

Circles and Parallels

Democratic Governance in a Small School*

T. ELIJAH HAWKES

Randolph Union High School, Randolph, Vermont

And you, America,
Cast you the real reckoning for your present?
The lights and shadows of your future—good or evil?
To girlhood, boyhood look—the Teacher and the School.
—Walt Whitman (1959, 330), “An Old Man’s Thought of School”

Schools and the teachers and children in them offer our nation a mirror, a reflection to help us gauge whether we are living our values with integrity. In the eyes of the children are great stores of meaning. What do they tell us? Some are bright with curiosity, others red from lack of sleep. Some are dull with hunger, others darting and anxious. Some have witnessed great trauma.

And how does the school treat these children? What are the habits and ways of the students and educators? What kind of society is the school preparing students for, and what kind of small society does the school aspire to be? There are some schools that intentionally strive to embody democratic values. It is important to study these schools, to learn how they work, and to understand whether their democratic practice is able to endure in the broader systems in which they operate. For a multitude of reasons, some schools are more successful in this than others.

This article is an inquiry into the work of educators at the James Baldwin School (JBS), a New York City (NYC) public school with an explicit commitment to democracy in its mission and core values. I was founding principal at JBS for the first six years. I’ve stayed in touch and recently went back to talk with faculty about how their work has evolved. (The names

*I dedicate this article to Christina, Perry, and Vince.

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We opened JBS in 2005, an outgrowth of Humanities Preparatory Academy, another small community-minded NYC public school (Hantzopoulos 2016). Like Humanities Prep, JBS intended to be a school that would empower both youth and teachers. Since opening, the school has more than tripled in size, and the faculty has known four principals. There have been growing pains and painful transitions. But the distributed leadership structures are still in place, as are restorative justice forums, student-led town meetings, and faculty meetings guided by consensus processes. These are good signs—and by many other measures the school is doing well:

- A recent piece in *The Atlantic* mentioned the school for its work in restorative justice (Brodsky 2016), and an article in *The Nation* noted JBS as one of the “successful public schools” serving “communities of color” in NYC (Goyal 2016).
- The widely consulted NYC school-review website InsideSchools.org describes JBS as “a small transfer school in a huge building that attracts students who were not successful at some of the city’s most selective high schools and others who are looking for personal attention in a small environment.” Data on the site indicate that most students are black or Hispanic, and over 70 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. The review notes, “Dedicated teachers and a college counselor work closely with [these students] to make sure they graduate and go to college, even if it takes some students more than four years” (InsideSchools.org 2017).
- In terms of more standardized measures of success, the latest NYC School Quality Report—the city’s annual evaluation of schools based on student achievement data and other inputs—rated JBS as “good” to “excellent” in every metric (NYC Department of Education 2017).

JBS is serving a challenging population of students, doing well, and being recognized for its good work. How is democracy part of the equation? Certainly, democratic practice is strong there still, indeed stronger in many ways than when I left. In this article, I will share artifacts and reflections related to democratic practice at JBS, past and present, and I will highlight three defining features of how democracy is lived at JBS: (1) pragmatism and clarity about positional power; (2) integrity of democracy’s basic form, the circle; and (3) different democratic experiences for youth and adults.

In these ways and others, JBS is—like every school—a special place. But JBS is only one of many schools in a long history in which educators have strived to ensure that the places charged with preparing youth for citizenship in a democracy function, themselves, in democratic ways. Past or present, and wherever they may be, such schools are worthy of study. Is our country’s future light or dark? We can learn much about that future from teachers and schools—especially those schools that strive to embody democracy in its basic forms. In an era when elected officials across our country show authoritarian leanings, the work of schools like JBS demand careful consideration by educators, learners, and leaders in all corners.

Mission and Core Values

JBS was a replication project, a transplanting of what we had determined were the root and trunk elements of our parent and mentor school, Humanities Prep (Benitez et al., 2009). The new school project was supported by several school reform organizations: the Coalition of Essential Schools, Expeditionary Learning, and NYC Outward Bound. A team of Humanities Prep teachers and leaders worked for a year to plan the school, collaborating with our external partners and a group of tenth-grade students who would transfer to join us as the founding student elders of the new school. Our team determined that the essential structures and habits of the new school would include:

- A codirectorship, made up of a principal codirector and a teacher codirector
- An advisory program
- Town meetings
- Restorative justice practice
- Performance assessment
- The Humanities Prep mission statement and seven core values
- Consensus-based governance process

Each year, I compiled and updated a faculty handbook to outline how these and other important structures and practices functioned. There were changes, year to year, as we grew, made mistakes, and learned from them. That said, one section of the handbook was never altered: the mission statement.

As is noted in the literature about democratic schools, mission and values are essential ingredients of these institutions. Researchers Münire Erden and H. Eylem Korkmaz (2014), after an exhaustive survey process that en-

gaged practitioners and allies of democratic schools around the world, have found that “the most important category in founding a democratic school is its ‘values and philosophy’” (371). And these values are not to be guessed or inferred; they are made explicit. As Michael W. Apple and James A. Beane (2007) note in *Democratic Schools: Lessons in Powerful Education*, “Democratic schools, like democracy itself, do not happen by chance. They result from explicit attempts by educators to put in place arrangements and opportunities that will bring democracy to life” (9).

In the spirit of explicitly naming democracy as core value and purpose, the Humanities Prep and JBS mission statement was written by Perry Weiner, the visionary and founding teacher codirector of Humanities Prep. Less concise than a typical mission statement, it reads more like a manifesto—and it always served as such for me: an inspiration, a reminder, and a calling. It is a text that demands revisiting, and I can recall our doing this annually at fall and spring faculty retreats. There was no pledge of allegiance, but there was an assumption of fidelity to the mission and an opportunity when reading it to reflect on how and whether we were fulfilling its expectations. It reads:

It is our mission to provide a philosophical and practical education for all students, an education that features creativity and inquiry, encourages habitual reading and productivity, as well as self-reflection and original thought. We agree with Socrates that the “unexamined life is not worth living,” and it is our desire to prepare students to live thoughtful and meaningful lives. We are committed to inspiring the love of learning in our students.

