Starting Something!

"ISRC 2000" & "SRCs and JSCs 2001"
...some ideas for kicking off...

Also in this issue:
- Kicking Off 2001:
  - Getting your Student Council Going
  - Starting from Scratch
  - Starting a Primary School Student Council
- Networks of Children's Media Participation in Brazil
- Thinking Like Darwin:
  - Struggle and Survival in Democratic Classrooms

& Incorporating the PASTA Newsletter #21

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This Issue

Back to school! A time for back-to-school sales for expectations and hopes, for steps into the unknown, for catching up with old friends and making new acquaintances. Scary and exciting!

And from Connect - some good old back-to-school guilt! For we ask right at the start of the school year what you are doing to build and support the active participation of students in your school.

So the first articles in this issue (an issue unequivocally in the 21st Century!) focus on making sure that there's an active and organised student group in your school. We've brainstormed the steps that could (should) be taken, run them past some experts (students), and written them up in the form of some checklists. (But don't think they have to happen sequentially - for they may overlap or occur simultaneously.) Perhaps a simple exercise: photocopy the pages, cut up the little 'cards' and (as a group) sort them into an order that suits you.

Some material is for a Council that's kicking all around again after the holidays: some for a school that's new to having a student group; ideas here for primary schools as well as ideas for secondary schools; ideas for students and for teachers.

More for teachers: a long essay by Assistant Professor, Steven Wolk, on survival techniques within schools. (But these may also be very useful comments for students working on change and democracy within their school.) I suggest that this could be a contentious article - I think there are things here that I might disagree with. But it provides some challenging material.

Wolk's essay comes from a great issue of the US based magazine Democracy & Education (published by the Institute for Democracy in Education in Ohio). Contact details are included with the essay - it's well worth chasing up the magazine, particularly this issue, in which classroom teachers (in primary, secondary and tertiary education) reflect on their practices around empowering students and around authentic learning. Contact Connect if you want to talk further about the articles in this issue - we have several years' archives of the magazine as well.

To some extent, Connect does in the same thing - Australia ... shares examples, encourages and supports people to be reflective about their practices, and advocates for education in which students are active and valued participants in purposeful learning and action.

Next Issue of Connect

Much of this issue of Connect focuses on the 'formal' role of students through Councils and similar structures - ways for them to have a voice, but also to move beyond voice into action and shared decision-making. Recent issues of Connect have also explored the negotiated curriculum, and purposeful project-based work in classrooms. Coming up in future issues: plans to continue all that - eg to carry stories about Student Action Teams, student reflections on addressing a staff meeting and on organising the publication of student anthologies and so on. With your contributions ... of course?

Roger Holdsworth

NEXT ISSUE: #128 - April 2001
Deadline for material: end of March
Ideally ... you've made all the arrangements at the end of last year, elected/selected the members of the Council, had a first meeting to set objectives for the year, selected office bearers etc. But, just in case ...

Here's a brief checklist of some of the steps you'll need to take to get going fast! After all, the longer it takes for the Student Council to get going, the more decisions that have already been made - without formal student input.

It's assumed here that you've had a student council before (there's another short article following for those starting for the first time), and need to kick it off ... into action! ... for 2001. Each school will be different, so adapt and develop and extend his list (and tell us what happens!)

Many of the following steps should or will likely happen sort of all at once - certainly within a few weeks. Think of them holistically. Don't just wait until one step is finished before starting on the next. Plan and look ahead to all the steps. Do them when it's convenient and necessary for those involved - including yourselves.

The outgoing executive meets with the support teacher to steer the process.

This is a student council, so it's important that students are driving it along. But it's realistic that every student council needs supportive committed adults working to support them. Start here: call a meeting to set down a timeline for getting the Student Council going.

Staff briefing meeting.

If staff are to support the process of appointing a new Student Council, and of its operation, they need to know what is happening and what is expected of them. Staff and/or students should address a staff meeting or prepare a hand-out.

Principal/Administration briefing meeting.

Similarly, keep the Principal and other key Administration members up-to-date with plans.

Class discussion.

Where possible: encourage, support, resource discussions in every class about the Student Council. These discussions should cover: why we have a Student Council, what it could do, what structure it has, what we expect from representatives, what the characteristics of a good representative are and so on.

Decide on and publicise the Student Council structure (it might be different this year from the past; it might adapt to school changes).

Everyone needs to be clear about how students join the Council, what they are joining (and what its powers and responsibilities are), different levels and areas within the Council, such as:

- a year level or sub-school forum;
- a whole-school Student Council (coordinating/executive);
- Student Council Working Groups, sub-committees, action teams etc
- other appropriate structures

Decide on and publicise how people get to be on the Student Council.

Students might volunteer, or be nominated and selected, or be elected from home groups, class groups or in other ways.

Call publicly for nominees/volunteers.

This launches the process of forming the Student Council. Everyone needs to know what's happening and have a chance to be involved. The form of this invitation depends on the structure and process you've adopted - people might nominate or volunteer themselves, or they may require others to nominate them.

Set up opportunities for students to give reasons for their selection.

Students should want to be on a Student Council for some reasons. There should be opportunities for them to publicly state these reasons - in talks, in writing, on posters, in conversations. Be careful that these opportunities do not exclude some students - those with lower literacy levels, those who are less confident in public speaking etc. The 'best' students (in traditional terms) may not be the best representatives.
Provide chances for new students to the school (eg years 7 or 8).

These students may not know each other, or know who might be a good representative. Introductory school processes should assist them to meet each other, and aid the selection process. Perhaps an 'interim' representative is appointed for a few months.

Celebrate at the first meeting.

Have lunch together. Welcome, congratulate, thank, challenge all members.

Hold the first meetings.

Important tasks to include are:

1. Check the structure:
   - Does everyone understand it? Is everyone happy to continue with it?
2. Set the meeting timetable:
   - When? Where? How will reminders happen? Is this OK with everyone?
3. Set the objectives for the year:
   - What does the Student Council want to achieve? This might take more time to discuss, so...

Hold the election or interviews or ....

From each group as decided, appoint representatives and deputies. Having all teachers involved in assisting this process can also get them involved in understanding and supporting the Student Council.

Carry business over from last year.

Look at any business still unfinished from last year’s Student Council work. You should also have a statement from last year about finances that the Student Council was left with - so you know where you can start. Bring this information to the first meeting.

Organise a Planning/Training Day.

The Student Council will need time to meet each other, get training for their tasks, and plan what they want to do, and how they will do it. Such a day might include reviewing the Council structure (sub-groups etc), appointing an executive, brainstorming possibilities, drawing up plans, setting timelines, allocating responsibilities... This could be one day, or a three-day camp. Try to have it away from the school to avoid distractions.

Advertise the first meetings.

These meetings need to be advertised widely. Personal congratulations and invitations to all representatives makes them feel special and also lets them know when and where meetings are held. Send all representatives information on the structure, powers, operations and responsibilities of the Student Council - and of individual members. Give them the constitution.

Have a 'hand over' event.

Last year’s Student Council congratulates the incoming Student Councils and tells them what they learnt - how they should have done things.

Appoint students to important positions.

You will need to think about chairing meetings, keeping records of what happens, writing letters, looking after funds, publicising, liaising with various people (including the Principal!), networking with other schools...

Appoint bank account signatories.

These may need to be changed over from last year so that current students from the Council control its funds.

Get a space.

The Student Council needs a home - a small room, or at least a filing cabinet. Get a noticeboard set aside for the Student Council. Get a mailbox in the front office.

Review and Reflect.

Build time into meetings to check how the larger things (structures, processes etc) are going.

Roger Holdsworth (with thanks also to Charles Kirgoz)
Starting from Scratch

Not had a Student Council before? There’s no neat recipe for establishing a Council - so much depends on the size, nature, structure, culture of your school. And the way you set it up depends on what you see it doing, who is interested to be included, and any past history. But here are some general ideas for teachers and students. You should read these in conjunction with the general article on Getting the Student Council Going in 2001.

You’re going to have to make some decisions ... after talking with others.

Why?
- Why do you think the school should have a Student Council? What could it do?
- Whose idea is it? (What’s in it for you/ them?)
- What scope is there for setting up a Student Council? What restrictions?

You’ll need to get the reasons worked out in order to convince other people and answer their concerns.

What do students think?
Consult with students across the school. Do they want a Student Council? What’s their idea of what a Council might look like or do? You might find that reasons and ideas are often a mixture. There might also be a history of Student Councils in the school which affect some views - for example, if there’s been a mixed history of inactive or ineffective Councils or one that was ignored, students might be cynical about any attempt to start again. But you’ll need an enthusiastic group of students if you are to proceed.

What support is there?
Talk with the Principal and other members of the Administration, with (other) teachers, with parents and their committees and with the School Council. How much support and cooperation can the Student Council expect from these groups? What support do you want? It will be much easier to develop the Student Council with their support - very difficult with their opposition, or if you ignore them! Don’t try to do it alone! What happens when you leave or when you get exhausted? Find support!

A Starting Group
OK - you’ve identified an enthusiastic group of students, who have some similar ideas of what a Student Council could look like and what it could do. Build on this group and this enthusiasm - but they’ll want to see action soon. They’ll also be the group to collate opinions and ideas, make decisions about a structure, and set it in motion ... and eventually they’ll have to seek approval, or a mandate, or even election from students generally.

Get Away
You’ll need time for these decisions to be made. If possible take a day - away from the school’s distractions - to argue, discuss, plan and decide. Have objectives for this day: eg by the end of the day, to have the basics of a constitution drafted or a description of how the Student Council will work; and to have timelines prepared to set up the Council.

Name
What do you all want to call the organisation? Examples in the past have been Student Council, Student Representative Council, Student Forum, Parliament, Student Leadership Council, Student Voice, Junior School Council (What’s in a name?) These names can represent what you see the group doing or how it is formed or how it is structured. But these names also exist in a context of past structures and a new name might be chosen to represent a new start.

