As we engage our students in social studies topics—whether at the college level or the secondary level—we are charged with promoting habits of mind and thought that produce our country’s citizens. If we are doing our jobs, we are insistent about finding ways to connect the democracy in our classrooms with the democracy in our culture, and thus impact the effectiveness of both. In the following auto-ethnographic case study, we map five years of one such effort to make connections through a university/urban school reform project. Two social studies teachers and two social studies professors describe and explore the democratizing elements of this effort and their involvement with it. We have found that changes in structure, curricula, and relationships have been dramatic, and that our own work lives have changed as a result.

As we engage our students in social studies topics—whether at the college level or the secondary level—we are charged with promoting habits of mind and thought that produce our country’s citizens. If we are doing our jobs, we are insistent about finding ways to connect the democracy in our classrooms with the democracy in our culture, and thus impact the effectiveness of both. Our work as social studies teachers and educators is inextricably bound to the democratic system of government in which we live. Dewey (1966) insisted that the foun-
dation of democracy as a system of government is identical to that of
the democratic classroom, rooted in the freedom to deliberate. Even
his earliest writings emphasized education as an authentic element of
democratic life—"a process of living and not a preparation for future
living" (1897, p. 77). Parker (1996) argued public schools are one place
encountered by almost all children and are therefore, while perhaps
not ideal, at least "promising sites for genuine civic apprenticeship"
(pp. 10-11).

As social studies teachers and educators, we are thus charged
with doing authentic work. Social studies educators have long been
concerned about authentic work (Newmann, Marks, & Gamoran,
1995) and about deliberation as an important part of our field. We, the
authors of this paper, are currently engaged in authentic work that is
somewhat new for us—the work of Smaller Learning Communities
(SLCs). Teachers and educators working with SLCs have produced a
body of literature related to this very theme of "doing democracy" at
the grass roots level in public schools. The literature is emerging from
intensive fieldwork around democratizing schools.

In our new capacities as members of a growing SLC, we are
curious about how this work might help us create the engaged social
studies experiences we believe our students should have. S. G. Grant
(1997) stated that if there is going to be change in schools, professional
development must change. If we are engaged in meaningful profes-
sional development in our particular field, then we must ask ourselves
what democratic practices would look like if we used them as the foun-
dation for teacher professional development. Grant (1997) argued that
professional development would then be "'curriculum' based on real
issues of and ideas about teaching and a pedagogy that differs from the
traditional" (p. 266). We would, as social studies teachers and educa-
tors, design and move toward in-service and professional development
models that shift the focus from teacher/presenter-centered to collab-
orative, thus promoting the engaged work we all seek to adopt in our
classrooms. It is in this context that we seek to restate the importance
for social studies teachers and educators of doing democratic work and
investigate ways in which the SLC movement provides us with new
and promising opportunities for doing so.

Review of Literature

At the heart of this work are conceptualizations of democracy
and democratic education, both those from the field that have shaped
us, and those that have emerged from our work. Through the review
of literature, we describe that shared conceptualization, followed by
the history and promise of SLCs as framed by the notion of democratic
education.
Conceptualizations of Democracy

Dewey and his colleague stated, "responsibility for the conduct of society and government rests on every member of society; therefore, everyone must receive training that will enable him [sic] to meet this responsibility" (Dewey & Dewey, 1915, p. 304). Dewey himself laid out two elements that characterize a democratically constituted society: "the greatest reliance upon the recognition of mutual interests," and "change in social habits—its continuous readjustment through meeting the new situations produced by varied intercourse" (Dewey, 1966, pp. 86-87). In short, democracy is dependent on the ability of citizens to participate in deliberation (Matthews, 1996). Democratic education involves the creation of environments both in schools and individual classrooms that reflect Dewey's "living together;" thus, our SLC reform efforts have centered on the development of an environment where deliberation, active learning, and reflection are key elements.

More recently, social studies educators have been attempting to define the democratic classroom as it relates to social studies teacher education, wherein "equal partners engage in mutual deliberation, decision making, and action toward the common good" (Wade, 1999, p. 72). Through the process of her research, Wade concluded that "democratic" has many definitions, and that the critical understanding for teachers in democratic classrooms is to clarify and define one's concept of the democratic classroom based on each lived experience with the students. Windschitl (2002) argued that the single most powerful determinant of whether or not constructivist classrooms flourish or flounder is the degree to which teachers/professors themselves understand the concepts of classroom freedom and democracy. We acknowledge this emergent quality of democracy, and affirm that our own and our students’ conceptualizations of democracy have a potent influence on lived experiences in the university and in secondary schools.

We must not only be aware of and reflect on our conceptualizations of democracy; we must also act on these understandings to nurture the growth of democratic structures and habits. Dewey (1966) stressed the importance of deliberation as the foundation for democracy and the need for teachers to model it in service to the public good. He highlighted the need in democratic classrooms for just such deep and disciplined inquiry.

