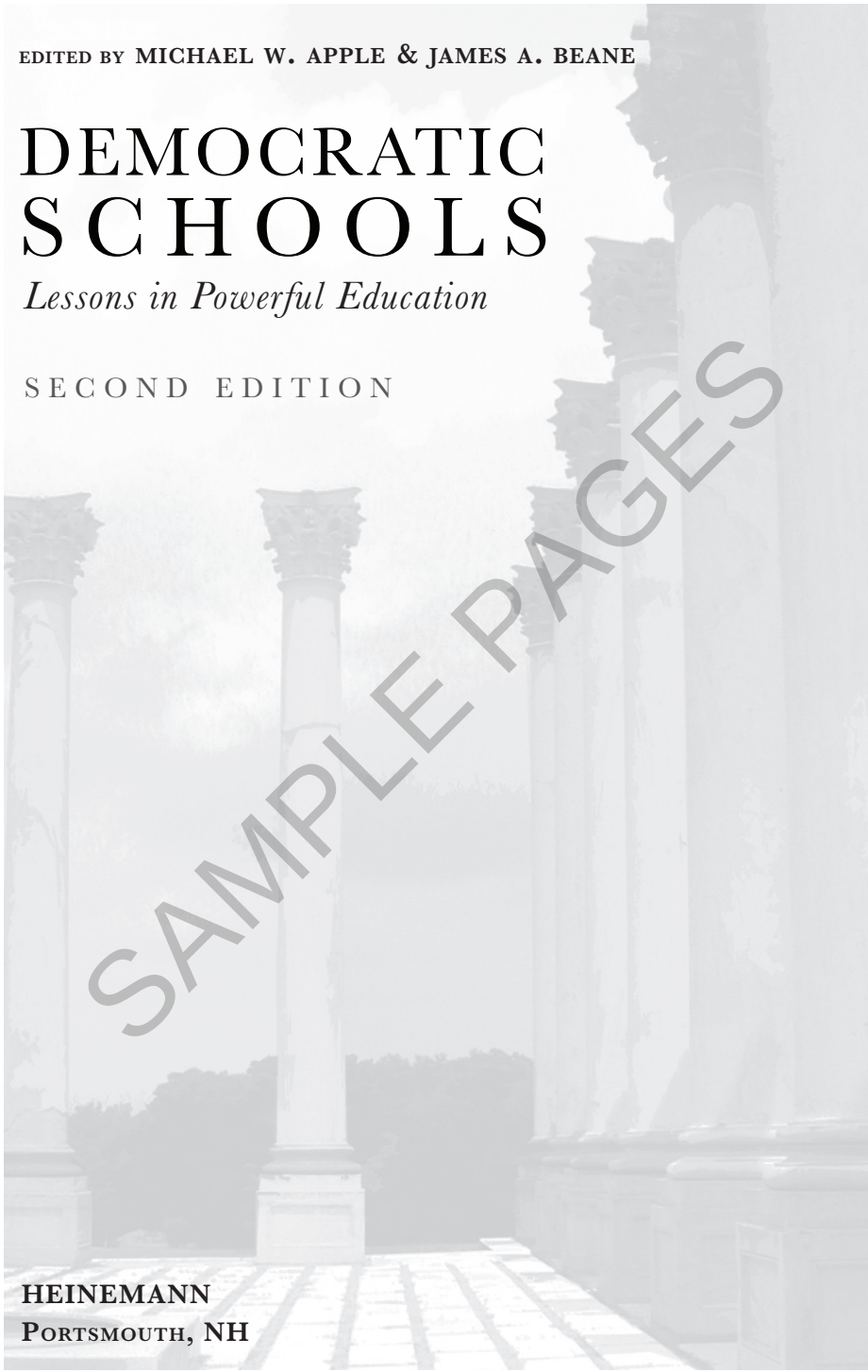
DEMOCRATIC SCHOOLS

SECOND EDITION



EDITED BY MICHAEL W. APPLE & JAMES A. BEANE

DEMOCRATIC SCHOOLS

Lessons in Powerful Education

SECOND EDITION

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Preface to the Second Edition

It has been over a decade since the first edition of *Democratic Schools* appeared. In that time it has done exactly what those of us who were involved in it had hoped. Hundreds of thousands of copies of the book have found their way into the hands of current and future teachers, administrators, educational policy workers, community members, and many other people. This has happened not only in the United States, but throughout the world. *Democratic Schools* has been translated into multiple languages with editions in Spain, Portugal, Japan, India (in Hindi and English), Brazil, and throughout Latin America. Other editions are in process as well. It has been used by committed educators, community groups, government officials, national teachers unions, and others as a model of what needs to be done to improve schools in their nations and communities.

