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## Democratic Character Education in the History Classroom

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In the southeast corner of the Bronx, on the third floor of an eight-school-building-complex, a 4-by-6, framed portrait of John Dewey hangs on the back wall of my US History classroom.

Dewey sits among some 50-odd, framed portraits of other dead (or nearly dead) Americans. The wall is themed. It is based on the Alice Walker quote displayed on a poster in the corner of the room: *The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any.* In other words, every person pictured, despite their unique obstacles, recognized the power they had to effect change, improve themselves, and shape the world around them.

In creating this wall, I attempted to reflect, in some small way, the lived experiences of my students. Residents of the Bronx have fought—and are still fighting—a great web of violence: discriminatory housing and employment, gentrification from luxury real estate, police brutality and police neglect, among other forces no less significant. In order to empower students, we must speak about injustice by examining the deep and powerful ways that people have resisted it.

Residents have formed movements like the recent South Bronx Unite, which fights for sustainable housing and environmental activism. When the Bronx was burning in the '60s and '70s, community members created movements

like Don't Move, Improve, and in the '90s, Nos Quedemos (We Stay). These projects, designed to build solidarity, rallied for legislation and created community from the bottom up. Organizations like United Bronx Parents mobilized the Puerto Rican community to fight the discriminatory funding of the public school system.

The Bronx Chapter of the Black Panthers, as well as the Young Lords (originally based in Harlem), began providing free breakfast to school children in the early '70s.<sup>1</sup> This was, of course, before the Federal Government piloted their free breakfast program, which spent significantly less money per child. These grassroots efforts in the Bronx led to it winning the National Civic League's All-America City Award in 1997. There is a fierce sort of pride in people from the Bronx—even outsiders can see this in figures like Cardi B and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

Yet, there is still much that needs to change. In 2014, after Bronx native Kalief Browder was imprisoned at Rikers Island for three years without trial (the majority of which he spent in solitary confinement), he died by suicide. He was accused of stealing \$700 worth of goods, and though it was found that there was no evidence against him, he could not make bail, and there was little impetus to put him on trial. The disturbing human rights abuses that occurred at Rikers have since been well documented. Two years later, Bronx resident Deborah Danner was shot and killed by a police officer in her own home. Though the officer was charged with second-degree murder, he was later acquitted in a non-jury trial. Deborah's home is a three-minute walk from my school.

For the wall in the back of my class, I chose fighters, poets, musicians, philosophers, and Americans from every background I could think of—people who demonstrated through their lives a fervor for improving their people's

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<sup>1</sup> Museum of the City of New York, *Activist New York*, <https://www.mcny.org/exhibition/activist-new-york>.

condition as well as a refusal to bow to unjust authority. I also chose people who I was quite, quite sure would care about the lives of my students.

Choosing who we should celebrate, who we should put on the wall, is a distinctly moral task. It is akin to asking ourselves: what sort of people do we want our students to become? Which role models do we show them? And how can we ensure that they have the tools to pursue lives that they find meaningful?

These questions fall within the philosophical framework of Moral Exemplarism, an approach that uses existing models of good character to anchor a comprehensive theory of morality. In her 2017 book, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, Linda Zagzebski aims to create a theory of morality as broad in scope as deontological, utilitarian, and virtue theory approaches—but one that is uniquely based in the perspective of the individual and her community.<sup>2</sup>

The theory is centered around the emotion of admiration, which is used as a reference point for the individual to determine what good moral exemplars are. Zagzebski breaks down the paradigm of a moral exemplar into four categories: a *virtue* is a specific trait that we admire (humility, for example); a *right act* is the most morally compelling action in a set of circumstances (standing up to a bully for someone else); a *duty* is an act that would induce guilt if not done (calling the ambulance for a dying child); and a *good state of affairs* is what an admirable person always aims for (say, the eradication of poverty). Through their own emotions, individual people can determine whether a particular person is worthy of

admiration and is therefore a good moral exemplar.

The case of John Brown is illustrative. John Brown was a radical abolitionist who by the end of his life believed that arming slaves for escape and insurrection was the only way to overthrow the institution of slavery. In 1856, he traveled to Kansas to protect relatives from militant pro-slavery settlers. At the time, Kansas residents were permitted to vote on whether or not to permit slavery in the state, which led to a rush of highly partisan settlers and sporadic violence that caused several hundred deaths. Brown him-

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self was instrumental in the murder of five pro-slavery set-

tlers. Three years later he attempted, unsuccessfully, to steal thousands of weapons from the largest federal weapons arsenal in the country, at Harper's Ferry, in order to arm the slaves in the south. In December of 1859 he was executed by public hanging.