Connections
In thinking about the structure, how do you see the Council linking with:
- classes and grade meetings;
- overall school decision making;
- other student structures (houses, teams, pastoral care);
- curriculum programs in the school (Civics and Citizenship Education, Youth Development Programs, Student Action Teams).

Most importantly here, how will decisions of the Student Council be heard within and influence the whole school? Will it have representatives on the School Council and its sub-committees, and on other working bodies in the school?

Discussion within classes
Ask every class in the school to talk about the role of a Student Council in some way. This might involve members of the Starting Group briefing staff at a staff meeting, then visiting all classes to talk and answer questions. It could be part of the school’s Civics and Citizenship curriculum: “Why do we have representative groups?”, “How do they work?”, “Are there other ways?” The aim is to get a broad understanding of the nature and possibility for a Student Council, but - more importantly - to increase the understanding of how everyone, every day, can be part of the decision making in the school. It could also lead to discussion about the qualities of a representative, and why some people could be elected - in order to get away from student elections as ‘popularity contests’.

Structure
Decide with the Starting Group on a Student Council structure appropriate to your school. Four possible dimensions to consider are:
- membership: volunteers?; elected (eg two per class)?; multiple roles (many committees)?; etc
- levels: a single whole-school Student Council?; year level forums and an executive?; inter-level working committees coordinated by an executive?; etc
- size: a small activist group?; a large forum?; many separate smaller groups?; etc
- when: meeting during class time?; at lunchtime?; as a class?; etc

Training
Once the Student Council is in place, you will need to set time aside for training and planning. Several short sessions, or a longer time might be appropriate. Some Councils immediately go away on a 2-3 day camp to get to know each other, to understand their responsibilities, and to plan their objectives and actions. It’s valuable for such an activity to be away from the school.

Network
Search out other Student Councils eg in your region. What are they doing? How can they help you? Perhaps even think about organising some joint activities and shared training.

Roger Holdsworth
(with thanks to Erica McCalman and Charles Kingston)
Many of the issues discussed in the other articles in this section also apply to Primary Schools - so read and adapt those suggestions to your situation. But there are some particular issues that need to be considered in establishing or re-starting a primary school Student Council (or Junior School Council).

- **Teacher responsibility**
  While students will be very enthusiastic about forming a Student Council, and may have considerable knowledge about what to do and how it can be done, primary school Student Councils generally need more support from staff and other adults than is the case in secondary schools. The support teacher, however, needs even more sensitivity about when and how to 'step back' and let students run the Council, make mistakes, solve problems, and own solutions.

- **Who has time and responsibility?**
  Because of the relationship between teachers and students, and because of the large classroom-based teaching commitment, it is particularly important to think about who has time to support and 'drive' the Student Council. As well as needing someone with the appropriate personal characteristics and commitment to student participation, the location of the teacher within the school is critical. How will any time released be managed? Several schools have located such support with a Deputy Principal, or have arranged that two or three teachers share the role.

- **Involve last year's Council**
  Students who have 'done it' are a valuable resource to advise new Student Council members. You can set up formal 'buddying' arrangements both within the Council and to involve ex-members in a new role.

- **Staff briefings**
  Because the role of the grade teacher is so critical in supporting representatives and in making sure that the Student Council approach connects with other curriculum initiatives, make sure that staff are fully briefed at a staff meeting. Set aside time there, or at a curriculum day, to discuss the whole school's approach to 'representation', 'decision making', 'democracy' and so on. These issues are very naturally part of discussions about the school's Civics and Citizenship curriculum program - see below.

- **Class meetings**
  The basis of the Student Council is in the classroom - and it should connect with ways of teaching in each grade. Do teachers hold classroom meetings to discuss the work of the grade? Are important decisions made here? How can such meetings link with that grade's representation on a Student Council? It might be valuable to provide reading material to teachers, or to hold a professional development activity around these approaches - the Parliamentary Education Office in Canberra has booklets and videos discussing various examples and ideas here.

  The Civics and Citizenship curriculum in the classroom in primary schools could (and should, and perhaps even must) cover rules and the need for them, how decisions are made in small groups (families etc), how decisions are made in larger groups (representatives) - and these issues can be linked to the role of the Student Council both in the school, and in its community.

  Within this, grades can discuss the characteristics and requirements of a good representative, as well as processes for reporting back and to enable participation by all in decisions.

- **Structural issues**
  The smaller size of many primary schools has implications for the size and structure of Student Councils. Many of these Councils are smaller, working bodies, where students can feel empowered to cooperate and work as a group, rather than have to deal with the organisational issues of 'class sized' bodies.

  But there are other critical questions that emerge here:

- For how long should students be appointed?
  Some schools believe that there should be a regular 'turn-over' of representatives (eg once a term), to give more students experience in these roles. Others feel that continuity and understanding at a greater depth require whole-year appointments.

- **What levels?**
  Some schools specify Student Council membership for seniors (eg grade 5 or 6) students, with some 'representative' younger grades; others defer membership from across the whole school.

- **When to meet?**
  The issues are similar to those in secondary schools - there are dilemmas both with meeting during class-time (often more of an issue for teachers), or at lunch-time (more of an issue for students).

- **Appointment**
  Once decisions have been made about structures and membership, students can be invited to apply or be nominated. Some schools do this very formally, insisting on formal nominations and then having speeches and elections; others invite students to self-nominate and then talk more casually with their grades; others set up staff-student interview panels. In any case, students should be considered who they want to be on the Council, and why they want to achieve.

- **Training and Networking**
  Opportunities to share information with other Student Councils are invaluable. You can, build the same training opportunities into your new Student Council as those outlined in the other articles, but also contact other nearby primary schools (and secondary schools) to see if they would be interested in sharing approaches, training and advice.

For more detail on many of these issues, see the booklet written by teachers from the Gresswell Cluster in Melbourne's northern suburbs: *Democracy Starts Here: JSCs at Work - available through Connect.*

Roger Holdsworth
Networks of Children's Participation in Brazil

In July of 2000, Brazil commemorated the tenth anniversary of the Statute on the Child and Adolescent. Brazil is one of the few countries in the world to have introduced such an all-encompassing legal instrument designed to protect all rights of children and adolescents. Partly as a result of the Statute and partly due to dramatic social changes over the past 15 years, much discussion about children's rights has taken place at all levels of government and civil society. One result has been the development over the past decade of projects aimed not only at providing basic services for children, but at working to ensure that all rights of children are fulfilled, including the rights to information and to participate in decisions affecting their own lives. While many countries give a token acknowledgement to child and youth participation, Brazil is home to dozens of projects whose major players are children and adolescents.

Dozens of Communication Projects

One example is the "Fundação Casa Grande", or "Big House Foundation", located in the city of Nova Olinda in the north Brazilian state of Ceará, 584 long, arduous kilometres from the capital city of Fortaleza. Working in a renovated old house, children of all ages at one time, a few as young as three years old (!), produce videos, newsletters, magazines and radio programs for children and youth. "Casa Grande" has established a "communication school" for children, helping youngsters to become active in their families and communities. Among the products of "Casa Grande" are a bi-weekly newsletter called Youth Awakening, a daily radio program, and special programs for television. Children and youth are also educated in local and Brazilian history and culture.

Far to the west of Nova Olinda, another group of children work in the Amazonian city of Manaus in a project called "Uga-Uga". Youth from the outskirts of Manaus participate in workshops and debates on education, sexuality, family, employment and other issues of interest to themselves. They produce a newsletter distributed to 15,000 students in the public schools in Amazonia. The experience of the late 1990's was so enriching that "Uga-Uga" became a news agency run by young people themselves, with the support of local journalists. "Uga-Uga" is a member of the national network coordinated by ANDI, the National News Agency for Children's Rights – one of the few such agencies in the world that concentrates on generating and improving the coverage of children's and adolescents' issues in the mass media.

Between Amazônia and Ceará is the northern state of Maranhão, where adolescents are the target audience for a twice weekly 45-minute radio program on their rights. Further to the south, in the large state of Bahia, whose population is largely of African descent, the organisation Cipó involves adolescents in its education and information activities, which include workshops and debates on children's issues.

In Brasilia, the capital city of Brazil, a group of 150 adolescents in the public school system participate in a 'Radical Group' network that organises extra-curricular activities such as chess, producing a school bulletin, photography, environment, story-telling in schools and hospitals, and prevention of drug abuse.

International Cooperation and Further Progress

Through one of the coincidences that UNICEF’s international character brings to all its activities, the "Casa Grande" network in Nova Olinda is working with a group of youth in the northern Mozambican city of Quelimane. The Communication Officer of UNICEF’s Fortaleza office was transferred to Maputo, Mozambique, where he immediately began establishing links between the "Casa Grande" group of children and youth and a group of youth in Zambezia province far north of Maputo. The first subject youth chose to address in the two countries was AIDS.

With a total Brazilian population of 168 million, of whom 60 million (36%) are children under 18, and about 25 million between 12 and 17 years old, projects with children and adolescents as key players in developing and implementing activities are still too few. Great progress is being made, however, through this immense country.

Paula Claycomb
Senior Communication Officer
UNICEF Brazil, Brazilia, Brazil
E-mail: PClaycomb@unicef.org.br

from: News from ICCVOS (UNESCO International Clearinghouse on Children and Violence on the Screen), Vol 4 No 2, 2000; Nordicom, Göteborg, Sweden
Challenges for Young People: Problems for Us All

Extracts from an ISRC 2000 presentation by The Honourable Emeritus Professor Peter Baume AO
(Chancellor, The Australian National University; Honorary Research Associate, Social Policy Research Centre, The University of New South Wales)

There is a mass of problems facing everyone. They face young people - certainly. But they face older people as well.

To cope well with those problems, to teach others how to cope, makes heroes. Mostly unsung heroes - but heroes nevertheless. Just to cope with problems successfully! Ordinary people. People we know and generally like. To hold jobs, to have successful families, to live happy lives.

And each of them was a school student once. It is during school times that some of the problems first come to notice and most of us form some views about the issues early... Some are more important than others. It is important that those of us facing problems can work out which ones have which importance, and it is important that any of us teaching have a clear idea of just how much we can achieve - even when problems seem great.