All of this is of course more than a little satisfying to us. Yet the widespread influence of a book like this speaks eloquently to matters of much greater significance. It speaks to the deep commitment of large groups of people to build and defend an education that is worthy of its name rather than one that is reducible simply to the efficient production of scores on problematic standardized achievement tests. It speaks to the growing dissatisfaction on the part of educators in so many places with curricula that have little relationship with the cultures and lives of the students in our schools. It speaks as well to an abiding belief that schools are not factories, that they must reflect what is best in all of us, and that they must embody not simply the rhetoric of democracy but its actual practice.

When all of this is put together, much like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, the picture that emerges shows that an increasingly large number of people reject the idea of "TINA"—the notion that

"there is no alternative" to the policies now being implemented in towns, cities, states, and regions throughout the nation. We are repeatedly told that the only reforms that work are those involving a strong commitment to high-stakes testing, strict regimes of accountability, a standardized and packaged curriculum, and a lock-step pedagogy. These elements are to be combined with a focus on privatization and regulations holding teachers' and administrators' feet to the fire of competition. Do all of this, we are told, and all will be well in all of our schools. Well, maybe not.

That reasoning has a number of problems. In the first place, there is little evidence to support these claims—and a good deal of evidence that they are not working now in the United States and have not worked elsewhere (Apple 2006; Valenzuela 2005). Just as importantly, as this book demonstrates, there *are* alternatives to that narrow reasoning, alternatives that *work*, and that provide a substantive and rich education while decreasing the rampant alienation of students and teachers (Beane 2005). These alternatives can be and are being created even at a time of immense pressure on educators to simply focus on mandated standards and test scores.

This new and enlarged edition of *Democratic Schools* is about such alternatives and the educators who have created them. It is part of the commitment of all of us who have worked on the book to act as secretaries for those educators and community members whose belief in democracy as a lived process is put into practice everyday. In addition to new accounts included in this second edition, previous authors were asked to tell us where their projects stand now. These updates are honest as they look realistically at events and policies that have diminished democracy in the decade since the first edition of the book appeared. But they also point to the fact that democratic work is still possible, still successful, and still the right path to a worthwhile education. In this way, both the new and the original accounts give us a sense of hope in these difficult times. Accounts like these and the hope they inspire are the foundation of a larger movement to keep the light of democracy alive in classrooms and schools around this nation and throughout the world. That light shines brightly in the chapters you'll find in this book.

—Michael W. Apple and James A. Beane

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1 | The Case for Democratic Schools

James A. Beane and Michael W. Apple

Pasadena, CA, 1937
A group of third graders has spent several weeks studying problems in their school, homes, neighborhoods, and community. Besides looking at problems they know of, they have also gathered examples from parents, teachers, and community officials. After a month of research and discussion, they collect their recommendations for solving these problems in a booklet that will be distributed throughout the community.

Baltimore, MD, 1953
The streets in one neighborhood of this city are filled for a week by high school students conducting a door-to-door voter registration drive among ethnic minority residents. This is but one of many projects they have worked on this year, including a civil defense survey, a community health campaign, and a study of housing relocation problems.

Port Jarvis, NY, 1972
Though it is a cold, snowy night, nearly 125 students, teachers, administrators, parents, board members, and representatives of various community organizations are meeting to consider projects they might undertake to redesign their schools. Among others, they will

make arrangements to distribute school newsletters in languages other than English, plan a new community youth center, start a radio program produced by students, set up mentorships for young people with adults in the community, and arrange to make the school more available for community activities.

Ulysses, PA, 1979
Just as they do every Friday afternoon, the students and teachers in the elementary school gather today to discuss ongoing schoolwide projects and problems. The major issue this week is that someone has written graffiti on a school wall. After nearly a half-hour of debate, three proposals are put forth. The group votes to establish a new rule: anyone defacing school property will spend their free time over three days working with the school custodian.