The deontologist would not have approved of Brown. The categorical imperative dictates that an individual's ultimate goals and local circumstances do not impact their moral obligation to not murder people. The consequentialists too would struggle. Though they may view Brown's motives favorably, the question of whether Brown's actions led to a greater good for the greater number is anything but clear. Virtue ethicists, too, might be at a loss. Brown's virtue of selflessness may not be enough to outweigh his incaution (the raid was, by most accounts, doomed to fail).

Yet, when we studied John Brown in my class, and the students voted whether or not to keep his portrait on the wall, more than 95% voted in favor. If we look at John Brown in the

<sup>2</sup> Linda Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

context of exemplarist theory, it is not difficult to discern why. The students praised his *virtues* of selflessness and bravery, they saw his raid on Harper's Ferry as a *right act*, deemed his actions to protect his family in Kansas as a fulfillment of *duty*, and recognized that the *good state of affairs* he pursued—namely the overthrow of slavery—was a fundamentally worthy goal.

The shortcomings of this approach, centered on the perhaps fallible emotion of admiration, we will discuss later. The clear advantage, however, particularly for those who value democracy, is that it is a bottom-up way of viewing morality. Zagzebski's approach is empirical. She does not believe that morality precedes the world it exists within. She argues that ethical theory should function to either justify or condemn attributes and actions that are already in practice. She argues that while the deepest nature of morality may remain elusive to us, we can use the exemplarist approach to point at *this* or *that* being moral or immoral.<sup>3</sup>

Zagzebski and other researchers have also explored the connection between exemplarist moral theory and character education. Bart Engelen, Alan Thomas, Alfred Archer, and Niels van de Ven consider exemplarism within the context of *nudge strategies*—broadly defined as methods of indirect positive reinforcement of moral behavior.<sup>4</sup> They cite a series of studies which detail how exposure to positive role models in different contexts has been shown to have durable effects on an individual's desire to act virtuously. With a nod to Zagzebski, they also discuss studies that detail how the nudge effect is tied to the emotion of admiration—which can have a more profound effect on long-term goals than, say, jealousy.

One point they make that is particularly relevant for educators is that stories are far more

effective in spurring virtuous action when they address single cases of heroism or suffering—one that is close to home for an individual. Broad narratives about the eight million people who died during World War One are, perhaps regrettably, far less salient for people than the novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*. And tales of heroism in our own communities tend to be more powerful than stories from abroad.

The level of engagement in my classes is always higher when I can find a way to make the Bronx and the experiences of its residents relevant and salient to the historical subject we are studying.

## The State and the History Classroom

The wall in the back of my class serves two distinct purposes: as a means of democratic engagement and as a vehicle for moral exemplarism.

Throughout the year, as we've studied various historical figures, we hold secret ballots on whether or not they deserve to be on the wall. For some figures, the vote is on whether to add them—Abraham Lincoln was not originally included, but the students voted "yes," so now I have to buy a frame for him (don't worry, they're from the dollar store)—and some votes are on whether a figure deserves the spot they have, as in the case of John Brown.

It should be noted as well that the goal here is not to achieve a unanimous decision. To this day, I still have a handful of students who will jokingly reference the portrait of John Brown as a "madman." I've had a few long talks with the most vocally opposed students, discussing Brown's complex and changing legacy during their 4th-period lunch. And, of course, the same

<sup>3</sup> Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*.

<sup>4</sup> Bart Engelen, Alan Thomas, Alfred Archer & Niels van de Ven, "Exemplars and Nudges: Combining Two

Strategies for Moral Education," *Journal of Moral Education* 47, no. 3 (2018), 346-365.

thing is true for Lincoln, who has also had some profound critics in my classes. In order to create a space where discussions like these are celebrated, the process of moral exemplarism must begin and end with the students themselves—and the narrative presented about potential exemplars must be subject to scrutiny and criticism.

Jackson was a man who had such a proclivity for dueling strangers that he is known to have personally killed dozens of people. He spoke about Indigenous Americans as if they were animals, and his executive orders were certainly the catalyst for the genocide of the Cherokee nation.