Others have worked to define how the democratic classroom relates to curriculum, curriculum that is "participatory, justice-oriented, and difference-sensitive" (Boyle-Baise, 2003, p. 54). "Doing democracy" in this way requires the marriage of deliberation and action. Newmann, Rutter, and Smith (1989) found that a key variable in mediating teachers’ sense of alienation in urban high schools was the opportunity to
support each other in curriculum development and teaching, such that
the freedom to deliberate could yield action in the form of curriculum
innovation and implementation.

In view of these assertions, we have sought not to impose our
definitions of democratic education on others but rather to create struc-
tures and spaces where deliberation around such definitions might
occur. It is this somewhat illusive, dynamic process that is at the heart
of the grassroots SLC movement and provides the foundation for our
work.

**Connecting Democracy and Social Justice to Small School Reform**

*History of SLCs.* The seed of this grassroots effort germinated in
inner city New York in the mid-1980s. The effort was in response to the
need for more effective public schools, particularly secondary schools.
The growing size of high schools across the country was of particular
concern, with 84% of high school students by the year 2000 enrolled in
schools with populations between 500 and 2,500. Fifty-three percent of
all U.S. high schools were considered “large,” meaning they were com-
prised of over 500 students (Hampel, 2002). Deborah Meier (2002), one
founder of the SLC movement in New York City, recounts the growth
of one effort that began with the vision of parents in a neighboring com-

munity. In that setting, educators, students, and community members
began to deliberate with parents about the impact of these large schools
on students from working class, poor, and ethnic minority communi-
ties, and the need for an alternative. While large buildings provided a
range of classes to meet various student needs, they often were viewed
as impersonal. This deliberation led communities to examine the size
of schools from a different perspective, so that the question of diversity
of course offerings was weighed against the loss of community in large
schools. Communities began to advocate for the restoration of smaller,
stronger, and more successful learning communities.

In Chicago, for example, reformers began to see the creation of
small schools as an important structural change—a first step—in the
improvement of educational options for young people (Ayers, Klonsky,
& Lyon, 2000). Teachers began to notice other profound effects, includ-
ing the multiple benefits of a strengthened professional community
(Daniels, Bizar, & Zemelman, 2001). Students began to comment on
the changed nature of their work—they were being asked to do more
authentic tasks, such as projects and presentations that allowed them
to apply knowledge (Toch, 2003).

*Arguments for and against SLCs.* The impressive benefits of well-
designed SLCs have been well established in the literature, with in-
creasing examples of success across the country (Cotton, 2001; Darling-
Hammond, 1997). Hundreds of SLCs have been created in urban areas,
including Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, and
Seattle. In their brief review of the literature on small schools, Crocco and Thornton (2002) assert, “good reasons exist for taking seriously the restructured school movement, especially in urban areas” (p. 209).

The presence of SLCs has been shown to produce a variety of highly desirable outcomes, including stronger feelings of affiliation and belonging, greater presence of safety and order, higher attendance and graduation rates, increased parent involvement and satisfaction, increased teacher involvement and satisfaction, more strongly integrated and aligned curriculum, and higher student achievement levels (Cotton, 2001). Meier (1996) added ease of governance, prevalence of respect, simplicity, and ease of accountability to the list. These characteristics describe, in short, more democratic secondary school environments.

Following a study of restructured schools in the state of New York, Crocco and Thornton (2002) expressed the concern that, while smaller schools do achieve a more caring environment and engage disadvantaged students better, the interdisciplinary focus required intensive training that might not consistently be provided. They cautioned that “as new teachers begin their work in the schools, administrators must provide oversight to ensure that students acquire not only skills, but also a coherent curriculum that balances a ‘less is more’ approach with attention to certain fundamental features of the social studies curriculum” (p. 229). They found that small schools in New York were adapting curriculum to meet the needs of urban and minority students in ways they described as detrimental to core historical knowledge. They warned that New York small schools might have gone too far in their reaction against highly prescriptive State tests. The authors positioned themselves on middle ground between the comprehensive survey approach embedded in the New York standards and the revised curriculum of the small schools under study. The study, while providing a valuable state-wide perspective for New York, is not generalizable to states such as Ohio, where SLCs are being created within the state-wide assessment structure.

SLCs, social justice, and democratization. A number of SLC researchers have made the connection between school reform efforts, social justice, and democratic education. For example, Daniels et al. (2001) noted: “Dewey called for schools where student-citizens would experience and learn about democracy by making choices and working collaboratively” (p. 139). Democratic values are indeed the foundation for SLCs, wherein teachers and students have to engage with the process of democracy. In its efforts to address inequity in our education system, the SLC movement is a social justice movement. Speaking in terms of their work with SLCs, Ayers et al. (2000) have reminded us, “Small schools must use the community as a vehicle for dealing in issues... Social justice requires these conversations because, without constant questioning and examining of controversy, justice is not learned by
the school community” (pp. 145-146). These are conversations we must have, and this is the work we must continue to do until educational opportunities are equal.

The emerging nature of democracy in these contexts is a delicate and challenging balance of power, as in any democratic experiment. In a 2005 article, Meier argued that reform consistent with democratic ideals takes time and careful attention to offering and protecting the power of choice for the many stakeholders involved in the reform. Members of such communities have to be responsible for both their voices and their actions (Ayers, 2000).