Belvidere, IL, 1990
Looking out a classroom window at the dumpster below, a student asks the teacher, "Where does that garbage go?" Just as curious, the teacher arranges for a class field trip to an area landfill. Concerned about the size and contents of the landfill, the students undertake a campaign for conservation and recycling in their school. Over several months, their efforts begin to take hold. Though they are just first graders, they have made a difference in their school.

Madison, WI, 1991
On a warm September day, a group of nearly 60 middle school students and their teachers are working together to create their curriculum out of questions and concerns they have about themselves and their world. Eventually they cluster their questions into themes like "Living in the Future," "Problems in the Environment," "Isms," and "Conflict." After selecting their first theme and planning relevant activities, they will spend the year trying to answer those questions—their questions.

Chicago, IL, 2004
Frustrated by the deteriorating condition of their school, a group of fifth graders decides to push city and school officials to build the new school promised years before. Though this kind of official inaction is not surprising in poor neighborhoods like theirs, the students are determined to take action. Over the course of the year they press their

case by gathering petitions, writing editorials, releasing a video documentary, contacting officials, and more. They also create a website, and do research, surveys, and interviews to gather information to support their arguments. The drive for a new school quickly becomes the central focus of the curriculum as the students learn and apply a wide range of skills. Along the way they will learn important lessons about citizenship as well.

All of us have heard stories like these and know that while not rare, they are unusual. All took place in public schools. All involved real young people, real educators, and real communities no different on the surface than thousands of others. Yet there is something about these stories, a somewhat elusive feeling, that speaks to the question of makes for a worthwhile and valuable education. Who are the people in these stories? What kinds of things are they working on? What drives them? How do they organize themselves? Who benefits from their work? If we take the time to answer these questions we will begin to remember a now half-forgotten idea that was to guide the purposes and programs of our public schools. The idea was, and is, democracy.

There are public schools throughout this country where the hard work of teachers, administrators, parents, community activists, and students to bring democracy to life has paid off. These schools are alive with excitement, even in sometimes depressing and difficult circumstances. In these schools, teachers and students alike are engaged in serious work resulting in rich and vital learning experiences for all.

Yet the idea of democratic schools on a large scale has fallen on hard times. All around us, we can see the signs. Public schools are called on to educate all of our children, yet are simultaneously blamed for the social and economic disparities that severely detract from their chances of successfully doing so. Local decision making is glorified in political rhetoric while federal legislation moves toward national standards, a standardized and scripted curriculum, and national tests, even when the evidence clearly shows that such policies may be counterproductive (Apple 2006; Meier 2004; Valenzuela 2005). Demands are made to emphasize critical thinking while censorship of school programs and materials increases. Census figures display growing cultural diversity

while pressure is applied to keep the curriculum within the narrow boundaries of the Western cultural tradition. The needs of business and industry are suddenly the preeminent goals of our educational system. Education in morality and ethics is reduced to a litany of behavior traits. Privileged groups seek to flee comprehensive, diverse public schools through vouchers, tax credits, "choice" plans, and exclusionary programs for their "gifted" children. And we are constantly told that successful schools can only grow out of market initiatives such as voucher plans or for-profit "public" schools run by private firms like the Edison Project or Education Alternatives Inc. (Molnar 2005).

The possibility of democratic reform lies with citizens who choose equality as the standard of social progress and the measure of their own empowerment.
Ann Bastian et al., 1986

Could it be that the century-long struggle for democratic purposes and practices in education and schooling never occurred? How could our collective memory have failed so utterly? Shall we forget that concepts like "student voice" and thematic curriculum are rooted in the problem-centered "core" approaches advocated by earlier progressive social reconstructionists? How can we disconnect the call for heterogeneous grouping, advocated by so many groups today, from the longer struggle of the civil rights movement? Shall we forget that "developmentally responsive" practices stretch back to the progressive, child-centered schools created more than a century ago? When we speak of cooperative learning today, shall we simply ignore the cooperative group process work done in schools and communities as part of democratic movements since the 1920s? How can we seem puzzled by ways to connect schools to their communities when so many stories of significant service learning projects can be found in the professional literature of at least the past sixty years?

The late civil rights activist, Rosa Parks, is often portrayed during Black History Month as simply a "tired, older woman" who wanted to sit down on a bus. But her courageous act on that bus came after months of work on resistance and civil disobedience at the Highlander Folk School. Likewise, many of our most trusted and powerful ideas about schooling are the hard-won gains of long and courageous efforts to make our schools more democratic (see, for example, Rugg 1939). We are the beneficia-

ries of those efforts, and we have an obligation to carry forward the demanding dream of public schools for a democratic society.