Jackson and Trump may seem to be extreme examples, so let's consider some of our more be-

**How we view exemplars is decidedly shaped by the environments within which the exemplar is presented.**

Top-down character education—saddled as it is with a history of paternalism, condescension, Social Darwinism, and authoritarianism—is dangerous. Though it functions as a good reference point, the emotion of admiration is fallible and easily manipulated. There has been a long history of people, often those with money or power, imposing on society their vision for character education. Particularly in the context of the top-down systems which dominate American education and society, there is a danger in expressly declaring that one of the functions of public school is to breed ethical behavior.

But who decides what this means?

If it is the state that decides on what constitutes ethical behavior, then my students and I may have some bones to pick. It was, after all, the state that executed John Brown. Therefore, moral exemplarism will function at its strongest when it is cooperative—meaning teachers and students must be active participants in exemplarist discussions.

If Donald Trump were making selections for his own wall of moral exemplars, he would likely select Andrew Jackson. The claims of similarity that have been made between Presidents Trump and Jackson are not without foundation—and Trump himself has spoken about his admiration for the man. Most of us with an understanding of Jackson's actions and beliefs, however—including my students—would be appalled at his inclusion.

loved founding fathers. If institutions could speak for themselves, the state would certainly include George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison for its wall. Most of its citizenry, depending on how the question was phrased, might be inclined to agree. Yet all three men owned human beings in the hundreds and allowed their revolutionary government to permit the continuation of that status quo.

With criticism of the founding fathers always comes accusations of presentism—and yet there were, in fact, significant numbers of people in the 18th and 19th centuries who did dissent from this state of affairs. There were women and men who dedicated their lives to fighting this oppressive and immoral system. Washington, Jefferson, and Madison, despite their ingenuity, leadership, and other admirable qualities, were at best complicit in, and at worst responsible for, perpetuating the most virulent and extensive form of chattel slavery to ever exist.

These historical figures should illustrate that while admiration is a good reference point, it can be quite malleable. How we view exemplars is decidedly shaped by the environments within which the exemplar is presented. The collective American feeling of admiration for the founding fathers has been, in part, constructed with state textbooks. It has been used to further the forces of nationalism, nativism, Social Darwinism, and American exceptionalism. These facets of the environment have enabled the crimes of the

founding fathers to be erased or minimized, and their triumphs romanticized.

To be clear, this is not to say that the founding fathers cannot be admired in any capacity. Admiration is also influenced by our own aspirations and self-image. Patriots tend to admire patriots. Rebels tend to admire rebels. There is a clear correlation between those students who denounce John Brown and those students who have expressed nationalistic views, just as Brown's most vocal supporters also tended to be a little anti-establishment themselves. In the environment of the classroom, the power to investigate and evaluate the historical narrative must lie with students and the teacher—and not with the state, or other institutions.

When governments choose which textbook to provide to their schoolchildren, they naturally do it based on the state's hierarchy of what is important in history. The state is not a neutral institution—it has clear aims—among them are maintaining power, maintaining order, and maintaining popular support from the people. These motives change little between democratic and authoritarian states. A primary end goal for every government must be to nurture cooperative and patriotic citizens, and thus it is logical that they should paint the historical narrative in a way that breeds obedience and pride.

When Harold Rugg, one of the founders of the John Dewey Society, created a textbook that attempted to show that the United States has faults as well as strengths, local governments and school boards began ordering the book's destruction.<sup>5</sup> This was also one of the explicit purposes of the House Un-American Activities Committee up until it was absorbed by the Judiciary Committee in 1975.

When I was in fifth grade my mom purchased a book for me titled *Everything You Need to Know About American History Homework* to help

me in what was, at the time, my least favorite subject. I certainly didn't read it then, but upon my last visit home, I re-discovered the book and flipped through its pages. In a book authoritatively declaring "everything you need to know," there are only two Black people mentioned, W.E.B. DuBois and Martin Luther King. No Black women, no Hispanic women or men.

Standing in my mom's kitchen the faces of my students formed in my mind, none of them reflected in the children's history book in my hand. While discussing the marginalization of women, poet Adrienne Rich put it best: "When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing." By including only DuBois and King, the textbook authors admit to the student that, yes, slavery and segregation happened, but no, we don't need to talk about it, and we certainly don't need to acknowledge that it happened to both men and women. It just took a couple of people to argue that all that stuff was bad. And now it's over.