This mission can best be accomplished in a school that is a democratic community. As a democratic community, we strive to exemplify the values of democracy: mutual respect, cooperation, empathy, the love of humankind, justice for all, and service to the world.

The James Baldwin School is college preparatory. Our curriculum and pedagogy prepare students for the rigors of college work and motivate them to desire and plan for a higher education. In preparing students for college we believe that we move students toward higher levels of intellectual engagement while they are in high school.

It is our mission, as well, at the James Baldwin School, to provide a haven for students who have previously experienced school as unresponsive to their needs as individuals. We wish for all students to find

their voice and to speak knowledgeably and thoughtfully on issues that concern their school, their world. We aid students in this endeavor by personalizing our learning situations, by democratizing and humanizing the school environment, and by creating a “talking culture,” an atmosphere of informal intellectual discourse among students and faculty.

In order to achieve this, we intend . . .

- to restore a true understanding of the First Amendment: that freedom of expression is the highest democratic right and must be therefore taken seriously, and that democracy can only continue if opinions are based on evidence and meaningful thought;
- to encourage students to become passionate thinkers, seekers of truth and beauty, advocates for justice;
- to create an environment in which individuality is respected and cherished, an environment in which human beings are valued for the content of their character and the quality of their thought;
- to address the problem of student cynicism through promoting intellectual behaviors which lead to students’ discovery of their own humanity and the value of human life, human feeling, human culture, human history, and the human endeavor;
- to promote an ongoing dialogue about the educational process, and to create an atmosphere of mutual intellectual and artistic endeavor in which students and teachers learn from each other;
- to cultivate the natural idealism of youth through promoting and honoring community work, and to acknowledge and engage the vital interdependency of the practical and the philosophical by creating meaningful external learning situations in the community at large;
- to advocate for peace and nonviolence through an understanding of history, modeling respect and mutual esteem, and actively exploring and promoting alternatives to hurtful conflict in the realms of both interpersonal and political life;
- to provide moral alternatives and to help students become morally sensitive people, and to establish the connections between the academic disciplines and moral action, the connections between learning and community, thereby creating a just community in our school;
- to employ the best progressive principles of education, to promote emotional as well as intellectual development, and to cultivate the various learning styles and intelligences present in all students. To

this effect, we advocate that depth of inquiry, not coverage of material, guide classroom instruction. (Weiner, cited in Hawkes 2011a, 5–6)

Ever subject to interpretation and reflection, the mission statement was never subject to revision—though occasionally someone might bring up the idea. Why not? Because it is important for every community to have sacred texts, those constellations of words and stories that are given special reverence. The mission, with its emphasis on democratic schooling for a democratic society, was one of those texts. The school's core values comprise another kind of sacred text at JBS. There are seven: (1) respect for humanity, (2) respect for the intellect, (3) respect for the truth, (4) respect for diversity, (5) commitment to peace, (6) commitment to democracy, and (7) commitment to justice. Lofty, broad, and flexible, the core values demand constant revisiting to have practical meaning and importance. Our handbook included a more detailed description of each value, as a point of departure for ongoing reflection and to aid teachers in connecting these values to learning intentions in the classroom:

Respect for Humanity

- Empathy: seeks to understand, empathize, and compassionately engage with others—in class and life outside of class and school.
- Artistry: employs visual art, music, poetry, movement in expression of self and ideas; appreciates artistic expression in and by others.

Respect for the Intellect

- Original Thought: is curious; asks questions; makes new connections and discoveries; gives voice to personally new and original ideas.
- Precision: is precise in word choice and argument; makes generalizations based on evidence but avoids stereotypes and absolutist statements.

Respect for the Truth

- Conviction: is willing to stand by convictions, to express and defend unpopular positions and minority viewpoints.
- Scholastic Honesty: expresses self in own voice; does not borrow from others without giving credit.

Respect for Diversity

- Inclusion: Includes others; seeks exposure to a diversity of voices, experiences, and ideas. Invites marginal voices, so the wisdom of the collective can be heard.

- Respect: acknowledges other people’s opinions and experiences; is respectful of other groups, identities; avoids slurs or degrading language.

Commitment to Peace

- Nonviolence: respectfully challenges other people’s ideas and authority; uses constructive criticism; creates constructive nonviolent alternatives to destructive conflict; makes recourse to Fairness Committee, mediation, and Advisor to address problems with others.
- Interior Peace: understands how to calm self when angry; is able to communicate passionately without hurtful language; is able to be quiet and alone.

Commitment to Democracy

- Citizenship in School: contributes to creation and revision of classroom rules; requires that decisions are made with input of all concerned; facilitates and participates in school-wide forums for discussion and governance, including Town Meeting, Staff Meeting, and Fairness Committee.
- Citizenship in Society: participates in public forums for debate, community action, voting and decision-making; understands local and national systems of government.

Commitment to Justice

- Stewardship: ensures fair treatment of school and natural environment; practices “leave no trace” ethic, picks up garbage, cleans and arranges furniture, puts away classroom books and supplies; leaves space better than as found.
- Activism: seeks community-based solutions to the unfair treatment of self/others; maintains community rules, norms, and routines that exist for the common good. (Hawkes 2011a, 7)

Every community—with people joining and departing—is always in process of becoming itself, and so forging a common understanding of community values is an ongoing process. This is especially true at a school for often-transient transfer students. For this reason, discussing the core values is an important element of many activities at the school, from the admissions interview to curriculum and activities in advisory, to behavioral contracts, to restorative justice interventions, to annual student-generated awards and faculty-conferred graduation honors. The core values ground

each of these processes, which compel ongoing reflection by students and faculty about the meaning of a commitment to democracy and the other ideals.