First, there are the immediate problems that we all have to face. Things like what job, what career, what trade or profession, where to live, which house, which partner. Many of the decisions we take about what will be our life trajectory are in this category.

Second, there are deeper problems which go to making us relevant in a different and changing century.

Third, there is yet another, still deeper, set of issues. They address who we are, how we wish to be thought of and how we wish to present ourselves.

First, there are immediate problems... Some teachers I know give up and decide that these problems are just too great to be solved. They teach their students only how to cope with defeat, how to cope with unemployment, how to cope with homelessness, how to cope with friendlessness...

This century coming... is frightening and demanding. But it is not impossible. We can succeed personally in such a world and we can do so more easily with the help of those who teach us. Never forget that in our new world, we are part of the minority with a well developed system of education, with widespread literacy, and with opportunities to learn new things as they are presented. We are so fortunate in all this.

... Education and training... both increase choices available to any individual when otherwise there are fewer and diminishing choices. So the main advantage of doing well in school, or going right the way through school, is that one gains more choices about what one will do when school ends...

... But there is a second layer of problems that should be set out and thought about. You might like to consider the question: "what can we do now to provide for the next generation the best chance of succeeding?"...

There is less point raiiling against the new world order and globalisation than there is in trying to make it work for our benefit. And this is one message we must disseminate and share - and school is where that sharing and that transmission should start...

... If looking ahead is your thing; you may care to return to some of the science fiction of the last thirty years. Most of the things that are discussed in those stories have happened - although they seemed extraordinary at the time. So read today's science fiction - it is likely to be the reality within thirty years.

There has been a lot of world interest in networking such as is possible with the Internet... What is desirable is that we take maximum benefit from the Internet revolution and that we combine it somehow with the educational process that is done well by many teachers today. Let us not seek to have one without the other. Let us not throw the baby out with the bath-water.

The other great problem that will define our future as a country: be the extent to which we embrace research and invest in research development and innovation. That is why the responses to the Batterham and Miles reports - the reports of the Chief Scientist and of the Innovation Summit - are so important for Australia...

But there is yet another layer of problems. It goes to how we define ourselves, about how we see ourselves. The issues in this third layer are important but they are more symbolic.

We might ask how we see ourselves politically - as part of monarchy or as an independent country... That issue will return in time. We shall vote again.

But another issue comes in our willingness to confront our past. That too defines something of who we are and what we stand for. It concerns reconciliation. How we wish to reconcile present day Australia with bloody and awful past... Our young deserve to inherit and take over a land in which that issue is still not clouding horizons. They deserve a land with a...
PASTA NEWSLETTER
# 21 - February 2001

PASTA is the acronym of the Professional Association of Student Representative Council Teacher/Advisors. Founded in New South Wales, Australia, in February 1995, our Association exists to support in whatever ways possible those who work with and support programs of student participation, representation and leadership.

SEE OUR MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION AND APPLICATION FORM IN THIS ISSUE

PASS THE PASTA

The run up to the fourth Annual General Meeting of PASTA, set down for Saturday 31st March, 2001, is a good time to reflect on five years of student representation, participation and leadership activities in Australia and on what has been achieved. Implementation of the vision of the 1980s, beginning with the formation of PASTA itself in 1995, successful participation in VASPAC IV and V, three overseas tours linking student leadership networks in the USA and Canada and, in 2000, the 1st International Student Representative Conference (ISRC 2000) held in Sydney as the inaugural Olympiad of Citizenship and Representation for a truly international student representative council - have all been achieved.

The willingness of the North American student leadership networks to share more than 60 years of experience with us, has been a rich and rewarding experience, and guaranteed the success of ISRC 2000. Representatives from five states of Australia, Germany, Thailand, Slovenia, the USA and Canada - including Akwesasne of the Mohawk Nation, 257 delegates in all, met together from 13-17 December 2000 to discuss and debate youth issues and to formulate recommendations that could be implemented locally, nationally or globally through UNICEF. The recommendations, to be published later, will form the basis of an ongoing dialogue between student representatives everywhere.

Changes in the school curriculum have been taking place during 2000 through (in NSW for example) the trialling of Civics and Citizenship curriculum in years 6, 10 and 12. Along with this critical recognition of the need to educate young people in the forms of government, the history of, as well as the roles and responsibilities of representatives, comes the practical knowledge of how government works so that all sections of the community can participate in meaningful and cooperative ways. Student Representative Councils can be a useful vehicle for obtaining some practical experience. So PASTA’s focus this year, the first of the new millennium, will be to support and build up Teacher Advisers in schools who are working at the grass roots of the student representative movement, and to seek their collective vision for the 21st century.

Jeanne Bow
PASTA President

FOR MEMBERSHIP AND SUPPORT DETAILS - SEE BACK PAGE OF THIS NEWSLETTER

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT THE FOLLOWING:

- PASTA Memberships and Professional Development Activities: bowtech@ozemail.com.au
- OVERSEAS TOURS (for advisers and students): suepage@ozemail.com.au
- CSC AWARDS (Community Service Certificate Program): RalphMurray@bigpond.com.au
- ISRC, International Linkages and Projects and Website: ckingston@interact.net.au
- COUNTRY SCHOOLS: teegeetoo@yahoo.com

http://www.hsc.csu.edu.au/pta/pasta/

February 2001
FOCUSING ON TEACHER/ADVISER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The many workshops, well-stocked resource rooms and networking contacts available at the recent ISRC 2000 Conference organised by our Association provided an ideal professional development setting for new and experienced SRG Advisers alike.

The final program reveals many offerings which clearly were of as much (if not more) interest and relevance to advisers' training, development and resource needs than to those of the students.

- "Being Reflective Through Systematic Inquiry and Writing"/"Challenging Ourselves"
- "Campaign for Respect" - character education/ "Young People As Global Citizens"
- "Corporatism and Democracy"/"A National Forum on Education"
- "Year Level Management Groups in an R-12 School" (SA)/"Youth City Council"
- "Winning Projects"/"Leadership 101"/ "School Symposiums" (all Canadian projects)

Each of the above will be outlined in this year's upcoming issues. With only two exceptions, they were all presentations by practicing professional teacher colleagues.

Roger Holdsworth's incisive and laterally ranging curriculum ideas are already well-documented in Connect. His twin ISRC workshops - "Negotiating Curriculum for real, for ALL students" and "Student Councils meeting real challenges in primary schools" revealed nothing new to many of us except that curriculum negotiation and real participation in decision-making are, sadly, still new to many of our colleagues and schools.

In a different setting, Advisor Lyndal Ezra from South Australia and Roger found time to discuss some historical information about state structure and national networking. This too came as new to the NSW students present, "who indicated that they hadn't realised that such a substantive history existed! Do we continue to forget the past to reinvent the wheel?"

So when and where is that negotiation that participation and that history to be done? Here a taste of something still "so rare" in Australia - one highly successful overseas program. Kathy Collin's popular workshops at ISRC 2000 examined its purposes, structure and outcomes of her accredited timetabled Leadership Classes. The program Pennsylvania's Model Curriculum for Leadersh Class. The full booklet is available on request.

LEADERSHIP CLASS LESSONS

Courtesy of Kathy Coll, Activity Director and Student Council Advisor, North Allegheny Intermediate School and Assistant Executive Director, Pennsylvania Association of Student Councils

Leadership Development 1 Class - Course Content

Both this and the more advanced course result in a letter grade and 1/2 elective credit in English. While linked to school activity programs, detailed class requirements also apply.

1. PERSONAL SKILLS: an opportunity for you to learn your strengths and weaknesses as a leader and to be able to share your ideas and beliefs in many topics.

2. GOAL AND OBJECTIVES: explore the roles that setting and achieving goals play in your life and in the groups you belong to and learn how to be a goal writer.

3. PROJECT PLANNING: learn the 12 steps necessary for planning a project, the barriers involved and how to overcome and actually be involved in planning a project

4. LEADERSHIP STYLES, QUALITIES AND THEORIES: discover your leadership style and when it is effective, investigate the differences between bosses and leaders and apply the theories of modern leadership to groups you work in

5. PUBLIC SPEAKING AND PRESENTATIONS: experience new methods to enhance your speaking skills and the steps involved in preparing a major presentation on a leadership topic of your choice

6. TIME MANAGEMENT: investigate your personal time clock and try new methods to make time work for you, instead of your working for time

Leadership Development 2 Class - Course Goals

1. To provide student leaders with opportunities to examine management skills.

2. To provide practice in decision making and problem solving in projects in school and community.

3. To provide opportunities to become followers, facilitators and evaluators.

4. To provide opportunities to learn organisational and meeting skills.

5. To use the school / community as a basis for actual application of all new skills.

**COUSE CONTENT:**

Motivation: Personal and Group ... Group Dynamics - Team Building ... Meeting Skills ... Committee Structure and Management ... Parliamentary Procedure ... Creative Decision Making ... Conflict Resolution

A FINAL FEBRUARY THOUGHT FOR US DOWN UNDER

Lest some of our Aussie colleagues are tempted to reject this curriculum project as 'too American', listen a moment to the Canadian President of CASAA, Gane Olsen, who wrote after ISRC 2000: "I would hope we can work past diversity and focus on the similarities.... The solutions are important to all and, as we work side by side, I believe we will come to realize that we are much more alike than we think. The differences are too obvious and sometimes too overwhelming to see beyond. But I believe that men and women of vision will soon realize that our future societal successes will be a direct result of celebrating similarities to solve common problems diverse."
First International Student Representative Conference

THE COUNTDOWN IS OVER

THE INTERNATIONAL ROCKET IS LAUNCHED

Media Coverage

A Media Workshop involving ten interested student delegates on Day 2 began the process of composing those difficult but very important 'media statements'. This first one, from USA student delegate Emily Moss and colleague Graeme Webb from Canada is a start.