A grassroots effort (Fine, 2005) such as this involves intersections across school districts, communities, and universities and is, of necessity, time-consuming, painstaking, and trying work. In these contexts, a commitment to professional development over time is critical. Ayers et al. (2000) argue that it is this time-intensive learning process that teaches us justice, and that “justice must be learned and practiced—it cannot be mandated” (p. 146).

The Study

This article is the beginning of an extensive case study of an urban, Midwestern school reform effort. It is a description of the grant work in two schools. Grant operations evolved differently in each building, and the work of the professors moved across both buildings and the university. We will assert here that a democratic assignment such as Boyle-Baise (2003) recommends for pre-service teachers would likewise be appropriate for social studies teachers and educators. We argue for the match between our (educators’ and teachers’) shared vision to promote citizenship and the work of creating Smaller Learning Communities (SLCs) in middle and high schools by drawing from a case study of our work over the last five years.

By working on teacher relationships and school structures, we can help teachers move toward more democratic environments in the classroom, thereby supporting the ultimate citizenship education goals of the social studies. For all of us, it is an innovative assignment, a departure from previous and more exclusive attention to social studies curricula alone, in service to the larger objective of democratic structural reform.

We therefore focus this case study on structural change that has the potential for creating spaces for democracy, whether in the community, the school, or the classroom, whether via curriculum or pedagogy. From our various locations within and outside the school, we ask: 1) In what ways is a more democratic environment apparent in the two schools under study? 2) What were the greatest challenges? As we reflect on these efforts, we have found that changes in school

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culture and classroom have been dramatic and that our own work lives have been transformed.

Background

We have been working together for the past five years in the business of turning around a couple of troubled urban schools. The successes are hard won, and at times, it has seemed like an unbearably arduous process of deliberation. Our assignment has been to help with the transformation of a middle school and its feeder pattern high school in a challenged urban district. The reform process has been funded through the federal Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Program (GEAR UP) that will continue for five more years. The goal for this federal program is to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education.

At each site (one high school and one middle school), there is a teacher coordinator—bought out of teaching and paid for by the grant—and a university liaison. The university liaisons work with site coordinators and teachers to support structural change, professional development, and the provision of student services. This article represents the work of these two university liaisons (Nancy and John, both social studies educators) and a social studies teacher from each school (Carey and Anthony). Both Carey and Anthony have Master's degrees and are applying to enter Ph.D. programs in education. They are both leaders at their respective sites.

This urban district is home to over 30,000 students, with 42 elementary schools, 7 junior high/middle schools, and 9 high schools. The middle school includes 7th-8th grades, with approximately 800 students and 60 teachers. The high school enrollment averages around 1,400 with approximately 90 staff. The staffs at both schools, as well as the communities in which they reside, are proud of the tradition that generations of young people graduate from the high school and continue to live and work in the community. In fact, roughly 20% of the high school's staff is composed of its own graduates.

Both schools are located in traditional eastern European immigrant communities whose populations have diversified over the years. At the time work began at the middle school (2000), the state report card painted a picture of a district and a set of schools in desperate straits that made them a prime candidate for reform dollars. The high school under study here had a 50% dropout rate, attendance and discipline problems, and academic failure. The school report card rating was the lowest that Ohio gives out of five possible—"academic emergency." The school was in danger of closing.

Both schools had traditional structures and chains of command before the reform effort began. The high school, for instance, consisted
of a seven-period school day, with most of the periods lasting only 47 minutes. There were few working structures that enabled communica-
tion or collaboration. In the area of chains of command, many teachers
were uninvolved and apathetic about policy making in the building.
The only role teachers played in the creation of building policy was on
the Building Committee—a small group of elected teachers led by the
building union representative.

In the fourth year of the high school reform effort, the school
received an “effective” rating (second highest) and had the second
best scores among the seven high schools in the district on the Ohio
Graduation Test. The feeder middle school also showed gains on state
measures, moving from a similar ranking of “academic emergency” to
one of “continuous improvement.”

The process of reform across the two schools has common and
unique elements. First, the effort began with the process of transforming
the junior high into a middle school. The 7th graders did not reach the
high school until those students themselves became freshmen, so that
the middle school effort is two years older. Second, the middle school
effort began with board-mandated clustering and morning advisory,
structures that had to be fought for and bought in to at the high school.
The fortuitous timing of the incoming grant, combined with these board-
mandated changes, provided the middle school staff with a significant
head start as they implemented change. Work at this junior high began
months before it did at other junior high schools in the district, the most
important element of which was the opportunity for the staff to choose
their team or cluster, something many feel was a key to their success.

Framework

For this case study, we constructed a shared definition of “democ-
ratizing” to guide the construction and analysis. This conceptualiza-
tion was built from an intersection of the review of literature and our
lived experience, and offered us clues by which to identify evidence
of more democratic environments. For our purposes, evidence of a
democratizing environment included numerous opportunities for
deliberation and participation, through structures/processes and new
relationships. Democratizing structures and/or processes included
mutual decision-making, trust, opportunities to understand/define
democracy, freedom to deliberate, freedom to practice and learn (i.e.,
not receiving mandates), continuous readjustment through meeting
new situations, greater student voice, and commitment to professional
development over time. Democratizing relationships included equal
partnerships; acceptance of responsibility for voices and actions; action
for the common good; recognition of mutual interests; intersections
across school districts, communities, and universities; and protection
of stakeholders’ power of choice.