Consensus-Building Processes

Full-faculty consensus-building process is an important way that the school strives to operationalize the commitment to democracy that is voiced in the mission and core values. At JBS, as at other schools (cf. Newell and Buchen 2004), active participation in democratic decision-making processes is made an explicit expectation of all faculty.

“Creating Curriculum *and* a School” was the title of the section of the faculty handbook in which I provided a teacher job description that focused on three essential aspects of working at JBS: teaching in the classroom, being an advisor, and being a school leader who participates in school governance. One of the expectations of a teacher and advisor at JBS was a “commitment to, and practice of, our core values; infusing them into our curriculum, culture, and lives.” The expectations of teachers as school leaders included “attending and participating in consensus-based staff meetings for school governance” (Hawkes 2011a, 13).

What does it mean for a meeting to be consensus-based? The school’s leaders have done much to clarify this in the years since I left, and I will share artifacts of their work later in this article. My explanation in the faculty handbook was that consensus is a means to surface multiple perspectives and to collectively realize the best response to a given problem or challenge. Faith is placed in the wisdom of the collective, and power is granted to each individual to shape the outcome of a discussion, indeed to block a decision from moving forward if there are significant concerns that a person can’t live with.

In addition to articulating the expectation that each teacher should be an agent in the consensus process, it also became important, as I revised the handbook over the years, to include explicit mention of the role of the meeting chairperson, discussion facilitators, and those people who had positional power in the school, including the principal. What was becoming clear, as the school grew and as our efforts to value every faculty voice became more challenging, is that any group should intentionally make use of the capacity of the chairperson or principal when uncertainty arises and time doesn’t permit further deliberation. This is a practical consideration with an attendant responsibility that the meeting leader acknowledge and record any concerns still on the table so that the participants can revisit the concerns when the time comes to evaluate the effectiveness of the decision.

By acknowledging the explicit roles of meeting leaders in consensus-based work, one thereby makes explicit the ways that a principal or any committee chair is accountable for seeking and listening to multiple and dissenting perspectives. As I noted in the handbook, “If the person in this position doesn’t listen well to these perspectives or misjudges the time needed for the process, then they need to be told this. In a school system that values hierarchy for efficiency and accountability purposes (and in a species that has natural tendencies toward stratification) being explicit about the leader’s accountability to the group ensures that consensus has a place in the solution-seeking at the school” (Hawkes 2011a, 79).

I came to understand the importance of positional power in democratic process in large part through time spent with good coaches from the NYC Principal Leadership Academy. One of them was Alan Dichter, who—with Nancy Mohr and other small school leaders—wrote a book called the *Power of Protocols* (2003). Alan and Nancy are two school leaders who have thought a lot about democratic process. Alan once shared with me his belief that “consensus is not about the right to make decisions; it is about making the right decisions” (pers. comm., 2007). Alan first shared this aphorism with me when I was feeling uneasy about ending a hiring committee deliberation, overtly not allowing the lack of consensus from preventing a decision from being made.

I remember this hiring committee meeting vividly. It was the second year of the school. Two years prior, my colleagues and I had been role-alike peers on a planning team together; then when JBS opened, I became a principal with a very different position in the system’s hierarchy. Still, the practice at JBS was that we always made hiring decisions by consensus, and any one of us could block consensus if our objections were strong enough. That was how we always did it—until this moment, when I used the positional power of the principal to end the discussion and make a decision for the group based on the majority’s opinion, which I shared. Such a move may seem like common sense and commonplace to most professional managers, but I lost plenty of sleep over it.

And I think the sleep was worth losing. We were a group of collaborative educators in a small school, located in a vast bureaucracy where top-down decisions were the norm, situated in a wider society where the voice and professionalism of teachers is routinely devalued. We were striving for a different model, a democratic model in which teacher voice and professionalism were the driving forces. Consensus-based decision-making was a core commitment. Overriding a strong minority opinion was not how I aspired to lead.

Yet I feel like it was the right decision. It was based on several factors, one of which was that the time of year didn't feel right for extending the process, but this was not the most important factor. My own opinion of the candidate in question and the opinions of the other people around the table pointed in the chosen direction. There were hierarchies in my own mind that influenced me: most of the people I'd known and trusted for years. The dissenting voice was not one of them. It is always important to listen to fresh perspectives, and sometimes it is best to defer to a new and different voice, but I decided this wasn't one of those times. It was an instructive moment for me, as a school leader. Reflecting on that decision with my mentors and the JBS teacher codirector helped me better see how even egalitarian communities have—and need to learn how to use—differentiated roles, positional power, and status hierarchies based on wisdom and experience. As long as the essential forms and norms of democratic process are in place, and as long as individual authority can be transparently mobilized to serve the common good, the occasional reliance on positional power can be important to meet the goals of the group.

Key Characteristic: Pragmatism and Clarity about Positional Power

This story about the hiring committee brings me to the first of three defining features of how I see democracy being lived at JBS. This is a characteristic of effective democratic institutions that I think idealistic educators should embrace: pragmatism and clarity about positional power.

Many educators will disagree with my perspective. On this topic, Erden and Korkmaz summarize the beliefs of the many democratic school leaders they surveyed in their research: “A general evaluation of all of the findings of this study leads to the following rough definition of democratic school: It is a democratic community where everybody—be they adult or child—has equal rights and power” (Erden and Korkmaz 2014, 372). I am reluctant, however, to define a democratic school in this way.

Democracy in schools isn't about the purely equal distribution of power or voice. Just as in the classroom it is a mistake for teachers to strive for purely student-directed learning, so at the level of governance it is a mistake for a faculty to idealize modes of interaction in which each voice—no matter, age, experience, or position—is said to carry equal weight or authority. Not that individual voices and personal freedoms don't matter. Rather, it is a mistake to be guided by such a vision because, quite simply, hierarchies exist, both formal and informal, and to not acknowledge them only makes it

more likely that the power at the top of the hierarchy will be abused. When well-intentioned leaders and collaborators obscure the fact that a hierarchy exists, this allows those with the positional power to be less accountable, and—most importantly—it prevents the collective from using that power to meet its goals.