Also in this report is a shortened version of a longer e-mailed response to requests from organisers for information from those unable to attend. Since "The Media" presence to report on this positive and largely successful event was conspicuously absent (see relevant Recommendations), Emily, Graeme and all the rest of us present, recommend you move on from these starting points. Do your own press releases. Now!

YOUTH TAKE A STAND AT AN INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

Hundreds of high school students from across the world are joining hands to shape their future. Representatives from several countries and states of Australia recently gathered for the 1st ever International Student Representative Conference in Sydney Australia.

For five days, students attended numerous workshops and lectures focusing on such issues as cultural diversity, the environment and problems facing today’s youth.

The projected goal of this International Conference was to have the students formulate a list of recommendations to present to UNICEF and later to the United Nations. These recommendations were a collaborative effort from many different parts of the world, as voiced and debated by the delegates present as representatives of others.

The theme of this first 'ISRC' was Building A Better Today. These students realise their impact on the lives of others and are taking a stand to do something now. These conferences were originally proposed to continue every four years in the country hosting the Summer Olympic Games. The success of this Sydney Conference has motivated delegates to suggest they occur now every two years wherever a group is able and willing to host them.

Emily Moss (USA) and Graeme Webb (Canada)

Student Delegates

February 2001
EVALUATIONS HELP GUIDE FUTURE ACTION

Evaluations of such events occur even as they are being planned. As people experience the event they make their own informal personal assessments. Once home, communication with others elicits new perspectives and periodic revisits of what occurred and how it impacted on their and others’ lives. Some of this gets back to the organisers, some not.

What is presented here is a selection of comments from the short evaluations and e-mailed messages after the Conference. A full Conference report to be published later this year will include more detailed accounts. Contact PASTA if you would like a copy of that.

A Reflection from The Editor of this final Bulletin (and all the previous ones as well):

Evolving. Exhausting. Exhilarating. At the end, empty. Apart from e-mails, personal communications so eager and enlightening reduced to mixed memories. For me, a golden treasure house of gifts: Aussie colleagues overwhelmed by delicious Thai smiles, scenic Canadian invitations, Slovenian assurances, the Mohawk flag a reminder that we are all part of a family of life.

And then, from my own native country, as in all good plans, thoughtfulness and innovation matched with exceptional timing. Fully successful or only a start, it’s what you all do with the idea from now on which will determine if this dream has wider meaning - in my adopted country as in those we have all yet to engage.

For the special honour and privilege of having all of you work with us at ISRC 2000, please accept our very special thanks. As current and future leaders who, like us, have ‘been there’ and ‘done that’ we invite you to adopt our very apt (if borrowed) credo:

“We the willing led by the unknowing are doing the impossible for the ungrateful. We have done so much for so long with so little we are now qualified to do anything with nothing!”

Charles Kingston
(PASTA VP - International, Bathurst NSW)

Unsolicited e-mailed comments from various climes and ages:

• “The amount of time PASTA members have put in is amazing! The dedication you have all shown is remarkable and I would like to thank you personally. I definitely will be renewing my PASTA membership in June and hope I stay involved with the organisation for years to come.” Lauren Meakin (2000 Tour Delegate, Davidson NSW)

• “It’s only about 20°F and it is cold here and we have snow. I’m so glad that my memories of Sydney and IS80 2000 are so much warmer, just the best.” Kathy Coll (Advisory, Pennsylvania)

• “Best wishes for MMI and for continued success in developing strong student leaders in Oz!” David Cord (Associate Director, Department of Student Activities & the National Association of Secondary School Principals, USA)

• “I want to thank you for helping me when I was in Australia. I really appreciate your kindness.” Dollah Tativivavavat (TFCE, Thailand - one of the IGs)

• “I really enjoyed it though I had little time to explore Sydney. It was my first time there. It’s very interesting and hopeful I’ll be back some day... After ISRC, I attended the conference in Bangkok about UNESCO - MANIFESTO 2000 International Year for the Culture of Peace.” Jansiriyo Supaporn (Adviser, Thailand)

• “I had originally planned structured activities, but due to the small size I eliminated some of them and had an informal discussion instead. The students there were very receptive. I think the small size was actually a blessing because I encouraged free discussion.” Mary Naam (USA, student)

• “I thoroughly enjoyed it. Had a wonderful time running the workshops. It’s really energizing hanging out with so many young inspirational people. Overall, the students were responsible and eager to learn. Thank you again for giving me this opportunity to represent World Vision, and contribute to your conference in this way. I just hope the students enjoyed it as much as I did.” Sarah Dunbar (World Vision)

• “... getting all the great ideas from ISRC to take back to my SRC and District. I thank you for the great conference. The motivation that we all have now is amazing. I still have the vacant spot were my American and Canadian friends aren’t around.” Claire Kensit (IG and 2000 Tour Delegate, Crookwell, NSW)

From Student and Adviser Written Evaluations (Anonymous)

• “The Conference turned out far different than I expected; I would seeing as how it was more focused on ways we could change the world. It was based on a much larger scale than I expected and was actually more useful and meaningful than I had suspected.”

• “I have never been so proud to be Canadian. I am honoured to represent my country. I have made many lifelong friends with my fellow Canadians. Thanks for providing me with such fantastic memories.”

• “We helped show the rest of the world what a great country we really are”

• International/Cultural Interaction/People sharing and ideas sharing (nearly all said these)

• “Watching students do what they do best”...
“Full impact of realising that such organisations exist and are networking and connecting progressively.”
“Study the problems in each country - then choose the ones to work on and help solve the problems together.”
“More time needed for: warm fuzzy writing time, nap time, nightly tranquillity.”
“Do what NASC does. They’ve been doing it for a long time.”
THANKS FOR THE DREAM (heaps said this in various ways)
“The first is always the most difficult.”
“Am sure it was challenging but you have got something great started... We can only grow bigger and better.”
“Have never met people quite like the people here. Wish my friends at home were like you.”
“Hope you were inspired to go back and make a positive difference within your community and country.”
“We’ve a lot to learn about ourselves and more importantly about the rest of the world.”
“OH, CAN I GO HOME WITH YOU!”
“You guys are so special to me. You all show your commitment and support to me and the SRC at all times.” (directed to those back home who sent their representative)
“To the ghostly future constituency of people who fully understand and can handle constructively the difference and interest conflict between democracy and corporatism: HANG IN, Go and Be Prepared to fight the battle for democracy.”
“Thank you for believing in me. This was a great opportunity because I always knew there was more out there. It was just a matter of finding it. Now I have seen it and can’t wait to get started.” (this and the following two directed to Advisers)
“Watch out! There will be change.”
“I now have better skills than you do!”

ACTION BEYOND ISRC 2000

ISRC 2000 is not just a talk-fest! Sure we’re a bunch of student representatives from around the world who have come to Australia to discuss issues affecting young people across the globe, but we’re much more than that.

ISRC 2000 is about action. We’re on about actually doing stuff about the problems and concerns we share and recognise that others face. We are aware that it is up to us to secure change in society. This doesn’t mean, however, that we are the only ones with this responsibility. National governments, non-governmental organisations, corporations and international bodies also have an obligation to transform the world - to rid it of injustice, poverty, inequality, war and intolerance. As student representatives we can play an important role in ensuring that these bodies live up to their obligations and that they take the views of young people seriously - not dismiss them as simply naïve. It is vital that we place pressure on these groups to remain accountable to the world’s citizens.

But, this lobbying function is only part of our role. We should also feel empowered to initiate activities on a local, school-based, state-wide, national or global scale to address our concerns. This involves not only starting up our own programmes but also includes participating in already established programmes and supporting existing organisations that are doing a great job or we think have loads of potential.

Here’s where the ACTION PROJECTS come in. Throughout the Conference, but particularly during the workshops, roundtables and Melting Pot sessions on Day 4 and especially during the Forum, think about ACTION PROJECTS you believe you and your fellow delegates should get involved in. They can be as small or ambitious as you like - from starting a letter writing campaign, to raising money for a non-government organisation, to donating computers to schools in poorer nations.

The ACTION PROJECTS are perhaps the most exciting aspect of ISRC 2000 in that they will ensure tangible outcomes from the Conference as well as allow for the work of the delegates to continue beyond the five days spent in Sydney. So, get thinking, and let one of the slogans of the student resistance during the French Revolution guide you: Be realistic, ask for the impossible.

Anna Samson
(ISRC Co-Convener - Programming)
1st International Student Representative Conference
Wednesday - Sunday 13-17 December 2000

Scenes and Faces
from ISRC 2000
CANADIAN RESOLUTIONS FOR THE UNITED NATIONS
(Based on but developed after the ISRC 2000 Sydney Conference)

NB: The Canadian original starts with a paragraph from the inside cover of the formal program acknowledging general support for ISRC 2000 and challenging others to continue. It then goes on:

"The following resolutions reflect a Canadian aspect on the resolutions created at the First International Student Representative Council Conference in Sydney.

Cultural Diversity

Be it resolved that the United Nations, its member nations and its agencies implement more extensive educational programs on cultural diversity that focus on understanding, acceptance, respect, and unity within the community.

Further to this:
- ISRC 2000 supports national education programs on diversity throughout schools;
- ISRC 2000 recommends that schools explore the use of non-traditional methods such as art, media and technology as a means of promoting better understanding of cultural diversity;
- ISRC 2000 recommends that all schools establish policies on discrimination, especially against indigenous peoples.

Challenges Facing Young People in the 21st Century

Be it resolved that the United Nations, its member nations and its agencies support the efforts made by youth to act as responsible citizens in voicing their concerns on various issues and bettering their communities on local, national and international levels.

Further to this:
- ISRC 2000 condemns all forms of violence;
- ISRC 2000 acknowledges the work done by volunteers as an essential community service;
- ISRC 2000 recommends that schools and community organizations recognize the positive achievements of young people.

Health

Be it resolved that the United Nations, its member nations and its agencies support the health and well-being of youth through offering relevant services and information at a local, national and international level.