The real story continues on the next page. So, all the others—the millions of slaves raped and whipped and killed by their owners, the activists and revolutionaries executed by the government, the civilians hung from trees and beaten in the streets with impunity, the innocents incarcerated for profits, the teenagers murdered by police officers—are not important enough for mention.

Eli Whitney, inventor of the cotton gin, is mentioned in every single textbook I've ever seen. For the state, this is how character education takes shape in history class.

Combating this as a history teacher is challenging. But it is the first step in establishing a democratic character education that is based in a cooperative moral exemplarism. If, for example,

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel Tanner, *Crusade for Democracy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002).

my class were to select moral exemplars after studying history only through the latest edition of *The American Pageant*, the results would be skewed based on the available resources: mostly white, mostly male, and mostly powerful. Representation matters. With good reason, “you can’t be what you can’t see” has been repeated often in recent political discourse. Just as my students find more salience in stories from the Bronx, exemplarism is ineffective if students cannot see themselves in the exemplar.

History teachers will also note that the imperative to engage with multiple perspectives in the classroom is not just a moral requirement. It is also a pedagogical one. Any inquiry into a historical event must include a diversity of sources, and students need the skills necessary to dissect and analyze those sources. However, as William Gaudelli and Megan J. Laverty discuss, this obligation is far broader than the recent scholarship around “thinking like a historian” and “citizenship education” would suggest.<sup>6</sup> Teaching students skills like sourcing, contextualization, and corroboration is valuable, but without a “clear demonstration of transferability” to students’ lived experiences, the hope of making students intelligent critics of our current historical moment will not be realized. As Gaudelli and Laverty point out, the typical American student will not spend more than 2.3% of their time studying history.

I know mine will likely spend far more time playing Fortnite and watching anime, and who can blame them?

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One tool I have to combat this is using the Bronx as a point of direct applicability. Dewey argues that “with every increase of ability to place our own doings in their time and space connections, our doings gain in significant content.”<sup>7</sup> In a Deweyan sense, the history classroom should not be seen as preparation for life or training to understand the goings on in the world—the history classroom is the world and life itself. Gaudelli and Laverty quote Dewey: all areas of study should be viewed as “means of bringing the child to realize the social scene of action.”<sup>8</sup>

Cooperative moral exemplarism must therefore be an ongoing, interdisciplinary, spatially and temporally relevant process for students to take part in. It must allow students to assume the roles of otherness, calibrate

those roles to their own experiences and beliefs, and evaluate their own feeling of admiration (or lack thereof) without the intervention of an authority. And it must always be situated in the present, while looking ahead, and asking, “how is this relevant?” and “why does this matter today?”

The wall itself functions as an important part of this process. By presenting the students with the portraits, the narrative becomes partially theirs to construct and critique.

In December of 1859, John Brown was executed for his raid on Harpers Ferry. Meanwhile, 550 miles north (and two portraits away), a five-week-old John Dewey was likely being nurtured by his reasonably wealthy, devoutly Calvinist

<sup>6</sup> William Gaudelli and Megan J. Laverty, “Reconstruction of Social Studies,” *Education and Culture* 34, no. 1 (2018): 19-39.

<sup>7</sup> John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916), 244.

<sup>8</sup> John Dewey, *Moral Principles in Education* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1909), 31.

mother, already being groomed for the college education she so desired for him.

To the left of John Brown is Harriet Tubman. Above Tubman is Eugene Debs, who was put in prison for criticizing US involvement in World War One. He was a member of the International Workers of the World (IWW), a radical socialist union dedicated to improving working conditions for American laborers, many of whom were imprisoned for their non-violent factory strikes. Mother Jones pictured to his right, cofounder of the IWW, was imprisoned several times throughout her lifetime. Students ideologically opposed to the IWW still must consider whether Debs' and Jones' actions merit admiration, just as students supportive of the IWW must consider the relative importance of their misdeeds.

Next to Debs is Alice Paul, who was also imprisoned for campaigning for a woman's right to vote. In prison she led several women in a hunger strike which drew national attention. Can we celebrate Paul's legacy while still acknowledging how she excluded black women from the fight? A few portraits to the right is Fannie Lou Hamer, who, despite being assaulted and fired on by white supremacists, led masses of women to the voting booths and coordinated political campaigns for women of color during the civil rights movement.

