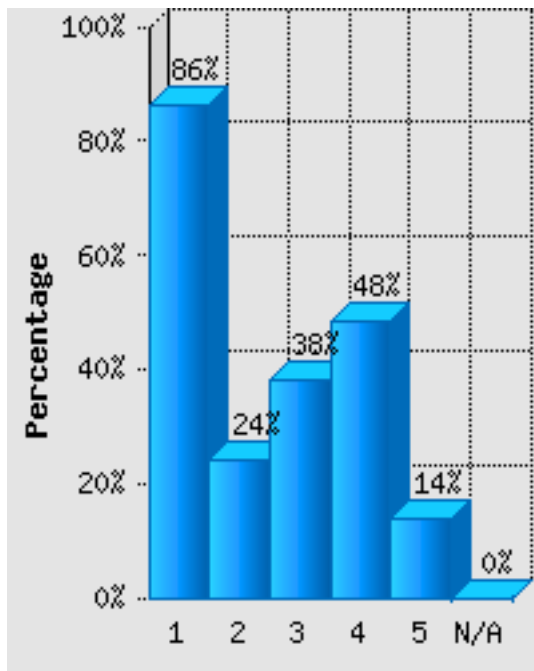
17) The first few questions do not really have choices for correct answers. There is a lot of room between never and monthly.

25) Unfortunately, the demanding nature of "meeting the state standards" often curbs the amount of time dedicated toward creating a more democratic classroom.

26) At a first grade level I think this boils down to respect and fairness.

**Q9:**

**What do you think are the obstacles or challenges to implementing a democratic classroom environment? (Check all that apply)**



Legend:	# of Results:
1: Time	25
2: Understanding how to implement	7
3: Other focus directed by school leadership	11
4: Other curricular objectives	14
5: Other	4
N/A: No Answer	0

**Additional Comments:**

6) As always, mandates from state and feds to teach what they deem important supersedes all else. The students do not have a choice, and I don't have a choice. We are a "low performing" school. NCLB has ruined democracy in our classrooms.

8) There are many mandated standards from the state of CA and The NCLB Act and time does not allow students to choose topics of study.

16) Time in a classroom is the most limiting factor.

There is never enough!

22) We try!

25) See above

26) With cross curricular links I could implement more.

29) Maturity level of students

Appendix B Interview Questions

How many years teaching?  
What grade level currently?

1. Would you like to comment or elaborate on any of the questions from the online survey?
2. Some of the most common practices that have emerged from the online survey included:
  - a. On daily basis:
    - i. encouraging sharing of space and materials,
    - ii. promoting positive social relationships and a sense of community,
    - iii. providing equal opportunity for participation and
    - iv. provide validation to students and their contributions.
  - b. On less frequent basis:
    - i. provide information about purpose/learning objectives or activities
    - ii. develop activities that encourage critical thinking, develop social awareness
    - iii. Were these the most important to you?
3. Do you practice democracy in the classroom through any strategies, approaches or activities that were not mentioned in the survey?
4. Please describe any training or books you have read on the subject that led you to pursue a more democratic classroom environment?
5. What new opportunities do you see for ways to infuse democracy in the classroom?
6. What do you think are the three key things teachers who are interested in fostering a democratic classroom environment should know?