Further to this:
- ISRC 2000 supports programs providing education for parents as well as students about adolescent illnesses, including eating disorders, run by schools and other organizations. These programs should aim to increase the awareness of the symptoms and prevalence of such illnesses and provide means of addressing the problems;
- ISRC 2000 supports services designed to assist young people with emotional and health problems;
- ISRC 2000 supports services aiming to help youth avoid and overcome substance use and abuse.

Conserving the Environment

Be it resolved that the United Nations, its member nations and its agencies promote the preservation and bettering of the environment within our community by:
- Reducing the consumption of natural resources and energy;
- Reusing those products that have a potential to fulfil a function;
- Recycling: the establishment and continuation of recycling programs within our community;
- Rejecting products and substances that pose a potential threat to the environment;
- Repairing those areas of the environment that have been damaged or harmed.

The Continuation of International Leadership

Be it resolved that the United Nations, its member nations and its agencies work together to create and support an international body for youth leadership in the spirit of the ISRC 2000 Conference."

- as developed by delegates from CASAA (Canadian Association of Student Activity Advisers) during January 2001 and submitted for consideration from its President, Gane Olsen (Edmonton, Alberta)
SPECIFIC IDEAS FOR ACTION

The Canadian Resolutions reflect most of the major general concerns of Conference participants. Many delegates, however, felt the need to be more specific.

The following are the topics or specific actions from some of the other numerous original recommendations coming out of the Melting Pot Process on Days 1 and 2. Delegates either brought these ideas with them to the Conference or developed them after attending and discussing various workshops. Each day, Programming Co-Chair Anna Samson organised lists of similar statements and these were circulated. These initial suggestions were then considered and refined by the Forum on Day 4. Both these and the final ones presented to UNICEF will be available in Conference papers to those who request them.

001 is International Year of the Volunteer. Delegates recognised this in the following ways.

Volunteers throughout the world:
An important form of community service... involvement of young people in volunteer activities... thanks to all these people...

ISRC/SRC Future Directions:
UN provide assistance in the development of student representative bodies in countries in which resources are limited and assist in forming an organisation of these councils at the national level... each nation hold an annual national student representative conference... ISRC conference held once every two years coinciding with the Winter and Summer Olympic Games... institute (this) as a forum to provide more opportunities for students with a variety of backgrounds to share problems and discuss solutions to these problems, because 'a problem shared is a problem halved'... vital that countries unable to physically attend should still be allowed to participate... new technology (eg tele-conferences and webcams) should be harnessed to assist... international governing committee consisting of a representative from each country responsible for the organisation of the next and future ISRCs... also function as an international student representative organisation... establishment of an executive director... younger students be encouraged to become involved in conference organisation as well as RC activities...

Schools:
Student groups to make their schools places where students feel involved and happy; support program to help students overcome a fear or dislike of the school environment... use restorative justice techniques to counter continued differences between individuals within the school environment... participation of schools in the development of the Amnesty International movement throughout the world and in schools...

The Media:
support work of young people, acknowledge their views and positive actions as a force for social change rather than a problem... disappointment in lack of positive media coverage of young people. Conferences and forums such as this should be advertised and more interest shown by newspapers and TV... an international magazine on student representation be established...

Global Issues:
global treaty to ban land mines be signed and implemented by ALL countries... UN promote public policies that seek to cancel the debt of Third World countries... supports balance of power of countries in the UN... increased communication between larger nations with smaller ones, to learn their concerns and desires instead of having the larger nations making decisions for these smaller nations... UN clarify standards of prosecution of juveniles as adults... creation and strengthening of existing laws to protect individuals against discrimination due to their sexual preference... UN to create a position of liaison for indigenous peoples to the UN ambassadors of their respective countries... non-violent protests as a form of reconciliation with indigenous peoples...

Health: community support of carers:
governments provide financial support for these carers... schools to fundraise and support Westmead Children's Hospital and similar children's health providers... use of visual aids to share with students the stories of sick children to help inspire them to financially assist organisations working in this area.
RECONCILIATION, OLYMPIC IDEALS AND CANDLELIGHTING HIGHLIGHT THE PLENARY SESSIONS

Like the Aboriginal spokespersons and dancers who opened ISRC 2000, the Mohawk Nation Delegation accepting their welcome and gift on behalf of the indigenous peoples of the rest of the world – made a huge impact on all delegates. Their Chief, Larry King, has allowed us to here extract parts of his inspirational address and to relay part of his more recent follow-up message.

His is only one example of the several insightful and inspiring young and older keynote speakers, performance Olympiad and social activities and other plenary events that brought everyone together. The touching and wonder filled Candlelight Ceremony conducted on the Friday evening by ‘Mr Phil’ Gugliuzza (of Louisiana and NASC fame) enabled everyone to personally embrace and share the message of peace and caring which Larry here encapsulates.

TO FUTURE LEADERS OF THE WORLD FROM AKWESASNE OF THE MOHAWK NATION

“We are Kahniakakehaka, meaning People of the Mohawk Nation. We are the Eastern Door Keepers of the Haudenosaunee, meaning the People of the Long House. Other members of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy include the Seneca, Cayuga, Tuscarora, Onondaga and Oneida Nations.

I bring warm greetings from those mentioned; as well, from all Indigenous Peoples of the North and the Great Turtle Island that is now called North America. We are deeply honoured to travel so far to be a part of this gathering and to partake and share in this prestigious event. We offer our sincerest gratitude to the organizers and all those who had a hand in making it possible for us to be here ...

... We believe in the Laws of Creation and that all life is bound by these same Natural Laws. We believe this to be the Essence of Life and that the human species is part of a Family of Life.

We are reminded that the Earth is our Mother. The animal and plant life are our brothers and sisters. The waters of the world are the bloodlines of Mother Earth. We, the human species, are the weakest members of this Family. We are the only ones that require clothes to keep us warm. We are the only ones who must make weapons to defend ourselves. To compensate us for this weakness, the Creator gave us an intelligence that is far superior to the rest of Creation.

However, with this gift, we were also given the greatest responsibility. We are the Caretakers of Life. We are the Guardians of Mother Earth ...

... It is our wish to expand on this experience and to motivate our youth and the whole idea of Youth Leadership in Akwesasne. A seed has indeed been planted and the best appreciation we can show would be to take Youth Leadership to new heights in our community as we eagerly await the next conference ... I offer our sincerest gratitude for the warm welcome and a humbling experience.”

Sken:nen/ In Peace

Chief Larry King

For further information and reports:
1st International Student Representative Conference
1 Gladstone Street, Bathurst NSW Australia 2795
Phone: (02) 6332 2603 Fax: (02) 6332 2302
E-mail: ckingston@interact.net.au http://www.hsc.csu.edu.au/pta/pasta/
YOU TELL US!


Whoever you are, tell us what you think is needed in this field.

With ISRC 2000 completed, our CSC Awards and Overseas Tours established:

- What do you think PASTA should be doing now?
- What are your most pressing needs in student activities? Civics and Citizenship Education? Leadership Curriculum? Colleague Support?
- What topics/speakers/processes should adviser seminars have?
- What marvellous successful (or not) projects have you undertaken?
- How can communication with you, your schools and systems be improved?
- Which student and adult citizens do you have deserving of CSC Awards?

How? See the 'How To Contact Us' page on our Website: http://hsc.csu.edu.au/pta/pasta/

OVERSEAS SRC LEADERSHIP TOURS

- For secondary school student representatives
- For teacher/advisers to leadership activity programs

PASTA has organised tours so far to student/adviser summer activities in the United States and Canada. International Representatives attend the NASC Annual Conferences in various parts of the USA and week-long summer leadership camps in various states or provinces. Host school visits are also a vital part of these four week tours. 2001 and future tours are now seeking both student and adviser applicants. The 69th NASC Conference will be in North Carolina in June 2001, Virginia in 2002 and Buffalo New York in 2003.

Check it out on our Website or contact Ken and Sue Page: <suepage@ozemail.com.au>

PASTA MEMBERSHIP

- Membership in PASTA means you/your school/your SRC or your business is taking on the responsibility of supporting the promotion and development of active citizenship education in Australia.
- By your membership, you enable SRC and other leadership activity advisers to distribute and create resources, programs, networks, professional development opportunities and leadership events.
- All members receive a subscription to Connect, discounts on PASTA organised events, access to national and international student council networks and resources unavailable elsewhere in Australia, and the very real opportunity to be involved in the future of SRCs and citizenship education and recognition now and in the future.
- School and other institutional members also receive a starter kit to enable them to carry out the CSC Awards Program for all their students or members.
- For the mere cost of one night’s dinner at a medium priced restaurant, you can do and have all this for a year. Concession rates available for student and retired members.

More info? Check out ‘How To Join’ page on our Website: http://hsc.csu.edu.au/pta/pasta/

CALENDAR OF UPCOMING AND ANNUAL EVENTS

- 31 March - PASTA Annual General Meeting - 11 am Professional Teachers Council Offices, cnr. Marion and Norton Sts, Leichhardt, Sydney. All current and new members welcome to attend or nominate themselves or others for all Committee positions. Committee Meeting follows AGM.
- March - November: PASTA will be organising two or more SRC Adviser Professional Development Conferences. Successful ‘Form One Lane’ one day teacher development activities continue through PASTA Victoria.
- Late June (annually) - NASC - National Association of Student Council (USA) Conference: 2001 - North Carolina; 2002 - Virginia
- July 2001 - Alberta, Canada SYLC (Summer Youth Leadership Camp) - a part of PASTA's annual Overseas Leadership Tours curriculum
- early August: NSW State SRC Conference, Vision Valley (contact the NSW Department of Education and Training for details)
- September (annually) - Canadian Student Leadership Conferences (CSLC) 2001 - in Nova Scotia (east coast); 2002 - in Saskatchewan (plains)
- October 2001 - International Youth Conference: Nepal (Tigertops - Chitwan) - Inter-Youth Coordination Council; contact: chauyen@col.com.np
- November (annually) - NASAA (National Association of Student Activity Advisers - USA) Conference: various locations throughout USA

The PASTA Newsletter is edited by Ken Page and distributed bi-monthly as a supplement to Connect magazine.
What does membership of PASTA offer you?