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The focus was on creating opportunities to think about and practice democracy. "Democracy" for our purposes is thus defined and not defined, including the two interdependent elements of "the greatest reliance upon the recognition of mutual interests," and "change in social habits—its continuous readjustment through meeting the new situations produced by varied intercourse" (Dewey, 1966, pp. 86-87).

**Data Collection and Analysis**

We collected and analyzed data from a variety of sources. To answer the first research question about democratizing school environments, we collected both qualitative and quantitative data, including longitudinal demographics on attendance, grades, and discipline from the school district and pilot group interviews with teachers and students. We amassed numerous artifacts over the years, including meeting agendas, class projects, project proposals, internal small grant awards, and school improvement plans. Finally, a key tool for this paper was the collection of auto-ethnographic narrative data (Reed-Danahay, 1997) from each of us. Each researcher wrote individual descriptions of events, observations, and personal reflections about the case. The answer to the second question about challenges emerged as we began our analysis.

The first step in the analysis was to build a chronology of the process in both buildings using the artifacts. This timeline, compiled by one researcher, served as a starting point for describing our experience and helped us piece together the growth of professional and structural relationships between the schools and the university. The next phase of analysis occurred over a series of meetings with the four coauthors. We read through the auto-ethnographic narratives, interview transcripts, and quantitative data summaries to perform a series of member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). When there were disagreements or conflicting perspectives on an event, we debated and discussed the details of each perspective, questioning and clarifying each other’s interpretations.

Once we completed the member checks, one researcher collapsed the data into an initial draft of the case. The professors then analyzed the draft through the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), reading the case once for emergent themes related to democratization. These themes were identified, described, and defined, and the professors read the case a second time to code incidents and align them with themes. The themes were then expanded to include elements from discussions, quotations and excerpts from the original individual narratives and excerpts from other data sources. These elements were sequenced in a final narrative that was edited by the entire team.

It was important to the process that as part of our focus on these two re/forming buildings, two teachers (also coauthors) worked to describe the changes occurring in their rooms and professional lives.
Their auto-ethnographic narratives confirmed and triangulated the participant observation data collected by the university-based researchers. The teacher narratives shed light on the reforms under effort in the buildings and classrooms. Although neither teacher represents the entire social studies department of either building, they are exemplars of the process that has occurred. Exemplars give us the chance to explore the possible. Embedded in the evolution of the project were challenges we encountered routinely as well as the possibilities of small school efforts.

**Findings**

Findings are organized by research question, so that we present evidence of democratization followed by the challenges inherent in the overall effort. Within both sets of findings, we then present data organized by emergent category. We saw democratizing environments emerge in three areas: structures, curricula, and relationships across both buildings. We also describe the most salient challenges in terms of either those with buy-in or fair play among participants. Although the categories are not mutually exclusive, they helped us describe the complexity of new interactions and influences at both schools.

**Democratizing Structures**

We looked across the data to find evidence of changing, democratizing school culture and began to organize data into categories. Although there have been numerous structural changes that have been employed with varying levels of success, the most enduring have been clustering and new whole-school representative government.

Significant structural changes have impacted the culture at both schools, related to both the wider school environment and classroom curriculum. The process of decision making has been grounded from the beginning in the grassroots ideology of small schools reform (Fine, 2005). Both schools have been encouraged to determine their own reform agendas. In a summer conference, Nancy noticed the insistence with which middle school teachers spoke about how the university project director consistently deferred to teachers for decision making, initially to their great frustration.

**Clustering.** Part of the outcome of structural reform at both schools was the emergence of vertical and horizontal vehicles for building relationships. Probably the most significant of these structural changes was the cluster structure, wherein teams of four or five teachers from the core disciplines of language arts, math, science, and social studies had common planning and common students.

The middle school day begins with a 30-minute cluster meeting that occurs from 7:35 until 8:05. Cluster meeting time at the high school
is built into each cluster teacher’s schedule as “common planning time.” Both schools have a provision for convening cluster leaders—monthly at the junior high and twice a semester at the high school. The leaders from each cluster come together to discuss building-wide issues related to a range of activities, and information is disseminated back to the clusters. Cluster leaders are crucial links in communication among the administration, teachers, and GEAR UP staff.