Within decades of Brown's raid, Geronimo of the Apache, Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce, and Sitting Bull of the Lakota were each either executed or put in prisoner-of-war camps (euphemistically known as reservations) by the US government. Their crime was resisting the US government's policy of genocide.

Beneath Sitting Bull are Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, two key activists in the Stonewall Uprising and the LGBTQ rights movement. Is it possible for students who are fearful of sexual differences and gender non-conformity to engage constructively with their legacy?

Close by their portraits is Fred Hampton, the young, charismatic, Chicago-chapter leader of the Black Panther Party. Over 100 years after John Brown's execution, Hampton was assassinated in his bed by the FBI.

Cooperatively, students and teachers can engage in the process of determining moral exemplars without pandering to the goals of institutions.

## Making the Wall Global

Thus far I have limited the wall to American figures. Mainly for practical reasons. I do not currently teach Global History, and opening the floodgates to all of the world's potential moral exemplars seemed too daunting, but this may have been shortsighted. A cross-cultural wall may have more value. Though it isn't yet, the adding and subtracting of exemplars has the potential to be something that is ritualistic for my class: a rite the community completes without instruction.

So democratic character education and moral exemplarism may have a companion in the work of Confucius, particularly in the Confucian notion of rites. *Rites*, in this way, must be seen in tandem with *rights*.

There is historical baggage in any discussion of ethics between East and West. Western imperialism was not just an economic or political policy, it was a cultural one. Those historical wounds are still festering.

If I were to make the wall global, one of the first figures I might consider is Liu Xiaobo, a Chinese dissident, who in his plight to enhance the freedoms of Chinese people, revealed the potential harmony (and inherent tension) between *rites* and *rights*.

Liu rose to prominence as an intellectual in the 1980s and was one of a handful of thinkers arrested after the Tiananmen Square massacre for supporting the pro-democracy protests.

Later in his life, he was instrumental in the creation of Charter 8, a manifesto for human rights that swarmed around the internet in China and garnered more than 12,000 signatures—this before it was discovered and expunged by the CCP.

Liu supported the idea of *rights*, but strongly critiqued Western employment of it. The West's imperialist history is highly relevant here. Liu reflects:

No matter how strongly modern Western intellectuals may critique Western rationalism, no matter how harshly they may denounce the West's colonial expansion and the promise of white superiority, they still maintain deep-rooted feelings of superiority toward non-Western peoples. They feel proud of the courage and sincerity with which they do self-criticisms.<sup>9</sup>

Rosemont and Ames take Liu's critiques significantly further. They suggest that the notion of autonomous individualism, deeply connected with the concept of individual *rights*, has been a far greater barrier to social justice efforts than it has been an aid. They enumerate why a Confucian role ethics grounded in a communal grammar of shared *rites* may be more purposeful.

Rights are inherently concerned with the self, while rites are grounded in the family and community. Locke and other Enlightenment figures suggested that the pursuit of happiness takes place at the individual level, while Confucius advocated for loyalty and filial piety first.

If the choice were a binary one, there may be reason to abandon *rights*. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights has, by almost any reasonable account, been an utter failure. The United Nations has repeatedly failed to stop human rights catastrophes like famine, genocide, and wars of aggression all over the world, and many member states, including the United States, have

endorsed, participated in, or been the primary architects of these crimes against humanity.

Rosemont argues that when we support the idea of *rights*, we also endorse the idea of individuals as primarily rational and self-interested, and under such a model, "the collective good will never be obtained." The Confucians, he contrasts, did not believe in the idea of the abstract individual, but rather that we all have specific roles to play, without which there would be no "I" at all. We only exist in relation to others: I am a son, a brother, a teacher, a friend, a New Yorker, a US citizen, etc. Through these roles we engage in the communal grammar as we enact *rites*.

Perhaps both *rights* and *rites* can serve to improve our moral conduct. The trouble is in the way that both can get hijacked by other causes and motivations. Ideology can be corrosive. The idea of rites can feed directly into forces of the status quo. When the state is viewed in paternalistic light, one of the roles of the citizen in a Confucian sense is to be obedient. An often-quoted passage in the *Analects* reads, "following the proper way, I do not forge new paths; with confidence I cherish the ancients."

Liu has taken issue with Confucian thinking. He argues that the public's renewed interest in Confucius serves, like it did before the revolution in 1911, for the "promotion of radical nationalism." The Chinese media has turned Confucianism into a cultural commodity, and in this way, has used the Confucian notion of filial piety as a "guard dog" to ensure nobody challenges their societal role, the supreme authority of the party, or the structure of Chinese society.