- Opportunities to be involved in discussions on the future of SCS at all levels
- Special resources for students and teachers
- Access to SC networks
- A support network for SC advertisers
- Training and development within the SC area
- Activities
- Access to NASC's Membership & Subscriptions
- Reduced registration fees at PASTA Conferences
- Regular newsletters and journals
- Educational workshops and conferences
- Positive support for SC advisors
- E-mail
- School/Business Address
- Home/Postal Address
- Family/Spouse's Name
- Given Names
- Title

North Head NSW 2263
G-12 Devon Drive, PASTA Inc.

Mail Subscriptions to

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Area of Particular Interest

NSW Department of School Education

Employee Authority

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PASTA Membership Form

For the year ending 30th June, 2001
This is especially true given the historical realities of American education. Our schools have historically been highly conservative institutions; our schools are among the most difficult social institutions to change; teaching is a deeply political endeavour; the culture of teaching is not friendly to risk-taking; and there is an endless list of taken-for-granted assumptions about what constitutes 'legitimate' schooling and teaching. Notions of 'valid' teaching are so pervasive in our society, that Marilyn Cochran-Smith (1991) refers to teachers who challenge these assumptions as working 'against the grain'.

As a past against-the-grain elementary schoolteacher passionately devoted to democratic classrooms (Wolk, 1998), I spent a good deal of my career making that swim upstream. There were times that I spent as much time defending my teaching as I did teaching. As a classroom teacher, I have faced resistance to democratic and critical pedagogy from every direction: school administration, parents, fellow teachers, society at large, the media, and my own students. Because of these experiences and because of the frustrations of my education students in wanting to create more child-centred, holistic, constructivist, and democratic classrooms, I've been asking myself what teachers who challenge the dominant factory-model paradigm of school can do to improve their chances of survival, deal with the culture of resistance, and increase their peace of mind. Here are some suggestions:

**Taking a Cue from Other Living Things, Teachers Who Work to Make Democratic Classrooms: A Reality Can Study Their Unique School Environment and Adapt to It.**

**Thinking Like Darwin**
There is an important message from Charles Darwin for teachers in democratic classrooms. In the biological world of natural selection, either species adapt to their environments or they perish. Taking a cue from other living things, teachers who work to make democratic classrooms a reality can study their unique school environment and adapt to it. This notion of teacher-adaptation could make compromise easier for teachers since it implies that compromise does not need to be sweeping conformity. Often a small, well-placed adaptation — such as a slight curve of a finch's beak — is actually a significant change that can make the difference between extinction and survival. In a sense, all the ideas in this article are intended to help teachers think like Darwin.

What this really means is that democratic teachers are going to have to compromise. Compromise for teachers who are passionate about their beliefs does not come easily. Good compromise is an art, requiring teachers to weigh a multitude of factors (personal, political, cultural, moral, practical) before making a decision. Compromise for some teachers can also be difficult because of ego. Perhaps the best democratic teachers are willing to let go of their ego for the good of the kids and the good of the larger causes of democracy, community, dignity and humanity. This means, at times, making deeply personal compromises, and giving up ideas or activities or specific content that is a critical part of who you are. The great Swedish film director Ingmar Bergman once said: "Sometimes you have to let your darlings go." His point is that sometimes he had to edit out scenes that he loved because they hurt the film as a whole. As hard as it may be, there are times when teachers in democratic classrooms must let their darlings go.
There is a Game of Schooling and as much as the practice of democratic teachers is often specifically in resistance to the game, to a certain degree, they must play the game. Teachers in democratic classrooms know the rules of the game all too well: text books and work books, report cards and grades, teacher lectures, forty-minute periods, silent classrooms, kids in their desks, seat work, testing, competition, ability-grouping, and on and on and on. These are some of the entrenched cultural assumptions of what makes school legitimate. If you don’t follow many (or all) of these rules, you can be accused of not doing ‘real school’ (Metz, 1989), ignoring the ‘basics’, and being soft. Playing the Game of Schooling does not mean conforming to all of these rules, but conforming to enough of the rules and expectations in your own context.

Teachers can also follow or ‘cover’ an expectation in a different way, and in a sense, reframe it. Most elementary schools, for example, require their teachers to teach spelling. But many progressive educators don’t believe in traditional methods of teaching spelling, with spelling workbooks and lists of twenty words and weekly spelling tests. But disliking this belief system of spelling doesn’t mean a teacher would have to stop spelling entirely, especially when there are a lot of people, such as principals and parents who usually expect some kind of spelling work. A teacher can still do spelling but do it differently, in a far more meaningful manner. Instead of using a textbook or workbook, you can have an individualised spelling program such as Nancy Atwell (1998) outlines. She requires her students to pick five spelling words a week from their own readings and writings that they’re having trouble spelling; they need to study those words for the week, and then they pair up in class at the end of the week to quiz each other on their five words. Atwell’s students maintain a weekly ‘word study’ sheet (their parents and principals can see) and a year-long ‘personal spelling list’ (that parents and principals can also see). Implementing a child-centred individualised spelling program is a compromise a teacher can make to play the Game of School, but do so in a more democratic way.

There are no rules about how to start a democratic classroom. For most teachers, it makes sense to start slowly. Again, this may not be easy. When I started to teach, there were ideas I wasn’t ready for; I needed more experience and I needed to do more reading and research. Even more, some of my students weren’t ready for them. Democratic teachers must remember that most of their students have had very traditional school experiences, so starting slow can help acclimatise kids to how a democratic classroom works. Of course, the way kids (and teachers) learn how to work in democratic classrooms is by actually doing and living democracy, so it’s not about waiting until your students first learn how to function in this kind of space, and then moving forward. We all learn together by living together. Starting slowly is about recognising the complexity and the newness of learning in a democratic environment for both the teacher and the kids. There’s nothing wrong with beginning a career or starting a school year at a time. With each new step, you and your students gain experience and confidence and community, and continually move forward and evolve.

This is also one of the most neglected – yet one of the most important aspects of a democratic classroom. It’s not enough for democratic teachers to do the ‘methods’ of a democratic classroom, such as writing and reading workshops, class meetings, authentic projects and activities, bringing critical and transformative perspectives into the classroom, practising constructivism, and so on. Again, most kids have very limited, if any, exposure to these ideas in their schooling. This means that, to be successful, democratic teachers need to help their kids learn how to be democratic students – or even better, how to be responsible and participatory members of caring and democratic communities, both in the classroom and out. As so many democratic classroom advocates, teachers need to make regular time to explore – to literally teach – these issues. The more students understand the purposes and the processes of a democratic classroom, the more peaceful and successful their classroom will be.

One of the best ways to do this is through class meetings, which I talk about in the following section.

Because most kids have had so little experience learning in democratic classrooms, behaviour and management can become a big concern. So many teachers are afraid to break away from traditional teaching practices in fear of losing control and having behaviour problems. The truth – and progressive educators must admit this – is that this can be a problem in democratic classrooms. My teaching has taught me that, the less experience kids have had (especially outside of school) to practise self-control and learning through intrinsic motivation and personal interest, the more difficult their reaction to a democratic classroom. Teachers need to take this into account, get to know the kids, and understand that they need this time and guidance in learning how – and why – to work inside a democratic classroom.

Helping kids become ‘good’ democratic students and citizens makes issues of behaviour and charisma a very real part of the curriculum. (After this I would say is true even if the class behaviour is perfect). There are endless ways of doing this: using literature as a picture book, exploring local and world events and issues (with a newspaper as an example), having class meetings on problems in the classroom and community, journal writing, drama and role play and looking at the traditional ‘centre-areas’ critically. Social studies and science, for example, are full of moral and ethical issues that children (and teachers) can explore and when we grapple with difficult and complex issues, we are ultimately exploring ourselves and our own behaviour and beliefs. Democratic behaviour is not just about going to watch every four years; it is equally about how we treat and care for others, and that what classroom behaviour is all about.

Class meetings were one of the central components of my own democratic classroom. Every day my students and I set our large rug in a circle and engage in open discussion and discussion also important ideas, questions, and even personal events. The topics we discussed came from our lives, our culture, our communities, the world, the newspaper and our personal interests. On some days we came up with a topic, but for many of our class meetings, the students chose the topic.

We also discussed issues on problems from our school and our classroom. Our class meetings were for our class to process – and learn about – how we were living as democratic classroom community. Students were abusing the supplies that put us in the class supply area, it would be discussed at a class meeting. If a student was going around during project time and not thinking of the common good of the class, we discussed that. Of course, much more was happening at these meetings than just some talk about one classroom in one school in one city. Ultimately, the discussions were about how we choose to live our lives, in school and out, and the kind of people we want to be at the end of the world we want to help create. Usually once a week, to add an extra dimension of thoughtfulness to our discussion, our class would write in our journals on something from the newspaper, and then share or discuss them (Proctor and Kantor, 1996).

Class meetings can help kids have ownership in their classroom, and that help everyone succeed.
FIND A FRIEND

When I started to teach, I was very fortunate to have had another new teacher, Aleta, right across the hall from me. We both taught sixth grade (along with three other teachers), and even more importantly, we both wanted to make our classrooms more democratic. This was not easy since we were at a school with a long history of traditional teaching. Aleta and I struggled in our teaching against the grain, at times feeling hostility from some of our colleagues. Having Aleta as a colleague and good friend made this much easier. As so often is the case in democratic classrooms, it was the small and fleeting day-to-day successes with my students that I cherished the most. This is the student learning that is so rarely honoured in schools, most adults, and the larger society. Having Aleta close by allowed both of us to share these successes, and celebrate them. But perhaps even more importantly, Aleta and I commiserated together, talking for hours about our frustrations with traditional educational thinking and expectations. Aleta and I aren’t worked together for years, but our conversations continue.

I suggest that democratic teachers seek out friendly support networks, whether it’s just one teacher or a group of teachers. It would be better if the friend was at the same school, but this doesn’t have to be the case.