When we are transparent and intentional about the positional power located in certain roles, however, it allows us to know what the power is, who has it, and how it can be used in service of common objectives. This can be as simple as being explicit about the authority of a timekeeper in a group-work protocol, or as complex as finding clarity about the positional power of the principal in distributed leadership structures.

John Dewey, to whom many look for guidance about the place of schooling in a democracy, would affirm this pragmatic view. As I've written elsewhere (Hawkes 2010), one can find in Dewey's prose—from *Experience and Education* (Dewey, 1938), for instance—descriptions of the well-governed classroom in terms that might remind us of traditional egalitarian societies, where individual freedoms are balanced with cooperative imperatives, where status hierarchies exist—and exist to serve the welfare of all. In such communities, people's interactions are not governed by high priests, exalted leaders, or monopolies of force. Rather, Dewey observes, the order of things comes from the group's orientation to common tasks. The community must get things done by working together. The individuals, Dewey remarks, "form a community group," and the leader of this community "has a particular responsibility for the conduct and interactions and intercommunications which are the very life of the group as a community"; the leader is not "external boss or dictator"; this person's role is to "arrange conditions that are conducive to community activity" and "communal projects" (Dewey 1938, 57–59).

In pursuit of the common good, different people will have different roles, based on their expertise, interests, and availability. Individual freedom is important—but there "can be no greater mistake," writes Dewey, "than to treat such freedom as an end in itself." It is the common project that preserves and perpetuates the group: "The primary source of social control resides in the very nature of the work done as a social enterprise in which all individuals have an opportunity to contribute and to which all feel a responsibility." This is the "normal and proper" way to hold the community together and how also to honor the individual "without the violation of freedom" (Dewey 1938, 54–56).

What Dewey says about the well-run classroom is equally relevant to the well-governed school. In the democratic schoolhouse, the role of school

leaders is not to dictate “because I said so,” but to frame an authentic and worthy common task, such that the imperatives of completing the task together dictate who does what and why. In so doing, it behooves everyone to know who has what powers in the larger system and then to mobilize them to serve common goals.

Codirectorship

By my second or third year as a principal, I became more comfortable with the idea that I had a special responsibility to manage the work leading up to a decision in such a way that, if expediency or other factors required a decision, there was adequately diverse input on the table to make a sound decision. With hiring, I came to see that it was particularly important that the principal have the final say—though not in isolation of input from others. This is because, as I learned over the years, once a teacher is hired, it is the principal who has the individual and often lonely responsibility of rating a teacher’s work satisfactory or not, professional or unprofessional. The special powers a principal has are not ones to be happily hoarded and wielded in isolation. Indeed, the weighty responsibilities singularly located in the position of the principal were one reason why I so valued the protracted collaborative processes at JBS, especially the extended and deep partnership that was the codirectorship.

From its inception to this day, there has been a teacher codirector and a principal codirector at JBS. The codirectors model collaborative decision-making at all levels of school functioning, from the weekly agendas of meetings to student suspensions, to hiring committees, to strategic planning. In essence, the purpose of the codirectorship is to ensure that teacher voice is always at the table. At first, we didn’t have a role description of the teacher codirector much beyond that notion, nor for the principal codirector. More extensive role descriptions were drafted in our second year, as we began to anticipate the succession process.

Deborah Meier and Paul Schwarz (2007) discuss succession and the departure of founding leaders in their reflections on how democratic practice at schools is often “eroded” over time and “mostly finally dropped” (147). I recall being told once by a mentor that codirectorships are unlikely to endure beyond the special first partnership. With that in mind, we decided to make succession of the teacher codirector an intentional process.

We envisioned a three-year term for the teacher codirector, which would allow multiple teacher-leaders to step into the role over time. In year 2, we

formed a governance committee to clarify the role, solicit interest from teachers, and guide the transition process. The plan was that candidates would declare interest in a letter to their colleagues. The entire faculty would then be invited to reflect, in writing, on which of the candidates they felt could best fulfill responsibilities of the teacher codirector. This was not a vote but an affirmation of strengths and critical-friend feedback on areas for growth. The selection committee, chaired by principal codirector, was to include the current teacher codirector and four other faculty. The final selection was to be made based on colleagues' responses to candidate letters, the committee's evaluation of ability to fulfill the role, and a discussion with the candidate of how she or he perceived the role taking shape in new ways in the future. The committee was to work by consensus.

But neither in year 2 nor in year 3 did anyone declare formal interest in the role. This was partially because our founding codirector, Christine Olson, was tirelessly doing a great job in the position and partially because the role is an intimidating one. Christine remained in the role into our fourth year, when Seth Rader, who had joined JBS largely because of the commitment to democracy and social justice, decided he would be willing. "My reason for considering this so seriously," Seth wrote in his letter to JBS faculty (January 28, 2010), "is my faith that our school will be stronger with distributed knowledge and leadership." Seth went on to discuss the democratic values of the school in connection to students: "I am confident that there are qualities I bring to the table that would be strengths as a co-director. Primarily, I am dedicated to the mission of the school. I believe deeply in our school's approach to creating an educational community that supports students in forming identities and building skills to become engaged members of a democratic society." Seth also voiced his dedication to democratic values in the context of governance: "I am committed to the idea that our school is strongest when all voices are involved in shaping it. I believe I can continue to build on our efforts to effectively make collective decisions and expand our democratic processes to include more stakeholders, especially students and families. Last year, the teacher co-director position was described to me as a constant and vigilant representative of classroom teachers in decision-making. This is a role I feel passionate about and would be honored to play in our school." Seth closed his letter with humility and a request for support from his colleagues should he be given the job—which he was.

Seth also remained in the role beyond a three-year term, straddling the time of my departure, working with four different principals over four successive years during a challenging period in the school's evolution. It was a

period during which the co-directorship might have dissolved and many veteran faculty might have left the school. This didn't happen, however, and it's likely that the codirectorship and a broader commitment to democratic governance were two major reasons the school could endure these transitions.