The questions raised here are meant to remind us of that half-forgotten dream, to rouse us from the steady slide away from it over the two few decades. Although our memories may have become blurred, we can still recall that public schools are essential to democracy. We cannot help but be jolted wide awake when discussions about what works in schools, what should be done in schools, make no mention of the role of public schools in expanding the democratic way of life. And so we must make the case again.

The Meaning of Democracy

Those of us who live in the United States claim that democracy is the central tenet of our social and political relations. It is, we say, the basis for how we govern ourselves, the concept by which we measure the wisdom and worth of social policies and shifts, the ethical anchor we seek when our political ship seems to drift. And it is the standard we use to measure the political progress of other countries as well as their trade status with our own.

It is not surprising, then, that the word *democracy* seems to be heard more frequently these days. In many places around the world, oppressed peoples struggle for human and civil rights. Dictatorships and popularly elected governments are overthrown at a startling rate. In the United States, growing numbers of people claim that politicians at all levels are no longer in touch with their constituents. Conflict among political, religious, and cultural groups fuels debate over free speech, privacy, land use, lifestyles, and, throughout it all, the rights of the individual in relation to the interests of the larger society. Amid this dissonance, the idea of democracy presumably serves as a crucial benchmark for judging events and ideas.

Central tenets and ethical anchors, however, also tend to be converted into rhetorical slogans and political codes to gain popular support for all manner of ideas. Thus, they are fraught with ambiguity. *Democracy* is no exception. Woodrow Wilson understood this well when he deflected opposition to U.S. involvement in World War I with the virtually unassailable statement that our soldiers were fighting "to make the world safe for democracy."

Calling forth the word *democracy* did the trick then and has done so for a wide array of political and military maneuvers since.

The meaning of democracy is just as ambiguous in our own times, and the rhetorical convenience of that ambiguity is more evident than ever (Apple 2000). One can understand, for example, how claims for democracy could be used to shore up movements for civil rights, expanded voting privileges, and protection of free speech. However, democracy is also used to further the causes of free market economies and school-choice vouchers, and to defend the dominance of major political parties. We hear the democracy defense used countless times everyday to justify almost anything people want to do: "Hey, we live in a democracy, right?"

On the other hand, it is not uncommon to hear some people say that democracy has simply become irrelevant, that it is too inefficient or dangerous in an increasingly complex world. For these people, the democracy defense itself has become cumbersome or, perhaps, not sufficient to get them what they want. In a society like that of the United States, where there are clear divisions of wealth and power, the personal freedoms and ambiguous definition of democracy have clearly benefited some people more than others. Efforts to sharpen the definition of democracy and extend its meaning throughout society are seen by some of the more privileged people of this country as threats to their own status and power. To understand this view, we need only look at the startling contradiction between the movement for greater school achievement on the one hand and the resistance to equitable spending for all schools on the other (Kozol 1991, 2005).

Under these complicated conditions, a book on democratic schools may seem almost foolhardy. After all, if the meaning of democracy is so confused in the larger society, how can we possibly settle on its meaning for everyday life in schools? That risk in mind, we have gone ahead, buoyed by certain beliefs. We believe that democracy does mean something and that bringing that meaning to light is critical at a time when many citizens are vigorously debating the future course of our schools. Moreover, we find it hard to imagine that people who have known the privileges of democracy would so easily give them up. We find it even harder to imagine that they would not want these privileges for their children, indeed for all people. We admit to having what Dewey and others have called the "democratic faith," the funda-

mental belief that democracy has a powerful meaning, that it can work, and that it is necessary if we are to maintain human dignity, equity, freedom, and justice in our social affairs.

Democracy works in multiple ways in social affairs. Most of us who attended school in the United States (and perhaps elsewhere) were taught that democracy is a form of political governance involving the consent of the governed and equality of opportunity. For example, we learned that citizens may directly and fully participate in such events as elections while being "represented" in other matters by those we elect to federal and state legislatures as well as boards and committees governing local school policy.