Although school literature calls for common planning time each day, it is interesting to note that many of the teachers do not consider this time “common planning time.” They use the time to discuss issues within their team, make plans, and conference with parents; they struggle to work on serious curriculum issues in a short time. Carey believes this is a developmental process, because some of the clusters that have been working together more consistently and effectively have moved beyond management and discipline issues to co-planning. The cluster structure is also showing early successes for students that are typical of SLCs. Anthony and Nancy were involved in a pilot program and comparative study of 50 freshmen (Patterson, Beltyukova, Berman, & Francis, 2007) during the second year of the reform effort. In collaboration with another teacher from the pilot cluster and the grant evaluator, they found that the Freshman Academy students had significantly better attendance and significantly fewer problems with discipline. Carey’s observations at the middle school corroborate these findings:

Initially our biggest concern was discipline. Help us with discipline, and we will be able to do the types of activities that the literature says we should be doing. Arguments were born over just this topic. Our GEAR UP faculty from BGSU assured us that the research indicated that discipline would improve when we employed new strategies in our classrooms. It became the proverbial chicken-and-egg debate. Finally, those who would never be convinced made way for those of us who were willing to try, and we were on our way. Today the traditional read-lecture style teacher is the minority at our school, not the norm. As a result we have seen improvements in discipline, with fewer suspensions and improved attendance.

Attendance and discipline continue to improve in both schools. For example, following the move to clusters of teachers and students at the middle school, discipline referrals declined significantly and attendance increased as measured by the mean number of days absent per student (Kretovics, 2005). Although improvements in academic achievement were not evident at the time of the earlier Freshman Academy study (Patterson et al., 2007), this high school cohort’s aca-
ademic successes were evident in a subsequent measure when Freshman Academy members scored above average on all content tests in the Ohio Graduation Test, a series of high-stakes, standardized tests. The bottom line is that this structural change, clustering, has led to success on many levels. As Anthony states, "There is something different about having the same students, trying to match up your discipline codes and your grading scales, trying to compromise about how the cluster should be run and what is most effective. It is a beautiful yet tedious thing, clustering."

**New whole-school representative government.** At both schools, representative governing structures have emerged that created forums for deliberation and decision making—the Task Force at the high school and the Professional Development Committee at the middle school. Both are comprised of volunteers who serve in a balance of administrative, cluster, departmental, and union positions. Policies and procedures around the workings of these groups are dynamic and constantly renegotiated. They are written and revised as needed, and then formally incorporated into annual school professional development plans at the end of the year. The governing body at each school organizes its work around a subcommittee structure whose members facilitate management of $100,000-$150,000 annual budgets.

The need has emerged over the years for communication across schools, so that all core departments as well as special education teachers are now meeting together to problem solve, predict, and plan. Although there was initial resistance and long-term habits of blame and mistrust, in the end, a common concern for students as they transitioned from middle school to high school forced the two faculties to begin working together in what we call the cross-school department meeting. The cross-school department meeting appears to be increasing in content, participation, and potential payoff. It is a development we will be watching.

**Democratizing Curricula**

In this context, "curricula" are defined as professional development, planning, and pedagogy. Although these examples of democratizing curricula are born of social studies, the changes are happening across all content areas.

**Professional development.** A unique component of these governing bodies is the site-based, teacher-initiated creation of a professional development calendar. Subcommittees survey their staffs in the spring and generate modules and courses that identify specific needs in the school and community that require professional development. The provision to allow co-teaching of modules and courses weaves practitioner knowledge and more theoretical knowledge into the discourse and fabric of our work.
We have worked to make participation “job-embedded.” Teachers might choose to engage in the modules or classes, but we also work to have the everyday aspects of their lives infused with discourse, such as materials and readings that propel the reform effort or discussion during a cluster meeting. By focusing on the issues, structure, and student work on site, social studies teachers and educators have found purpose in reading literature, collecting data, and proposing recommendations that are more immediate and centered in the community context.

Much of this work was conducted in social studies cross-school meetings, where teachers provided each other with opportunities to grow professionally. Carey offered ideas about alternative assessments for social studies to the group. Both Carey and Anthony attended and presented at the National Council for the Social Studies conference one year and were enthusiastic upon their return about new ideas and resources.

Staff members report the work of the Professional Development Committee and the Task Force at “sharing dinners,” held numerous times over the year. Those who have received funding for projects or conference attendance meet over dinner to share aspects of their projects, reports of results and issues, or recommendations to be considered. Staff members are also invited to create posters and/or papers to disseminate lessons learned.

Pedagogy. Similar to the process of re-structuring, changing pedagogy has unfolded at different paces and in different ways at the two schools. Despite changes in structure, attention to new teaching strategies has not penetrated the high school to the degree it has the middle school. Through the work of cross-school department meetings, we expect that the focus on pedagogy will come soon to the high school in the way it did to the junior high. Nancy has engaged in several conversations with high school social studies teachers during which they complain, “All the students [incoming freshman] want to do is all this active learning." The high school teachers are less familiar with the student-centered strategies in use at the middle school, but are beginning to have those conversations with middle school teachers and incoming students.

Pedagogies that are common practice now at the middle school include action research, deliberative discussions, Web Quest explorations, issues analysis, and alternative assessments such as portfolio and dual-entry journals. Carey speaks of not only the pervasiveness of innovative strategies at the middle school, but also of their student-centered and democratic nature. She calls it “pedagogy to promote participation in a democracy”:

Our very traditional approach to teaching has evolved over the course of the last five years. Once where reading, lecture and
worksheets were the norm, you now see students engaged in problem-based learning activities, service learning opportunities, cooperative learning activities, role plays, extracurricular clubs focused on academic content standards and hands-on approaches to learning.