Throughout my career in education, I’ve met other teachers who are passionate about democratic classrooms, and our many dinners and conversations have been invaluable to my work and life, giving me ideas, confidence, and peace of mind. There are times when what a democratic teacher needs most is a connection with another person who understands and believes in what they’re trying to do.

STUDY THE SCHOOL

Although there are many remarkable similarities between how schools work, every school is still a unique environment. That a teacher isn’t allowed to do in their classroom, in one school, they might be allowed to do in the school right around the corner. This is why I suggest that teachers, and especially new teachers, study their school in order to understand its uniqueness. The better you know your hool and its expectations, the more you will be able to, quite literally, get away with what you teach.

Schempp, Sparks and Templin (1993) talk about a school’s unique culture in its ‘cultural codes’. They write, ‘The hool culture composes the rules that define what is normal, acceptable, and grist in terms of acting and thinking the hool’ (page 461). The ‘rules’ at any particular school are its ‘cultural codes’. I recommend that teachers make a conscious effort to learn their school’s cultural codes. For example, when I first started to teach in a Chicago public school, I didn’t pick up that none of the teachers allowed their students to work on projects in the hallway, which was something I did all the time when I taught in the suburbs. But at my Chicago school, having kids work in the hallway wasn’t just allowed — it was not considered acceptable teaching — so when I did it, I heard about it (in an indirect way) from the principal who saw it as my class being unruly and out of control, even though my students were well-behaved and (usually) hard at work in the hallway.

The best way for teachers to learn the unique codes of their school is for them to seek them out themselves, primarily through paying close attention to what’s happening around the school with a heightened consciousness. Teachers can study what’s going in other classrooms, the hallways, the teachers’ lounge, faculty meetings, and what kind of student work is hung up and displayed. Teachers can also just ask certain colleagues (perhaps discreetly) whom they’ve grown to trust. Sometimes the easiest way for a teacher to get an idea if something they want to do in their classroom would be acceptable is to ask someone. There are other times, however, when the best course of action is to do what you want to do without asking anyone. Knowing which of these to do and when can be a slippery slope, and the better you understand your school and its overt and tacit rules, the better position you’ll be in to make a decision.

UNDERSTAND SOCIALIZATION AND INDUCTION

This is important both for new teachers and experienced teachers that are new to a school. When a teacher begins working at a school, a socialisation and induction process takes place. While the specifics of the process differ depending on the school, there are common elements, such as the new teacher ‘feeling’ his/her way around the school, trying to fit in, understanding the place, and getting to know people. A school’s dominant culture or ethos can have an overpowering effect on one’s professional practice, pulling teachers (especially new teachers) in certain directions, including directions a teacher does not want to go or simply does not believe in.

And as any seasoned teacher can explain, like any other workplace, schools also have an underground culture. Many schools have factions or cliques of teachers, often based on their teaching philosophies (or far worse, based on race, age, or gender). Where a new teacher fits into these groups (or ignores them) depends on many variables, including the teachers themselves and the overall school culture. New teachers should go into a school fully conscious of the induction and socialisation process, with the understanding that the existing school culture can be a powerful influence — both good and bad — on one’s teaching.

BE ABLE TO SUPPORT WHAT YOU DO

I don’t believe teachers should do anything in their classrooms that they can’t support and defend. Let’s say that, as part of a democratic classroom, you want to have project-based teaching, where your kids are involved in many long-term integrated projects. You have to imagine a parent, a principal, a school board member, a superintendent, or a local newspaper reporter, walking into your classroom and asking you, "Why are you teaching like this?" That’s a perfectly legitimate question. Part of the job of a teacher, and especially a teacher who challenges many of the dominant institutional and social beliefs, is being able to answer simple questions like this. This means not just being a teacher, but being a learner, which should not be a surprise for democratic teachers since that idea is central to a democratic classroom being a true learning community.

Specifically though, this would mean teachers being well-versed in some of the research, literature, and history of their own educational philosophies, as well as those they do not believe in. It also means staying informed of new (and old) ideas, reading professional books and journals, attending workshops and conferences, being critically reflective of their own practice, and perhaps even conducting some of their own action research. Susan and Stephen Ichudi (1993) call this "articulating your philosophy..." An articulated philosophy allows you to provide a strong rationale for why you do what you do in the face of questions from administrators, parents, colleagues, and your students" (page 13).
KEEP GOOD RECORDS

Schools like records. Parents like records. Principals like records. They especially like to see records, usually in some kind of a record book. Many teachers are easily buried under the required paperwork and record-keeping. Records like grades and assessments are one of the rules of the Game of School. But teachers in democratic classrooms need records too. In fact, it may be more important for these teachers to have some form of meaningful record-keeping, since much of what their students are doing aren’t traditional assignments, and are often not graded quantitatively. When I was teaching elementary school, at the start of every year, I made my own record book. It changed from year to year, but every year I had a custom-made spiral-bound book that I used to maintain records of my students’ work. (To be honest, maintaining up-to-date records was a weakness of mine, and it hurt my work.) It certainly didn’t look like a traditional record book, which only has little boxes for recording a letter or number grade. I wanted larger spaces for other forms of records. When a student finished reading a book of their choice in reading workshop, I recorded the title of the book, and the date; when a student finished a piece of writing for writing workshop, I recorded the title, the genre and the date; as my students worked on integrated projects, they maintained a project assessment sheet that was filled out weekly (first self-evaluated and then teacher-evaluated), and I recorded these as well. A teacher can get away with a lot of unusual-looking things going on in their classroom if they have good records to show that children are learning.

MAINTAIN PORTFOLIOS

One of the best forms of record-keeping is to maintain student (and teacher!) portfolios. While portfolios are, unfortunately, still not generally considered a valid ’record’ of student learning and growth (as opposed to test scores and grades), that’s exactly what they are. What assessment could be more authentic and democratic than looking at the students’ own work? Portfolios come in many shapes and sizes, so there isn’t just one correct way to implement them. The basic idea of portfolios is simple. Maintain some kind of collection of actual student work. This should be automatically easier in a democratic classroom since they usually have more authentic and project-oriented activities. Also, even if your school doesn’t do portfolios, you can still choose to have them in your classroom.

Some of the very best evidence for the value of democratic classrooms is quite literally right in front of the teachers’ faces: the students’ work itself. If we, as democratic educators, claim that our methods, ideas, belief systems, and so on, are better and more meaningful than traditional schooling, then that should show in the kids’ work, as well as other documentation of classroom life. Showing a sceptical parent or principal some high quality, thoughtful, and creative student work can truly support the work and passion of a democratic teacher. Also, to make student portfolios even more meaningful, include some form of student self-reflection, which again may not be seen by most as being ‘valid’ evidence of earning, but can add some support to your work, particularly with parents.

It can also be extremely valuable to document some of the purposes of democratic classrooms that go beyond the traditional ‘schoolwork’. At their heart, democratic classrooms are about promoting community, dignity, thoughtfulness, social justice, self-esteem, creativity, equality, lifelong learning, critical consciousness, and simply a better world. While these qualities aren’t valued nearly as much by most people and the media as test scores are, the ‘basics’ are, recording and promoting student growth in these areas can do a lot to support the work of a democratic teacher.

CHOOSE YOUR BATTLES CAREFULLY

For democratic educators, this is often much easier said than done. In many ways, our lives and our work are about confronting and challenging dominant and oppressive belief systems. However, schools are highly political and emotional places, so sometimes the best thing to do is walk away from a potential battle. Our schools are, and have always been, very conservative and very traditional institutions. Democratic teachers can easily find half a dozen new battles to wage every day. But doing so will only cause grief and frustration, and can cost them their jobs. Democratic teachers need to constantly be mindful of their priorities. Stand up for the most important and for what you feel your particular context will allow; and let the others go. You’ll be more at peace because of it.

Some have spoken about what a school considers to be ‘sacred’. These are the non-negotiables, the rules and rituals in a school that are not going to go away any time soon, and that you’re clearly better off not challenging. Teachers should study their school’s culture to learn what is sacred. If your school, for example, has ability-groups and tracking (which most democratic educators consider to be anti-democratic) and it is sacred, then there is really nothing you can do about avoiding it, and perhaps it would be better not challenging it. (Of course, if you happen to have one of those ‘lower’ groups, it doesn’t mean you have to treat them as a lower group. You can choose to see them, treat them, and teach them as you would any other group of kids.) One of the quickest ways for a progressive teacher to create friction in their workplace is to challenge something that so many others consider to be sacred. I up to each teacher to decide for themselves where they draw the line on what battle they are willing to wage. These are moral, political, and very practical decisions to be made, and it’s usually not worth waging a battle that jeopardises your career or your men health.

SOMETIMES CHOOSE TO REMAIN SILENT

This suggestion is connected to the previous one. In a way, this is a contradiction to democracy, it’s advocating silence. But there are times (perhaps often) when the best course of action is to remain silent. During my first or second year of teaching, I was at a faculty meeting re-authorising the school’s curriculum. My school at the time was very traditional, so the meeting was basically about teachers swapping textbook chapters and textbook topics deciding what should be emphasised what grade, and so on. Not surprisingly considered (and still consider) textbooks to be part of the problem, not part of the solution. I wasn’t using the textbooks, but ‘covering’ the required topics by having them into long-term integrated projects. And I did not remain silent at the meeting. In my naivety, I questioned whether should even be using textbooks. This did nothing to reduce textbook use in school, and everything to create friction between me and my colleagues. If I had been conscious of the school’s ‘culture code’ (‘teachers in this school sell textbooks’) then I would never have ever opened my mouth. I should have chose to remain silent, gone along with the meeting, and then returned to my classroom and continued to teach without the textbooks.

Democratic teachers need to careful not to take silence too far. Teacher believe, are the key to deep education change, so we must remember our role leaders and change agents. In their six on three teachers, Schon, Stemp and Templin (1993) write: By far the most prevalent and domina strategy used in teaching was to remain silent! To show their willingness to fit in and accept the status quo, the beginning teachers formed a society of the silent. That is, they were afraid to express opinions to peers and administration might be considered controversial or thus jeopardise their chances for success and survival in the school. (page 468)
I would never advocate silence – which can propagate the political and pedagogical hegemonies inside our schools and our societies and seriously under meaningful change – to democratic schools, but there are advantages for all teachers at times to opt to remain silent.