I left JBS after year 6, a difficult professional decision made for personal reasons: my wife and I had our first child and we wanted to live closer to extended family. Of the faculty at the school when I left, 15 of the 22 are still there after year 12. And although a few teachers have moved on, only one teacher left JBS to work at another NYC school. This is significant. In a system as large as NYC, with one million students, there are many opportunities for good teachers to leave one school and work at another. It matters that so many midcareer professionals chose to stay at JBS during the challenging transition years. When I returned to JBS to interview folks to inform this article, I spoke to a science teacher, Tom Mullane, who has been with the school since year 4. Tom joined JBS after teaching for several years in another reputable school. I asked him if he thought that democratic governance was something that has kept the school strong over the years. He told me, "One of the reasons I came here was because the school had a set of core values, including a commitment to democracy" (Tom Mullane, interview with the author, January 19, 2017). He reflected on his own involvement in school governance and remarked that there were three proposals he was currently working on, ideas for school improvements that he'd brought or was going to bring to the full faculty for feedback and refinement. He noted the value of faculty-facilitated meetings and teacher-led professional development. "I'm still here," he said, "in part because of how the school is governed."

After my departure, the first new principal turned out not to be a good fit. This person was there for just one year. Then Christine, the founding teacher-codirector, who had her administrator license, stepped into the role. Following this, Brady Smith joined the school as principal. Brady had been a friend of JBS for years, having founded a school in the same Expeditionary Learning and NYC Outward Bound networks at the same time that JBS got started. Brady is still JBS principal as I write these reflections, and Josh Heisler is the current teacher co-director. Josh is another midcareer expert educator who was drawn to JBS because of its commitment to collaborative governance. Democratic practice is a core strength of the school, something that attracts powerful and empowered professionals and that has helped the school endure challenging leadership transitions.

Key Characteristic: Democracy's Basic Form, the Circle

Strength and endurance often derive from simple practices. In some ways, the subtleties of democratic process can be complex and hard to illuminate, but in other ways, they're easy to define. There is an essence to democracy, a basic shape: the circle. This is another key characteristic of how democracy lives at JBS—and in most places. I see the same in my current work, for instance, as coprincipal at a very different school. It is a larger rural comprehensive grades 7–12 school in Vermont. There are plenty of contrasts in comparison to JBS, but when it comes to the democratic classroom and democratic governance, there are consistencies. One of them is the shape that democratic interaction takes. The circle is the elemental shape of the democratic spirit.

And by circle I simply mean a group of people—large or small—facing each other, listening to each other, deliberating a common concern, and making meaning through collaboration and empathic exchange. At JBS the circle is the common form of interaction and deliberation. This is a key element of how the school lives its mission with integrity.

Integration, or integrity, requires that there be many small instances of living one's values repeatedly—in a day, in a school year, in a lifetime. A small group of people facing a common question, working together to shape a response: if a school is committed to democracy, then any observer should find various and frequent instances of this kind of interaction in the school. Let us consider the various ways that circles structure the daily, weekly, and annual cycles of interaction at JBS:

- Admissions: JBS is a transfer school, with students joining the school throughout the year and at various grade levels. The admissions interview serves as the first step in an orientation process. Students are asked to write a reflection on one of the school's seven core values and its connection to their own lives. Then two applicants are brought together with two faculty members and there's a discussion. The first substantive interaction a student has at JBS is in a circle.
- Advisory: A small group of 10 to 15 students meets every day for forty minutes, and longer on town meeting days. As part of the Expeditionary Learning network, "crew" is the name given to advisory: "we are all crew, not passengers." The normal shape of crew is a circle.

- **Town meeting:** Assembly of the school happens each week: sometimes whole-school meetings, sometimes smaller groupings of crews. The meetings are prepared in advance by a crew and facilitated by students. The topics range widely. The purpose is student leadership development and the cultivation of the habits of civil discourse. The basic norms of a town meeting mirror those in crew and in the classrooms, such as the “One Mic” rule: don’t talk while someone else is talking.
- **Classroom:** From group-work collaborations to Socratic Seminar and whole-class discussions, one rarely finds chairs in rows at JBS.
- **Restorative justice:** Whether it’s a fairness committee hearing (Hantzopoulos 2006; Olson 2011), a peer mediation, a postsuspension re-entry process, or a student holding his principal accountable (Hawkes 2011b), high-stakes behavioral interventions happen face-to-face and in groups, and solutions are determined collaboratively.
- **Student-led conferences:** With three or four chairs around a table, or a few desks pulled close, twice a year students meet with their crew advisor and members of their family to discuss personal and academic goals and progress.
- **Oral defense:** As part of the New York Performance Assessment Consortium (Foote 2007), JBS is a school at which the highest level academic work culminates in the oral defense papers and projects in core disciplines. This happens before a panel of faculty and external evaluators from the wider community. Like the first admissions conversation, a JBS scholar’s journey ends in a small group of people, facing each other, wrestling with common questions.

The student experience outlined above is likewise a teacher experience—and this is significant. If we want the adults of our schools to be skilled in the norms and processes of democratic interaction, the bulk of our interactions with students must also be structured in democratic ways. This is both a matter of integrity and a practical matter of time on-task. It takes time to develop expertise, and teachers spend a lot less time meeting with adults than they do working with students. So if the adults are going to practice processes that value each voice, learn how to facilitate the collaborative construction of knowledge, and understand how individuals can feel empowerment when a group gets work done collaboratively, it is important that they hone this skill set in the classroom as well as in meetings of adults.

That said, at JBS there is a good deal of adult meeting time. In addition to practicing democratic habits with students, adults at JBS go to several hours of weekly meetings at which students are generally not present. Some meetings are dedicated to working in subject-specific departments, others are focused on the work of being an advisor, others are whole-faculty or committee meetings focused on school-wide concerns. The meeting agendas focus on a mix of topics, including what Carl Glickman (1993) would call “core impact decisions,” having to do with the instructional program, student achievement, professional development, and the allocation of resources: “These decisions align the school with its educational values” (34).