But democracy is not only a "process." It also involves values and principles that make up the foundations of "the democratic way of life" (Beane 2005). This "content" of democracy and its extension through education is a central concern of democratic schools. Among such values and principles are the following:

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

If people are to secure and maintain a democratic way of life, they must have opportunities to learn what that way of life means and how it might be led (Dewey 1916). Although common sense alone tells us this is a true statement, there is perhaps no more problematic concept in education than that of democratic schools, a concept that some consider almost an oxymoron. How can this be so? Simply

> *The cause of democracy is the moral cause of the dignity and the worth of the individual.*
> John Dewey, 1946

put, many people believe that democracy is nothing more than a form of federal government and thus does not apply to schools and other social institutions. Many also believe that democracy is a right of adults, not of young people. And some believe that democracy simply cannot work in schools.

But others are committed to the idea that the democratic way of life is built upon opportunities to learn what it is about and how to lead it. They believe that the schools, as a common experience of virtually all young people, have a moral obligation to bring the democratic way to life in the culture and curriculum of the school. They know, as well, that such a life is learned by experience. It is not a status to be attained only after other things are learned. Moreover, they believe that a robust and equitable democracy should extend to all people, including the young. Finally, they believe that democracy is neither cumbersome nor dangerous, that it can work in societies and it can work in schools. As Maxine Greene (1985, 4) tells us, "Surely it is an obligation of education in a democracy to empower the young to become members of the public, to participate, and play articulate roles in the public space."

Those committed to creating democratic schools also understand that doing so involves more than the education of the young. Democratic schools are meant to be democratic places, so the idea of democracy also extends to the many roles that adults play in the schools. This means that professional educators as well as parents, community activists, and other citizens have a right to fully informed and critical participation in creating school policies and programs for themselves and young people.

Advocates of democratic schools also realize, sometimes painfully, that exercising democracy involves tensions and contradictions. Democratic participation in decision making, for example, opens the way for antidemocratic ideas such as the continuing demands for censorship of materials, the use of public tax vouchers for private school tuition, and the maintenance of historical inequities in school life (Delfattore 1993; Jensen and Project Censored 1994). Furthermore, there always looms the possibility of the illusion of democracy, in which authorities may invite participation so as to "engineer consent" for predetermined decisions (Graebner 1988). Such contradictions and tensions point to the fact that bringing democracy to life is always a struggle. But beyond them

lies the possibility for young people, professional educators, and citizens to work together in creating more democratic schools that serve the common good of the whole community.

This book is for and about educators who are committed to democracy, who value the democratic way of life, who believe that schools can be democratic places, and who have the courage to carry those beliefs into action. In several chapters we will hear some of these educators describe, in their own voices, how they have brought the idea of democracy to life in their schools and classrooms. These are remarkable stories inasmuch as the very idea of democratic schools has proved to be so elusive to the educational community. The stories are not filled with the easy promises and slick slogans of packaged programs or systems. Instead, like almost all school stories, they reveal the hard work and commitment of real educators struggling to create and maintain arrangements that reveal the deeply held values that they, and we, believe must be acted on now.

The authors of this book are fundamentally dissatisfied with the conservative solutions usually put at center stage over the past decade: tighter centralized control, standardization of content, reductive testing, authoritarian and sterile teaching methods, and so on. All of us believe that we must move beyond handwringing and find real answers to the question "What works in schools?"

What Is a Democratic School?

Before presenting the real-life stories in this book, we want to offer a context for their telling. What is a democratic school? What might we expect to see if we visited one? What are its underlying principles? How has the concept of democratic schools emerged over time? What threatens the existence of these schools? How can it be that these stories are so remarkable in a society that purports to be democratic?

Democratic schools, like democracy itself, do not happen by chance. They result from explicit attempts by educators to put in place arrangements and opportunities that will bring democracy to life (see, for example, Bastian, Fruchter, Gittel, Greer, and Haskins 1986; Wood 1988, 1992; Beane 2005). These arrangements and opportunities involve two lines of work. One is to create democratic structures and processes by which life in the

school is carried out. The other is to create a curriculum that will give young people democratic experiences.