There are certainly aspects of role ethics that can serve as a corrective to the excesses of individualist-based thinking. The question for a democratic character education is, do we choose

<sup>9</sup> Liu Xiaobo, *No Enemies, No Hatred: Selected Essays and Poems*, trans. E.P. Link (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013).

moral exemplars based on an individual's human rights record and how committed they were to principles of *natural rights*, or do we choose them based on how fully and honorably they fulfilled their *rites*-based roles throughout their life?

The answer I think must be both.

## Deweyan Democracy for All

In order for students to be able to participate in moral exemplarism they must live and learn with democratic structures.

The premise of democratic character education depends on democracy functioning in real-time for every member within the system. The society, school, the teacher, and the student must all be active participants in the processes of democracy and the processes of democratic character education. And naturally, if a moral education should be based in this democratic philosophy, it so follows that a moral education would provide students with a clear-eyed understanding of the failures of current democratic life.

We must acknowledge all of the ways our history and the lives of our students and teachers tend towards authoritarianism. As the state has often failed to act democratically, so has the traditional school.

Do not get married. Do not leave town at any time without permission of the school board. Do not keep company with men. Be home between the hours of 8 P.M and 6 A.M. Do not loiter downtown in ice cream stores. Do not smoke. Do not get into a carriage with any man except your father or brother. Do not dress in bright colors. Do not dye your hair. Do not wear any dress more than two inches above the ankle.<sup>10</sup>

The above was posted under the heading, "Rules for Female Teachers," in one town in Massachusetts in the late 19th century. It is more than likely similar artifacts could be found from this period in towns across the country.

While we thankfully do not have such draconian rules policing teacher conduct today, the top-down authoritarian structure that allowed these rules to come into existence is still the same structure we operate with now. Teachers in New York City—despite the size of our union—have no real clout. They are not a part of any major decision-making processes on curriculum, evaluation, or any matter of educational importance.

Teachers across the country are striking for better wages and are rarely getting as much as they ask for. It is impossible to enumerate here all of the ways that teachers are alienated from their work. Dewey writes, "now either teaching is an intellectual enterprise or it is a routine mechanical exercise." He goes on to note that there is "no way better calculated to retard and discourage the professional spirit than methods which so entirely relieve teachers of intellectual responsibility as do the present methods."<sup>11</sup>

It should be obvious enough that when individuals have a locus of control over their work and the system they operate within they are more interested, dedicated, professional, and successful. In the environment of my school, I feel lucky that I have an administration and a principal who support my judgment and advocate on my behalf. It is a testament to the need for all of us who work in education to continue to operate as democratically as possible within the system as it

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<sup>10</sup> Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492 – Present* (London: Routledge, 2003), 338.

<sup>11</sup> John Dewey, "Professional Spirit Among Teachers," in *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924*, Volume 7,

edited by Joanne Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 112.

exists, even when the system's impetus is towards authoritarianism.

It should be clear enough as well that happy and dedicated teachers are much more likely to nurture happy and dedicated students. Dewey

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observes that “the undemocratic suppression of the individuality of the teacher goes naturally with the improper restriction of the intelligence of the mind of the child.”<sup>12</sup> There are already a surplus of undemocratic forces in the life of every child—an alienated teacher need not be one of them.

Every morning young people scattered throughout the Bronx, immigrants from the Dominican Republic, Albania, Nicaragua, Ghana, and Bangladesh, alongside children from families that have lived here for generations, board old and perpetually late MTA buses in the early hours of the morning to ride to school. The building the students are meant to be learning in hosts seven other schools and some three thousand other teenagers.

If students leave their schools' area—one half of the third floor, in our case—it is considered trespassing, and they are suspended. In order to gain access to their school building, children must wait, sometimes up to 30 minutes, to go through metal detectors. Their phones are confiscated. Then, as the system was designed as preparation for factory work, students are shuffled from class to class by bells. In their classes they are made to prepare for state tests in every

major subject. Their graduation, and their teachers' evaluations, are contingent upon the results of these tests. There is not a minute in a child's day, from the moment they are scanned upon entry to the moment when they are dismissed, that they are not told exactly where to be and exactly what to do.