Both Carey and Anthony have been engaged in evaluating and experimenting with new strategies in their social studies classrooms. They consider these to have democratizing impacts in varying ways. Over the past several years, Carey has been doing research on the impacts of civic education and has implemented various discussion strategies (simulations and jigsaws) and problem-based learning structures, such as WebQuests. Anthony is very new to the idea of varied strategies that promote democratic habits of mind. He participated in a summer workshop that focused on inquiry-based planning through the use of technology. He learned to create his own WebQuest and to use iMovie. He reacted very positively to the ideas presented in the course, but is very frank about the distance he had to travel:

Inquiry-based learning? Maybe I didn’t listen very well during my undergrad years, or maybe I went to college too long ago, but before we began GEAR UP, I had never even heard of it. I thought, “I have the information; you need the information, so listen. Then when the test comes, write down everything I tell you. No problems.”

He was also very interested in learning about ways in which the use of technology can facilitate a more student-centered classroom, and he describes the equally long road he has had to travel in that direction:

How did I use computers and technology? I would make up some sort of vague assignment with unclear parameters (simply because I didn’t have the energy to put something good together) and then I would sit nodding off in the corner as the students worked on the assignment. If they walked up to me to ask what they were supposed to do, I would say, feebly, “I don’t care; just do something and turn it in.” As embarrassing as this is, I have to say that I did not know there could be so much more in assignments. I did not know that we could actually challenge them to critically analyze through their schoolwork. I didn’t know that really being a teacher would take so much time and effort.

Anthony, a 9-year veteran social studies teacher, tried a simulation during a Cold War unit for the first time last year. This was in the Winter 2008
context of participating in a study with other teachers in Northwest Ohio to explore the use of reverse chronology in history teaching. He is entertaining new ideas and is having positive experiences with more democratic approaches.

Planning. In addition to successes noted above, both Anthony and Carey report important academic successes from interdisciplinary planning. They have watched the obvious connections students make when teachers collaborate by planning across the disciplines. Students have noticed, too. Anthony’s students still remember the unit they did on the Russian Revolution, when they were reading *Animal Farm* simultaneously in their English class, and they report on how much easier it was to learn and remember (Patterson et al., 2007).

In Carey’s cluster, interdisciplinary planning and teaching take two forms. First, through grant writing they work to support major initiatives in their curriculum, especially related to service learning. Second, topics are integrated on a small scale, daily basis with such activities as using social studies and science vocabulary for spelling words and using literature in a language arts class to support social studies topics. Most recently, language arts and social studies departments collaborated on a student project to assess a unit on the Middle Ages. The project rubric allowed for a grade in both language arts and social studies based on the appropriate content standard.

Democratizing curricula, while clearly a goal, has emerged as both a marker of success and a struggle for many. It is one area where we see enormous growth and change, coupled with an awareness of how far we have to go. Carey and Anthony serve as exemplars of the broadening pedagogical continuum across which they and their colleagues are now moving.

Democratizing Relationships

Undergirding the whole-school structural changes and curricular reforms discussed above is what we all agree has been the most salient characteristic of the process—the renewal and creation of many types of relationships. By participating in a recursive process that at first glance appears focused on structural reforms, the grant site directors have worked to model what democratic relationships might look like in an educational setting. Explicit efforts have followed to recreate these model relationships within individual teachers’ classrooms. With small learning communities at the center, we have identified new teacher-to-professor relationships, student-to-student relationships, student-to-teacher relationships, and school district-to-university relationships.

Carey and Anthony’s experiences with clustering have been very positive, and they continue to advocate for and find new ways to work within the cluster structure. While Anthony acknowledges the tangible
improvements that have emerged from the clusters, he continues to invoke the relationship aspect:

In the area of clustering, there are many benefits. Interdisciplinary planning, more consistent discipline and follow up on students, common planning, and so on. But the biggest difference it has made, not only in my life as a teacher but in the whole school, is in the relationships. Almost every important relationship in the school is brought to a new level.

Anthony’s positive experiences led him to a set of evolving questions about relationships, questions that became the focus of his Master’s project and have drawn our attention to the ways in which all sorts of new relationships have grown through this process.

Teacher-professor. Carey is enthusiastic about new teacher-professor relationships. She and John have developed one that goes both ways. Carey co-teaches with John in masters classes held on site, and John is in Carey’s classroom often working with methods students and student teachers. Carey also worked with Nancy to offer pedagogy seminars in a Teaching American History grant. These relationships have led Carey to enter a Ph.D. program in education. Anthony has also applied for entry to a local Ph.D. program. He and Nancy are working together in numerous ways. Anthony co-teaches the methods class and also hosts student teachers from the teacher preparation program at Waite High School. The feedback loops are multiplying and strengthening.