Democratic teachers need to also be aware of how they advertise what's happening in their classroom. Just because our kids did some amazing work on a project or engaged in an outstanding discussion, doesn't mean you need to publicise it. Often times it's better to reveal these successes yourself, or to share them privately with a friend. One of the easiest ways to get away with controversial methods and ideas in your classroom is not to tell people that you're doing them.

**UNDERSTAND CHANGE**

his too, is connected to the above two suggestions. When I started to teach, I had no idea that simple and complex change. I was naïve here too. First, I locked on many veteran teachers who could not change how they taught – I wanted them to be more in line with how taught. Three ideas concerning this did not cross my mind in my early years of progressive, democratic, even radical teaching. First, maybe those veteran teachers like and believe in the way they teach, just as I feel about how I teach. Second, on the personal level, change is very difficult and complex and scary, especially if a teacher has been working a certain way for many ears. Finally, on the institutional and systemic levels, change even tougher and more complex. Deep, meaningful change, especially when it involves changing an entire paradigm or ality, is very political, emotional, and frustrating. It is usually a glacially slow process. The main things democratic educators have gone for them when it comes to the difficulty of change is their persistence and their passion and their ability to work with children.

**FOCUS ON THE KIDS**

is my last suggestion connected to the above idea. (All four of them really do work symbiotically.) It's very easy for democratic educators to focus on the bigger issues, such as reforming the institution of teaching, overthrowing the paradigm of factory-model schooling, changing a traditional school into a more open-minded one, and so on. These issues are a major part of why I became a teacher and why I chose to work in education. I believe to the marrow in my bone that schools and teachers can help make a better world and can nurture that wonder and power of lifelong learning. I believe that part of that process of seeing myself as a change agent in the great struggle to bring meaningful reform to our schools, classrooms, teaching, and societies.

However, no matter how important all of these ideas are to me, my primary focus must remain on what's most important: my students and what happens in our classroom. During my first year of teaching I was entirely focused on creating the most dynamic democratic classroom that I could. Frustrated by the slow pace of change in my school, and with the larger conservative institution of teaching and schooling, my focus began to shift away from my students and our classroom, and onto these bigger issues. Not surprisingly, this had a negative effect on my teaching. It took me a few years to bring my primary focus and energy back to where it belonged: on my kids. Doing this doesn't mean I gave up on the larger struggles, but that I kept them in perspective, and that I ultimately understood that the best way I could contribute to those larger struggles was by focusing enough to make our classroom the best it could be.

**BUILD CORNERS**

People in all sorts of contexts manipulate systems in order to accomplish something. Given the political nature of schools, they are ripe institutions for teachers to manipulate and work around. Bill Ayers (1993) calls this 'creative insubordination', and writes, 'Every successful teacher I know (and every principal can tell) stories of creative insubordination—of regulations ignored, paper work 'lost', procedures subverted' (page 130). Herb Kohl (1994) has a similar idea that he calls 'creative maladjustment'. The point here is very well known. The more a teacher begins to understand the cultural codes and expectations that shape their teaching, the more they will know which expectations and rules they cut around and which ones they can ignore.

**MAINTAIN HIGH EXPECTATIONS**

This is also one of the most neglected aspects of a democratic classroom. In classrooms where children are doing more holistic, authentic, communal, and constructivist work, teachers must still have high expectations. These expectations usually come in different forms than in the traditional classroom. Since democratic classrooms aren't about maintaining rigid control and silence, they want to kids to maintain self-discipline and self-directed learning. This does not mean that the teacher relinquishes authority; the teacher is always the final authority, including inside democratic classrooms.

The expectations I had for my students were in two categories, behaviour and work. First, I wanted them to try their best to be the very best people they could be. This would involve issues of how they treated others, empathy and compassion, being a caring classroom member, thinking about the whole good, and having just plain good behaviour. If their behaviour was poor, at times this meant consequences, such as staying in for recess to make up for lost work time or even a phone call home to a parent.

High expectations for their work included the quality of the work itself, the thoughtfulness they put into it, and the overall effort. Democratic classrooms are often criticised for being soft and 'touchy-feely', but they can be—and should be—'rigorous' in their own way.

**WORK WITH PARENTS**

Parents are valid and important stakeholders in the education of their children. That means they are not only entitled to a voice in the process of schooling, but as teachers we should invite their voice. This can actually be quite complex when it comes to a democratic classroom because most parents have also never experienced this kind of schooling. Many are very sceptical (to say the least) of these ideas. So, democratic teachers are going to have to find a happy medium between fulfilling their own beliefs and passions, and satisfying parents who understandably have concerns about the education of their children. Again, this usually means making some compromises. But, going beyond that, it can also mean keeping parents informed of what's going on in your classroom (with a regular newsletter, for example); going out of your way to invite their voice and participation; and (carefully) working to educate parents about different teaching philosophies.

One of my biggest struggles as a democratic teacher was when a parent clearly disagreed with something I was doing in my classroom. How much power should a group of parents (or even one or two parents) have to dictate their children's schooling and my teaching? On one hand, parents should be involved and even sceptical, but on the other hand, at their best, teachers will have knowledge and experience of teaching, schooling, learning and society that many parents don't have, which must count for something. (It's interesting to note that there aren't any other professions where the client tells the 'expert' how to do their job.) There are no easy answers to these issues, except to say that a teacher's job is so much easier with parent support and infinitely more difficult without it.

- February 2001

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IT'S OKAY TO FAIL

Somehow the culture of teaching made it unacceptable to fail. Teachers, perhaps more than anyone, should know that failure is a necessary and important part of learning. As a democratic teacher, I often felt that I was held to higher standards than traditional teachers, as if I had to prove - without failure - that my ideas work. And when something in my classroom didn't work, the whole paradigm of democratic schooling was often blamed (along with me of course). When someone works in a way that goes against common assumptions, their work is at times held under a microscope. Maybe this is a good thing. But democratic teachers are often examined in detail by parents, principals, school boards, and the kids themselves, and while they may emphasise the failures and ignore the successes, it is important for the teachers to keep things in perspective and understand that it is perfectly okay for some things not to work out as planned. Then it's central to risk-taking and experimentation and exploration, which are critical elements of democratic classrooms. And perhaps the most important part of failure is learning from it, which in turn makes us better teachers.

DO THE 'LITTLE' THINGS

There are endless list of 'little' ideas that are usually more acceptable to critics and sceptics of democratic classrooms. Some of these ideas are: journal writing, literature-based classrooms, class meetings, having kids do a lot of meaningful work, using drama and art, having debates, keeping portfolios, and using the newspaper and magazines. While these ideas can appear 'small' compared to some of the larger and more sweeping ideas such as student-created projects and writing workshop, they can actually have huge benefits. Many teachers believe they can't implement democratic classrooms because the powers that be won't let them. In truth, I believe that virtually all teachers could implement some elements of democratic schooling. The key of course is that they will not get an invitation to do so, they must take the initiative themselves.

DON'T FOCUS ON FUN

Perhaps more than any other word, 'fun' comes up a lot in my teacher education courses. Many of my students say that their own schooling and learning was boring, and that they want to make their classrooms fun. I agree with Bill Ayers (1993) who says that fun is distracting. When I think of fun I think of a good comedy movie, a picnic, a party, clowns. Is that the kind of atmosphere we want in our classrooms? School and learning can be fun at times, but as Ayers says, it doesn't have to be fun. Here are some adjectives that I would use to describe a democratic classroom instead of 'fun': interesting, intellectual, awe-inspiring, engaging, communal, thoughtful, critical, welcoming, fascinating, caring. A classroom doesn't have to be fun to have these qualities. There are times in class when some fun is exactly what's needed most, but most of the time school should be fascinating and thoughtful, and that's different from fun.

DO WHAT YOU CAN

It's so common for democratic teachers to get frustrated by the limits placed on them. We are, after all, teaching in a way (and teaching specific content) that goes very much against the dominant paradigms of schooling, society and even the economy. I often hear from my education students that they can't ever imagine being allowed to actually implement these ideas in a 'real' classroom. They go into schools for clinical hours and student teaching, they have siblings and cousins in school, and they remember their own school days. What they see and hear going on in schools looks and sounds like the antithesis of democratic classrooms. They see schools today as entrenched with the same traditional methods and content that they experienced when they were in school. Given these realities, it's easy to get depressed. It's also understandable that some teachers aren't comfortable with some elements of a democratic classroom. They're too radical. My suggestion for both of these scenarios is simple: Do what you can. There is no such thing as a 'pure' democratic classroom. If your school has specific demands and expectations, don't let that stop you in your way of doing anything. If teaching through open-ended projects isn't yet in a teacher's comfort zone, then some projects can be done with more structure and more limits. Examine the situation, your context, and your own feelings, and determine what you can do and what you want to do and focus on that. Try to set aside what you can't do and concentrate on what you can do.

BE HAPPY

One of the reasons I became a teacher, and especially a democratic teacher, was to be happy in my job. I needed (and still need) to look forward to getting up each morning and going to work. I don't believe that happens for most people today. I get a clear sense that most American adults are not truly happy and feel no personal connection to their chosen career. Teaching can be one of the most personal of professions or 'callings', as David Hansen (1995) writes, so it's important not to let our frustrations, ideals or egos get in the way of it happening. Teaching is tough no matter how you teach, and democratic educators who work against the grain make their struggles more of a challenge from the start. So, don't bite off more than you can chew, don't allow yourself to get buried beneath frustration and fear of losing your job, and try not to get upset by nameless systems, endless bureaucracies, or obsolete notions of the 'correct' way to teach. As important as your work with kids is, focus on pace of your own mind. Be happy and smile a lot. It will make your efforts so much more meaningful.

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