Much like subjugated people through history, students do what they can to resist. Many engage in Martin Luther King Jr.'s creative maladjustment, where students actively resist learning because what they're being asked to do is dehumanizing. In order to maintain humanity, like American slaves, the Mexican-American war deserters, the Lowell Mill girls, and countless others, students engage in slow-downs and disruptions. It is often more empowering for a student to resist an education that is dehumanizing than be obedient in a system that is unjust.

As the educator Herbert Kohl describes in his book, *I Won't Learn From You*:

Conscious, willed refusal of schooling for political or cultural reasons is not acknowledged as an appropriate response to oppressive education. Since students have no way to legitimately criticize the schooling they are subjected to or the people they are required to learn from, resistance and rebellion is stigmatized. The system's problem becomes the victims' problem.<sup>13</sup>

A democratic character education would require a shift in mindset from seeing these students as threats to the school to seeing them as an essential point of care and focus, a spotlight on the system's flaws. In this way, students are an essential democratic check for what aspects of the institution need to be changed.

In *Experience and Education*, Dewey explores the complex relationship between individual

<sup>12</sup> John Dewey, “Democracy in Education,” *The Elementary School Teacher* 4, no. 4 (December 1903), 199.

<sup>13</sup> Herbert R. Kohl, *I Won't Learn from You: And Other Thoughts on Creative Maladjustment* (Vancouver: Langara College, 2003).

freedom and social control,<sup>14</sup> a relationship, I think, that is at the forefront of every classroom teacher's mind when they are standing in front of a room of disengaged students. Questions run through the teacher's head: What am I doing wrong? Why aren't they listening? How do I fix this? And often, in both traditional and supposedly progressive schools, the teacher will forgo democracy and turn to authority in these moments. We treat the behavior as something that needs to be corrected, rather than as a symptom of a contaminated system (or a boring lesson, or both).

Dewey discusses this struggle by likening natural social control to what occurs when children play games with one another during recess. Every game must involve norms and codes of conduct, and when there is a violation of those, an individual can act on behalf of the rest of group in enforcing the rules.<sup>15</sup> Social control, in this case, is a positive force, where the collective desires of the group establishes expectations for the community—ones based on a mutual understanding of the means and ends of a particular activity.

There is also an echo here of Confucius, who advocated for rites—ceremonies, procedures, and codes of conduct— as a means of building and maintaining community. Confucian scholars would likely suggest that the choice is not between control and freedom, but between social harmony and social disorder. For those that have studied early childhood education, it is useful to recall how essential collaborative, make-believe play is to a child's development. Toddlers being able to construct a pretend world with one another, establish norms and codes of conduct, and navigate and mitigate conflicts over the nature of the pretend play, is essential for intellectual growth. It is, according to many theorists, the cornerstone of early childhood education.

It's not a stretch to say that collaborative, make-believe play is a kind of Confucian rite. This natural, cooperative form of social control stands in direct contrast to the control exercised in the traditional school. As Dewey puts it:

The school was not a group or community held together by participation in common activities. Consequently, the normal, proper conditions of control were lacking. Their absence was made up for, and to considerable extent had to be made up for, by the direct intervention of the teacher, who, as the saying went, "kept order."<sup>16</sup>

The weight of this truth is evident in the way classrooms have, past and present, treated marginalized children.

When the Freedmen's Bureau was formed by Congress after the Civil War to help former slaves integrate into White society, the white supremacist ideology that sustained and perpetuated slavery did not disappear, it mutated. The new and polished form was the white progressive teacher, who was able to stand in front of a room of black children and say the n-word in a motherly voice, while Klansmen and moderates protested her actions.

When the Carlisle School was formed to integrate indigenous peoples, those students who did not comply with the stripping of their culture, language, dress, and traditions were beaten with paddles and whipped with belts. The overt nature of this ideology has certainly changed since the 19th century, but the underlying principle—that discipline and punishment build character—is still present.

Girls across the country since the beginning of formalized education have been put into boxes and told what they can and cannot be, what they can and cannot say, what they can and cannot wear, and what they can and cannot feel.

<sup>14</sup> John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Free Press, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> Dewey, *Experience and Education*.

<sup>16</sup> Dewey, *Experience and Education*.

Black boys are already more likely to get suspended for the same infractions as their White peers in kindergarten. The modern school-to-prison pipeline has been discussed for a long time, and the pipeline is still flowing.