In *Renewing America’s Schools*, Glickman (1993) offers comprehensive guidance on many aspects of what it means to govern schools that are committed to the core purpose of schooling in a democratic society. “What democratic governance does,” he writes, “is strive for decisions that focus on matters of school-wide education, are fair and equal and distribute power, and are morally consistent with the school’s goal of democratic engagement of students” (Glickman 1993, 42). Glickman is careful to note that in addition to choosing the right content for the focus of our deliberations, process matters, too, and all decision-rules—protocols by which decisions are made—must be clear in advance to participants. Indeed, just as we need carefully crafted learning intentions and clear guidance for students in our classes, we need to be clear about how a democratically run school is governed and where a faculty member should expect to experience those circles of distributed leadership and collaborative process. This is an area where JBS has made deliberate progress in recent years.

Improving Clarity and Transparency

Since I left, JBS codirectors and teacher leaders have done much to improve the clarity and functionality of procedures for faculty consensus building and decision-making. One of the benefits of leadership transitions—though they are hard—is that they provide a school the opportunity and imperative to clarify roles and operations essential to the welfare of school. If this is not done, those essential elements risk being lost.

In the school’s challenging seventh year, a small committee met to work on illuminating the subtleties and clarifying the core simplicities at the heart of consensus-based deliberations. The result of their work is the *JBS Decision Making Process Handbook* (Rader et al. 2014). The purpose of the handbook—which the school leadership will gladly share with interested

readers—is to clarify when and how consensus-based deliberations are used in the governance of the school. “It is intended,” notes the introduction, “to provide structures that foster and facilitate democratic processes and stakeholder voice whenever possible with the intention of building consensus for every decision that is made” (Rader et al. 2014, 1).

The authors note at the outset that “there is not sufficient faculty meeting time to make all decisions through the Whole Group Consensus Process and many decisions do not have the scale to warrant the use of faculty meeting time required to achieve whole group consensus.” They help explain, therefore, the “distinction between the Whole Group Consensus Process that may only move forward with the consent of the full faculty and building consensus through consultation and revisions based on feedback in cases where leadership is empowered to make final decisions” (Rader et al. 2014, 1).

The handbook provides examples of different types of decisions:

Whole Group Consensus Decisions: Decisions made with the consent of the full faculty. (Not a majority vote.) Criteria: Long term philosophical or structural shifts to the school.

Delegated Decisions: Decisions made by committees or individuals in specific roles in consultation then presented to the co-directors for approval. Criteria: Pertaining to a discrete issue with a scope limited to a particular group.

Co-Director Decisions: Decisions made by the principal and teacher co-directors in consultation. Criteria: decisions that are short term, do not impact whole school, are in need of immediate action, or it is determined that there is not sufficient time available for a Whole Group Consensus decision. (Rader et al. 2014, 3)

In addition, there are descriptions of “Union Chapter Decisions,” which concern topics that could impact “contractual obligations,” and decisions that fall only within the purview of the principal, which include supervisory or personnel matters.

As noted above, pragmatism and clarity about positional power in a democratic community is key to the sound functioning of the group. This document is clear about when the principal’s power matters, and it makes clear that even in cases where the principal or codirectors make the decision, it is still expected that those decisions “will be made in consultation with the

faculty, specific stakeholders or other school leaders depending on the type of decision being made.” The authors also describe the responsibility of the principal in cases when whole-group consensus processes get stuck: “In cases where the Whole Group Consensus process becomes stalemated and timely action is required, it is the responsibility of the principal co-director to determine the next step, based on a measured weighing of the various perspectives shared to assure a timely decision is made” (Rader et al. 2014, 3).

The faculty who helped shape this document know from experience that “Commitment to Democracy” can ring clear and true to the ear, but be far from clear and transparent in practice. They take pains to give specific guidance on how democracy works at this school. What does it look like when a teacher initiates a Whole Group Consensus process? What does it look like when someone proposes a delegated decision? Specific steps in the different processes are outlined. And just as teachers do in the classroom, steps in the process are scaffolded, including graphic organizers or templates to help teachers draft proposals. The handbook also includes a “Consensus Tracker,” a tool to use in meetings to follow a discussion as it unfolds, noting what strikes you as a “pro” and “con,” allowing you to change your mind and note it as the deliberation evolves. The handbook describes other tools that meeting facilitators can use to gauge how a proposal is taking shape over time—and sometimes it takes a lot of time. Some proposals enter the process and take a year or more to be refined. Other proposals find more expedient paths.

The leaders at JBS are now hosting workshops on democratic governance for other educators. The work is gladly shared, so I will not include additional detail here. I should remark, however, that for all the emphasis on democracy in the JBS governance handbook, there is little reference to voting, except when it comes to processes governed by union rules. This is intentional. In a democratic school, minority voices should not be counted in such a manner that they can be discounted. In a group of twenty people, a vote of 11 to 9 can efficiently yield the adoption of a measure that nearly half the community opposes. In contrast, the slow-democracy processes outlined in the JBS handbook reveal how those nine voices are accounted for at various stages in a longer deliberation, their opinions allowed to shape and reshape a proposal until it becomes something that more people can more fully endorse as their own. And in the end, it is about owning it: seeing the challenges faced as both mine and yours, together shaping a vision of how to address our common needs, and then articulating each individual’s role in getting the common work done. Dewey’s description of “social control” in the classroom holds true here at the level of governance: JBS teacher-

leaders and administrators are committed to running this school as a “social enterprise in which all individuals have an opportunity to contribute and to which all feel a responsibility” (Dewey 1938, 56).

It is a social enterprise fraught with the challenges of any social enterprise. Even when using the well-wrought processes that the JBS leaders now have in place, doubts arise, people feel left out, some voices are loud, some quiet, it takes too long, it moves too fast, and there are contradictions. But the school’s commitment to helping faculty work through these challenges is clear.