Student-student and teacher-student. Anthony is passionate about the changes he has seen in student-to-student relationships. The cluster structure has created opportunities for a culture that feels like family:

It seems as if a cluster forces the relationships to be less like normal school relationships and more like a family environment. In the student-student relationship, they become more like brothers and sisters, which can be positive or negative. On the positive side, they spend all day together. They lose the desire to impress each other and they become a much more cohesive group. They help each other more often and they know a lot more about each other and how they are doing in each class. This leads to a lot of peer encouragement. On the negative side, when they argue, they sound like siblings. It can be carried from class to class because they are always together.

Anthony’s experiences have improved his own attitude toward teaching. Since the beginning of the reform effort, Anthony has noticed vast improvements in teacher-to-student relationships. He reports feeling more positive about teaching, stating, “I am much more likely
to actually care about their grades and follow up with a call to parents than I ever was before. You grow a strange attachment, even to freshmen, by the end of the year, and then for the next 3-4 years, they constantly are stopping by and visiting and telling me how they are doing and so on.”

He discussed the benefits of improved relationships between students and teachers and resulting increased opportunity for intervention in the lives of students who are struggling with many common issues. Where many who have not built these relationships may not be approached or welcomed by the students, the teachers who are known well and trusted find a wealth of opportunities to help students with more than just academics.

School district-university. The family analogy extends to other emerging relationships. John and Nancy are very aware of the multiple ways in which school district-to-university relationships have changed their daily lives. For one, there are many weekly trips to the East Side and lots of “ground time.” Both Nancy and John have “East Side Day,” a designated time each week to spend on site. The GEAR UP relationship with the teachers’ union continues to evolve, as partners generate policy through existing structures that ease reform efforts. For example, recently a policy was approved that eased the process of student-teacher placement in East Side schools.

Nancy and John also note the richness of the relationships that have grown with teachers. Professors are in secondary classrooms, teachers guest lecture in methods courses, and we co-author research and attend conferences together. There are actually a couple of retired teachers who are now working from the university side to promote SLC reform and serve in other capacities.

Challenges

The challenge from the beginning has been to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education, and to do so by democratizing the school environment. To be clear, not everything is working at both schools. Some things are not working at either. We have not shied away from conflicts. The case study has highlighted two persistent and related challenges to democratizing these environments: broadening engagement and building trust.

Broadening Engagement

Although we as a cohort of professionals cannot say enough about clustering and small schools, the authors of this piece also have to admit that the process has been difficult and messy in every way that one would expect from democratic work. As with all democratic
processes, there has been much frustration, given the difficult process of collaboration and the complexity of gaining buy-in at every turn. Carey talks about the middle school struggle to create whole-school, democratic structures:

Our first few years were rough, as in shouting matches, many bruised egos and hurt feelings; however, out of those “discussions” came understanding, purpose, and focus on the work ahead. Our school did not begin to feel even tingling of successful democratic reform until the mid-third and fourth year of the project . . . .

At the high school level, trying to get teachers out of their normal teaching lives and involved in the reform has been an enormous challenge. We are concerned about student involvement and are actively seeking ways to engage them on every level. Our students have many after-school commitments and are often unavailable for after-school activities.

**Building Trust**

Much of the process has been one of people in all roles gaining a level of trust. Deborah Meier (2005) submits that the power of choice is critical in such reform efforts; yet, teachers were initially uncomfortable with and distrustful of so much choice. For example, both Nancy and John report the difficulty of encouraging teachers and administrators to spend their allotted annual budgets. Nancy stated, “It was amazing to see $2,000 sitting with the clusters by the end of the year. Only one of seven clusters tapped in to their allotment.” While the middle school has become more adept at this over the years and breaks even, this past year, the high school had a $30,000 surplus. Regarding the difficulty of choice, Carey says:

Even within our large urban district we have found areas of empowerment through choice. There were areas in which we have choice where before there was none; now there is involvement in democratic decision making by all stakeholders. For example, the once thought of “sacred” schedule has been altered in ways in which teachers never felt they had any legitimate voice.

**Conclusion**

We began this effort to document and reflect on our identities as social studies teachers and educators, and on our work with Small Learning Communities using an auto-ethnographic process (Reed-Danahay, 1997). This process showed us abundant opportu-
nities that SLCs provide social studies teachers and educators for doing democratic work, namely, creating structures, curricula, and relationships where deliberation, active learning, and reflective work are key.

The first question was, "In what ways is a more democratic environment apparent in the two schools under study?" If we measure the integrity of our effort by Fine’s (2005) and Meier’s (2005) definitions of long-term, grassroots, democratic reform, we are seeing success, as we continue to share responsibility across the East Side and the Academy. We saw evidence of these successes in democratizing processes and structures such as mutual decision making, growing trust, numerous opportunities to understand/define democracy, freedom to deliberate, freedom to practice and learn, and readjustment through meeting new situations. There has indeed been a commitment to professional development over time. Relationships have grown, with evidence of more equal partnerships, shared responsibility, growing recognition of mutual interest, and joint action toward the common good. The intersections across school district, community, and university have multiplied, and increasing numbers of stakeholders are being brought in.

If we measure ourselves by Cotton’s list of desirable outcomes (2001), we are indeed creating successes for students that have democratizing effects. We have documented stronger feelings of affiliation and belonging, greater presence of safety and order, higher attendance and graduation rates, increased parent involvement and satisfaction, increased teacher involvement and satisfaction, more strongly integrated and aligned curriculum, and higher achievement levels. We have qualitative data that document the democratizing nature of multitiered relationships.