**It's not a stretch to say that collaborative, make-believe play is a kind of Confucian rite.**

The building I work in has more than a dozen security officers present at all times, and when a student is in crisis, at least eight follow them around the hallway as a matter of procedure—never mind the incredible amount of further distress this must cause the student. A few weeks ago, a ninth-grade girl was tackled by eight officers and handcuffed after refusing to leave the building. As long as “keeping order” is the business of the teacher and administration—rather than the collective goal of students and teachers alike—there will be radically authoritarian instances like these. What ceaselessly amazes me as a teacher is how fearless and resilient children can be in the face of all this.

Sometimes after my third period class, Thomas, one of my eleventh-grade students, will stay in my room during his lunch. He is in my guitar class right after, so we'll walk down to the music room together, a few minutes before fifth period starts. Thomas is a small, devout Christian who came to the United States from Ghana in 2011. When Thomas does go to lunch, he is known for preaching to the other students, though he is not invasive or pedantic and will only approach students if they indicate that they are interested in hearing what he has to say. He is so eloquent and engaging that, when he does speak, groups of students who were not initially involved in the conversation will join only to listen.

When Thomas stays in my room, I, too, do a lot of listening. He tells me about his

upbringing in Ghana, the elementary school teachers he had that he admired, his opinions on Kwame Nkrumah, and what he believes are the root causes of the shortcomings of pan-Africanism, socialism, and neocolonial Africa. He tells me about his views on American education, seamlessly weaving proverbs and psalms that he's memorized into his thoughts. He tells me how he feels about the other students. And he tells me what it is that he wants from his life. Barring his disdain for my lack of religiosity, the conversations are incredibly pleasant, and often the highlight of my day.

After a particularly difficult class, Thomas stayed after with me and I broached with him the question of individual freedom and social control. We had spoken about similar topics before and, knowing how he had admired some of his teachers in Ghana, I thought I would pick his brain about what in the classroom and the school could be different. He thought for a moment, and then told me I had the dichotomy entirely wrong.

The question is not about freedom. Everyone has freedom. We are all masters of our own destiny. Just because some obstacles have been put in our way does not mean we do not have freedom. These students are free to walk out of class every day, stand up and shout on the desks, and free to never return if they wish. When the school tries to control students, the student still knows that they are free to act how they wish. The question is really about whether it should be the teacher in charge of the student, using personal power to try and say, “I have control over you,” or the students controlling and mastering themselves. How can the student master themselves when all around them the world tries to master them?

About twenty minutes after this conversation, we walk down to the music room together, and the topic has changed to Judaism and Christianity. Thomas would like to know why I am not

religious, and if I can open my heart to spirituality. Ten minutes later I show Thomas how to play “Wonderwall,” by Oasis, on guitar. A few minutes later he is practicing, and back talking with his friends.

When I taught a Government course last year to all graduating seniors, I asked students to tell me what they thought about democracy. We had studied Socrates and the advent of direct democracy in Greece (though many rightly disputed whether this was a true democracy), and I wanted to know whether they believed this system was effective in protecting an individual’s ability to pursue the kind of life they wanted. Many students didn’t know what to say. From their responses, they indicated that they had had very little experience of what democracy actually was. One girl said that if the United States was a democracy, there was no way it could be the most effective system. I didn’t know what to say in response.

Democratic character education requires several things. It requires an awareness of the spatiality and temporality in which the character education is taking place. It requires that moral exemplars are evaluated cooperatively, students and teachers together. It requires that the teacher and student are aware of the undemocratic forces that the state explicitly endorses in the history classroom, or is complicit in allowing. It requires an awareness of the corrosive effects of ideology. It requires that we recognize that while all human beings wish to live in dignity, not all cultures specifically endorse the narrow visions of natural rights implicit in Western rhetoric. And it requires that we fight—schools, teachers, parents, and students together—for a system that allows us to teach, learn, and live with freedom and dignity.

I think the people on the wall in my classroom demonstrate the power of democracy, even under authoritarian structures. I like having their frames hanging in the back of my room.

Character education is a dangerous concept, but even more dangerous when democratic ideals are taken lightly. Students, teachers, and all stakeholders must experience democracy in the school system. It is time that we view their rebellion as a symptom of injustice, just as the actions of John Brown, John Dewey, Harriet Tubman, Eugene Debs, Mother Jones, Alice Paul, Fannie Lou Hamer, Geronimo of the Apache, Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce, and Sitting Bull of the Lakota, Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, and Fred Hampton were all symptoms of injustice.

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