Key Characteristic: Different Democratic Experiences for Youth and Adults

In all this discussion of democratic governance, there has yet to be mention of having students at the decision-making table with adults. Actually, this isn’t exactly true. The description of the many ways that students experience circle interactions and dialogue at the school include some important instances of young people being at the table, making decisions, taking the lead. The forums for restorative justice, for instance, are authentic decision-making meetings, at which students exercise their knowledge and insights to shape the life of the school in meaningful ways. We once designed a re-entry process at JBS, after a terrible end-of-school-year fight, at which students had a primary role in deciding if other students would be allowed to be present at the graduation ceremony (Hawkes 2009). The stakes can be very high, and time is made in the weekly schedule for these meetings, which shows the priority placed on students having time to participate in such decisions. Likewise, time is made in the weekly schedule for student-led town meetings, the content and facilitation of which is much in the hands of students.

Is it possible for the core value of democracy to live with integrity in a school even if students are not equal partners to adults in the governance of the school? The answer is yes—which is not to say that schools shouldn’t have young people representatively involved in school governance with adults. This should be a priority. There is much to be gained: the eyes of youth are skilled at seeing hypocrisy and inconsistency; the insights of youth offer corrective perspectives and new solutions that adults can’t see; the presence of youth can remind adults of the deeper purpose of our work; and intergenerational settings are typically places where people of all ages better behave themselves. For these and other reasons, young people should be represented at some, if not all, school governance meetings. But representative structures

that allow a few students into a meeting can't be a replacement for the more essential work of cultivating the agency and engagement of all students—and this can only happen through the work that happens in those spheres of school life where all students attend and participate. Restorative justice forums and town meetings aside, it is to the classroom that we must look if we are to know whether democratic schooling is truly aligned to the needs and capacities of young people. There are few schools that will truly empower any large number of students through representative roles or governance structures, or even through direct democracy like casting ballots or voting in a student assembly. The way to empower students is by driving voice and choice and responsibilities for important tasks down into the day-to-day classroom and, simultaneously, through curriculum that tackles important contemporary topics, out into the school and broader community.

One of the questions I asked the faculty at JBS when I visited recently was whether the norms and processes of democratic interaction at the level of faculty governance have parallels in the classroom. In other words, does valuing teacher voice in teacher meetings and school governance have corollary in the valuing of student voice in the classroom?

When I was talking with Tom, the science teacher, I asked him about it. We were sitting in his classroom; learning targets were on the wall, and a small aquarium and artifacts of hands-on learning were everywhere. I asked if he thought there were parallels between the habits of democratic governance at the level of the faculty and a teacher's student-centered pedagogy in the classroom. He remarked how the circle process is used in both faculty meetings and in advisory. He pointed to the learning targets and noted how such statements are akin to how goals and objectives are framed in faculty meetings. He noted how similar methods for gathering feedback and investment—like surveys on a one to four scale—are used in both faculty consensus building and in the classroom.

Another teacher, one of the founding members of the faculty, Marie Leblanc, offered these reflections: “The setting of classroom norms is negotiated in many of our classes. As a member of the community, the facilitator comes in with experienced norms that make the classroom environment run smoothly. This becomes a starting point for students to also contribute norms that they feel might create a better learning environment in class. . . . This is certainly aligned with what happens at our staff meetings where we review the norms, and an invitation is extended to add to these” (email message to the author, July 6, 2017).

In addition, Marie praised the work of a colleague who involves students in developing lesson plans and determining the content of learning. She

sees students working on “professional lesson plans” to guide the learning in this class, and she notes that “this is incredibly empowering for them” (email message to the author, July 6, 2017). She also draws parallels between student self-assessment and teacher goal-setting, between teachers sharing their own reflections on professional practice with colleagues and student-led conferences where students share their reflections on their goals and growth. She notes: “Whenever teachers provide the opportunity for students to assess their semester’s contribution to a course, self-assess their proficiency levels, submit a proposal for an alternative project or are given an opportunity to choose from a selection of alternative projects—these are democratic opportunities” (email message to the author, July 6, 2017).

I would not be surprised if a visitor to JBS, who spent time in both faculty meetings and in classrooms, were to find many parallels. Just as a nation can look to its schools to gauge the integrity of its values, so can a school look to its classrooms. Chances are, if you find the adults using careful discussion protocols to seek solutions at the level of school governance meetings, you’ll find similar discussion protocols for the collective construction of meaning at the level of the classroom. If there are norms for talking about heavy topics in a faculty meeting, chances are you’ll find similar norms in the classrooms. And the classroom, with students, is where it matters most, for the classroom is where school people live most. It’s where you have the time to get good at the skills and habits democracy requires. Being able to listen with empathy, to ask questions of different kinds, to clarify roles in a collaboration, to take an impassioned stance, to make a principled compromise, to be empowered to speak truth to power, to wield positional authority in service of the collective—each of these attributes is as important to good teaching as it is to democratic governance.

Curriculum Content

Being committed to democracy in a school is about form and process, habits and skills. But content matters, too, just as much. Let us remain at the level of the classroom. What does a school’s commitment to democracy look like in the classroom—not just in terms of how, but also in terms of what? In addition to protocols for building trust and enabling student voice, in addition to skillful differentiation and inquiry-based instruction, What is the content that a democratic school posits as worthy? We can answer this question by looking at some samples of what they’re teaching at JBS. Living democratic values with integrity is not only about how we work together, it’s also about what we’re working on. The content of the work that students

and teachers do together will reflect the pressing needs that the school community and broader democratic society are facing. Here is a glimpse of some of the courses that students can choose from at JBS (Olson 2016), excerpted from the course catalog of the year in which I write this. Two social studies classes, for instance, place contemporary concerns in historical perspective:

Borders: How open should our borders be? Today immigration policy [is] at the center of a boiling debate in this country. This academic expedition will explore the political, social, and economic significance of borders between countries. Students will combine their learning from historical immigration policies with their research on other immigration controversies in the United States, past or present.