Democratic Structures and Processes

To say that democracy rests on the consent of the governed is almost a cliché, but in a democratic school it is true that all of those directly involved in the school, including young people, have the right to participate in the process of decision making. For this reason, democratic schools are marked by widespread participation in issues of governance and policy making. Committees, councils, and other schoolwide decision-making groups include not only professional educators but also young people, their parents, and other members of the school community. In classrooms, young people and teachers engage in collaborative planning, reaching decisions that respond to the concerns, aspirations, and interests of both. This kind of democratic planning, at both the school and the classroom levels, is not the "engineering of consent" toward predetermined decisions that has too often created the illusion of democracy, but a genuine attempt to honor the right of people to participate in making decisions that affect their lives. This set of commitments has been demonstrated to work in powerful ways not only in the United States, but in other nations as well. In Brazil, for instance, the Citizen School and "participatory budgeting" have provided exceptional models of how democratic education can change the lives of students, teachers, and entire communities (Apple, Aasen, Cho, Gandin, Oliver, Sung, Tavares, and Wong 2003).

We must remember, however, that local decision making must still be guided by democratic values. It is one of the contradictions of democracy that local, populist politics do not always serve democratic ends. After all, left entirely to local discretion, we might still have schools characterized by legal racial segregation and denial of access to all but the wealthy. In short, the realization of democratic schools does in part depend on selective intervention of the state, especially where the process and content of local decision making serve to disenfranchise and oppress selected groups of people. While such intervention is usually unpopular among those who have sought exclusive power, it serves as a reminder that the wide distribution of rights and other democratic values are meant to be more than principles on paper.

Our own times offer many illustrations of the tension between the state's obligation to safeguard democracy and the democratic right of interest groups to air their views. For example, public schools in a democratic society are meant to offer access to, and critical examination of, a wide range of ideas. However, various special interest groups, especially many religious conservatives, demand that ideas and materials open to consideration in schools be limited to those supporting their groups' own values (Apple 2006; Apple and Buras 2006). At the same time, local groups across the political spectrum are troubled by national testing and standards regulations since the range of knowledge valued in the curriculum is eventually defined by select national groups that create the tests and the standards. The idea of widespread participation in school affairs as a feature of democratic schools is thus not as simple as inviting participation, because the right to "have a say" introduces questions about how various viewpoints fit into the fragile equation balancing special interests and the larger "common good" of the democratic community.

Those involved in democratic schools see themselves as participants in communities of learning. By their very nature, these communities are diverse, and that diversity is prized, not viewed as a problem. Such communities include people who reflect differences in age, culture, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic class, aspirations, and abilities. These differences enrich the community and the range of views it might consider. Separating people of any age on the basis of these differences or using labels to stereotype them simply creates divisions and status systems that detract from the democratic potential of the community and the dignity of the individuals against whom such practices work so harshly.

The greatest intellectual, moral, political, and spiritual resources in America that may renew the soul and preserve the future of American democracy reside in this multicultural, rich democratic heritage.
Cornel West, 2004

While the community prizes diversity, it also has a sense of shared purpose. No matter the claims of "privatizers" or those who want economic rationality to drive schools, democracy is not simply a theory of self-interest that gives people license to pursue their own goals at the expense of others. This does not mean that

creative individuality is ignored or demeaned. After all, diversity is a necessary ingredient for a rich community. But in a robust democracy, people see their stake in others. For this reason, democratic schools are marked by an emphasis on cooperation and collaboration rather than competition, and arrangements are created that encourage young people to improve the life of the community by helping others.

In all these arrangements, and in the policy decisions that support them, people in democratic schools persistently emphasize structural equity. While initial access to educational opportunities is understood to be a necessary aspect of democratic schools, access alone is not considered sufficient for their realization. In an authentically democratic community, all young people are also considered to have the right of access to all programs in the school and to the outcomes the school values. For this reason, those in democratic schools seek to assure that the school includes no institutional barriers to young people. Every effort is made to eliminate tracking, biased testing, and other arrangements that so often deny such access on grounds of race, gender, and socioeconomic class (Oakes 2005).

Educators who are committed to democracy realize that sources of inequity in the school are likely to be found in the community as well. At the very least, they understand that the possibilities arising from democratic experiences in the school may too easily be washed away by life on the outside (Gutmann 1987; Kozol 2005). In seeing themselves as part of the larger community, they seek to extend democracy there, not only for the young but for all people. In short, they want democracy on a large scale; the school is just one of the sites on which they focus. This is a crucial point. The educational landscape is littered with the remains of failed school reforms, many of which failed because of the social conditions surrounding the schools. Only those reforms that recognize these conditions and actively engage them are likely to make a lasting difference in the lives of the children, educators, and communities served by the schools (Anyon 2005).

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