The second question was, "What were the greatest challenges?" If we measure ourselves by the sustained nature of the reform and its discomforts, we are again succeeding. It has been a 6-year project thus far, with an ongoing commitment. It is the commitment to not walk away from a fight, and the awareness that conflict is opportunity. It is the struggle to maintain our grassroots focus, built upon the shared needs of the community and academy. The effort is, in fact, distinguished by its challenges, the most salient being broadening engagement, interpreting achievement data, and involving the larger community. They are evidence of a democratic process at work.

Amidst the challenges are opportunities. Our work (that of teachers and educators) has changed as a result of our involvement. It seems as if we are all much, much busier. The physical and emotional time commitments are palpable. The case study details the numerous ways in which our work has changed — ways in which we have become more engaged with community. Our conversations are much richer and more
frequent. We continue to challenge each other in defining “engaged work.” We question how we define democracy and how we enact it. How do we mark the effectiveness of professional development with teachers? How do test scores fit in? In what ways do we value portfolios of work, skills, and attitudes? Must we always agree? Where are the spaces for practitioner knowledge?

Teachers like Anthony and Carey continue to talk about how our shared work is moving them to a new place professionally. Teacher educators/researchers like Nancy and John continue to work to structure their efforts as collaborative, reciprocal efforts to build communities of inquiry. Education both models and teaches what Mirel (2002) has called the paradox on which U.S. culture hinges, “the shared experience of controversy over common values” (p. 55). In building relationships by engaging in debate of school structure, classroom pedagogy, and content knowledge, the teachers we work with—and we ourselves—have in small part contributed to what Mirel (2002) says democracies need: struggle, deliberation, and work towards a common purpose. Perhaps the most salient way in which our work has changed is this understanding of what collaboration feels like.

Implications

For social studies professionals, with our grounding in the democratic project—in a purpose infused with issues of social justice—questions about schooling and school reform provide us space to influence the environments and individuals with which we work. Our work as social studies teachers and educators is inextricably bound by the contexts in which we exist. To be successful, we must negotiate the boundaries between practitioner and theoretician. We must take up Dewey’s call to deliberate (1966), while intertwining action (Wade, 1999). We must constantly consider whether we are working on them, with them, for them, or next to them, and why.

Maybe the answers are as simple as making our work with and for teachers and schools mirror the work we want teachers to engage in with students: active, participatory, inquiry-based, constructivist. In doing so, we move the field and move our work to focus on important issues. Although our study was focused on two schools and the experience of a limited number of educators, it has identified three key emergent areas for reform and reflection:

- Democratizing structures: those that create vertical and horizontal links for teachers engaged in reform to adopt smaller, responsive organizations. These are spaces of deliberation, scales upon which the interests of all parties are weighed in our continued reform efforts.
Democratizing curricula: those that are the best practices of democratic planning and pedagogy, in that they are diverse, student-centered, and collaborative. They help us build teacher-to-student communities of inquiry. They also help us build professional development programs and modules that model these same communities of inquiry and constructivist spaces for the staff.

Democratizing relationships: those that require social studies researchers and educators to adopt a stance of quiet humility and a sense of community. University researchers work with teachers to answer important contextual questions about their practice and the environment in which it occurs. Teachers work with university researchers as they work to alter their relationships in large urban school structures. Students and teachers become part of the same community of inquiry.

As social studies teachers and educators, our common commitment is to communities that incubate and nurture the growth of democratic culture that is deliberative and engaged in promoting social justice. It is how we learn to be fair.

Our work with these schools is an effort to demonstrate that those interested in helping teachers meet the citizenship education goals of the social studies might best work to develop more democratic structures for building staffs, teachers, and the students working with them.

Ultimately, our work is unfinished, perhaps necessarily so. Democracy is an unfinished project; Parker's (1996) civic apprenticeship—the structure, curricula, and relationships of the school—is unfinished as well. By working with/in the framework and tradition of SLCs, we believe social studies educators can help create the kind of learning environments that working class, poor, and ethnic minority students deserve.

As we work within communities to listen to needs, issues, and priorities, we are reminded of Michele Fine's (2005) call: “The small schools movement was never simply about size” (p. 1). It was about creating democratic, challenging, engaged, learning environments where students can develop real relationships. At the heart of the work, we hope to improve the social studies education in place at our schools, at work with social studies teachers, and infused in the preparation of future teachers at the university. No one spot is sufficient. It is the "large work of small schools," and social studies teachers and educators in classrooms and universities are, perhaps, best suited to take up the challenge.

Our findings suggest that we, as social studies teachers and educators, should care about small schools reform efforts, because creating SLCs has the potential to support strong, vibrant social studies teaching
and learning, while giving us all firmer ground on which to build a
civil society that works for all of its citizens. We believe the large work
of small schools reform deserves attention as a catalyst for promoting
democratic classrooms, ultimately to serve the public good. It is work
we, as social studies teachers and educators, should do.

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