Revolutionary Women: This course is an exploration of women and girls as powerful individuals and change-makers throughout the world, past and present. Women often are left out of mainstream history or are confined to damaging stereotypes. Students will dig deeper for stories of radical and revolutionary women who have been making history all along. (Olson 2016, 7–8)

Such courses embrace matters of familial and personal importance to students in the school, which are matters of importance to any citizen in our country today. It is fitting in a school named after James Baldwin that students will engage in studies such as these. Baldwin was a writer whose words emanated from a place that was deeply personal and honest. He hid neither his love nor his anger, neither his questions nor his convictions. And it was armed with this—his love, rage, questions, and convictions—that he both assaulted the hypocrisy of America and affirmed its promise of freedom and democratic community.

Like their school's namesake, teachers at JBS often posit the truths of students' personal experience as their points of departure; and with the strength derived from the honest interrogation of that experience, and the self-knowledge that this reflection engenders, they connect the learning to wider circles of meaning, which includes our nation, the ongoing American experiment in democracy, with all its blessings, missteps, flaws, and potentials. English class offerings include:

I Write, therefore I Am: memoir, identity & transformation: Why do people write their own life stories (memoirs)? Why do people draw and paint themselves? How does writing your own narrative help de-

fine who you are (your identity)? . . . Can memoirs and self-portraiture be empowering, or even liberating? In this academic expedition, we explore how expressing identity in memoirs and visual art can transform anyone willing to enter that journey.

Native Son in the Promised Land: Is racism still alive all over our country, from our big cities, to our small towns? If so, how does it operate systematically to place some in power and others (based on their race, gender, sexuality) on the outskirts with less power, value, and worth? How can it affect a person's psyche to be powerless and on the margins; to be considered a problem, an outcast, a menace? (Olson 2016, 10–11)

Math and science teachers also work hard to place a commitment to democracy and the common good at the heart of their curriculum, as shown in two such courses:

Got Water?: Got water? is an expedition that will use water as its first lens of study. Students will collect and analyze statistics based on the results from their water taste test. Students will find evidence to support the “Flint” water crisis. Students will use statistical techniques to analyze the lack of “drinkable” water as a global health concern in order to develop the abilities and confidence needed to analyze any subject . . .

Climate Change: Our New Normal: Experts claim that climate change is upon us, is happening right now, but how do we experience climate on a day-to-day basis? And how will the “new normal” affect us in the future? We will look back into our climate past to get some perspective on the projected changes. We will also explore Earth systems' interactions in urban areas to ensure our survival here in NYC, a vulnerable coastal region. (Olson 2016, 10–11)

I'm reminded, again, of Glickman: “If the central goal of schools were to prepare students to engage productively in a democracy,” he writes, then students and teachers would be focused on the concerns of their “immediate and future life” and their “immediate and extended communities” (Glickman 1993, 9). I agree. The curriculum at JBS embodies this imperative and is a further reflection of the way the school strives to live its core value of democracy with integrity.

Democratic Schools: A Contemporary Imperative

Working with young people in schools is child-rearing work, and it's among the most difficult and important work a community has to do. It gets even harder when you add to it the responsibility of rearing citizens in a nation that aspires to be a democratic society. And it gets harder still when you aspire to organize your school itself as a democratic community: the tensions between positional power and equity of voice are not easy to live with and never neatly resolved; democratic dialogue's need for space and time can feel impossible to come by in a system of rigid calendars, constraining schedules, and factory-like batch-processing of people; and the developmental differences between maturing children and adults make it challenging to determine who should make the rules and decisions—a tension that can be as difficult to negotiate in a school as it is in a maturing family.

The educators at JBS, and schools with similar commitments to democracy, struggle constantly with these tensions. JBS has been able to endure for more than a decade and through some difficult transitions in part because of the transparency and intentionality with which educators struggle with these challenges. To shine light on their practice, I have shared some of the grounding and guiding texts that inform their work—and which the current school leadership would be glad to share in more detail. In addition, I've highlighted in this article several key characteristics of democracy at JBS, as I see it:

- Pragmatism and clarity about positional power. One indicator of this is the work of the current leadership to articulate exactly when and how full-faculty consensus should be the means of making decisions, and when it is not.
- Integrity of democracy's basic form, the circle. One can find this elemental shape of democratic interaction throughout the school, from disciplinary interventions to advisory, to classroom interactions and faculty meetings.
- Differentiated democratic experiences for youth and adults. The school does not treat everyone as the same, but puts the same energetic focus on helping students and faculty feel agency in the places where they spend the most time and have the most developmental readiness and role-related responsibility. Students spend most of their school lives in the classroom, which is where the dominant efforts are made to help them speak their voice and shape their environ-

ment, including—via a curriculum engaged in the pressing problems of their time—the world outside the school.

These observations and my other reflections are a very partial and inadequate representation of the life of this school. Teaching and learning are personal, and a school must be experienced in person to know it. It is important that we visit schools like JBS and the many others so dedicated to the broader democratic purpose of schooling. Let us find the educators committed to democracy in our communities and go visit them. Let us champion their work, if that's what they need; let us protect them from scrutiny, if that's what they need. Let us support them as best we can.

We live in a society shaped by power brokers who view with suspicion, if not disdain, many of the essential elements of our democracy, including free and equitable public schools, a free press, and free and fair elections. Journalists today are threatened and assaulted. Public schools' resources are channeled to private schools. Free elections are compromised—less by foreign meddling than by homegrown Jim Crow intimidation and deterrence.

Yes, our democracy is in contemporary trouble. Educators long committed to democratic schools might say they saw this coming. Debbie Meier (2003) warned us more than a decade ago: “The real crisis we face is not a threat to America's economic or military dominance but the ebbing strength of our democratic and egalitarian culture” (15). Let us hear this warning afresh. The imperative to support educators committed to democratic life is as urgent as it ever has been.

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