

## Paley's Paradox: Educating for Democratic Life

John F. Covaleskie

*Northern Michigan University*

What I am going to call Paley's Paradox is the paradox of democratic education. Put most directly, it says that education for democracy need not — indeed cannot — itself be democratic. While it is true that the reality of democratic citizenship is rooted in, among other things, the freedom of the individual, it is equally true that the reality of democratic life is rooted in the individual's using that freedom in certain ways and denying herself the pleasure of using it in others. For example, democracy allows individuals to use their wealth and power to influence the political process in ways that preserve and enhance their wealth and power and grant privilege to their children. However, democracy requires that wealthy and powerful individuals refrain from so using their wealth and power, for when they so use it, democracy becomes plutocracy, and democratic life is a mere formality, without substance or meaning. The paradox of democracy is that, while democratic life is indeed about individual liberty and freedom, it is equally about the common, as opposed to individual, good.

There is no more important job that schools have in any presumptively democratic society than to prepare children to take their place and fulfill their responsibilities as citizens. In this context, there is no more important part of that job than developing a democratic character. No small part of this democratic character consists of specific virtues that allow democracy to be more than a procedure for settling disputes about public policy issues (itself no small thing, I might add). However, as John Dewey spent a life trying to make clear, democracy is not just a procedure for settling disputes — indeed, it is something totally other than that; it is a way of life that seeks human fulfillment in society and community.<sup>1</sup> Democracy, therefore, requires certain outcomes to those disputes, or, to be more specific, it requires certain *kinds* of outcomes to these disputes. We cannot have a democracy as Dewey envisioned the ideal if we are each engaged in the pursuit of our own personal goals without regard to how those goals and the pursuit thereof affect those around us, including strangers.<sup>2</sup>

The consequence of this is that the educational task of any democratic society is to foster those virtues that are required of democratic citizens. Among these are certainly the communicative virtues discussed by Nicholas Burbules and Suzanne Rice,<sup>3</sup> but also virtues such as patience (that is, the willingness to allow time for democratic resolution), charity, justice (in a robustly biblical sense of giving to others what they need, not merely our cramped sense of giving people only what they have somehow earned), intelligence and perception applied to social problems, empathy, and acceptance of others and others' differences.

In the previous paragraph I spoke of “fostering” virtue. It is difficult to know exactly what verb is correct. We might think of it as “inculcating,” “instilling,” or “developing” virtues. Some might even speak of “indoctrinating,” a term with an intentionally negative connotation. Each of verbs these captures some sense of what

it is that we are doing in educating for democracy, but I will speak of “fostering” these virtues and dispositions more often than not. I suggest that this best conveys the idea that we do indeed want to encourage the acquisition of virtue, and that the best way to do that was described by Aristotle twenty-five centuries ago in the *Nichomachean Ethics*. He said that one develops the dispositions to act virtuously by acting virtuously. Thus does one acquire the habits that we identify as virtuous. This insight has been updated by many, including Vivian Paley and Deborah Meier; Philip Jackson, Robert Boostrom, and David Hansen;<sup>4</sup> Durkheim;<sup>5</sup> and Dewey.

In *Democracy and Education*, especially chapter four, Dewey discusses this issue when considering the nature of habits. Habits may be mindless, he says, but need not be. We can choose to be mindful of our habits and mindfully shape them, ending old ones and developing new ones. In this process, we must first identify those habits that they need to change and then we must begin to form new habits to replace them. We must decide the ways in which we fall short of our ideals of action, and then we must set about making our preferred actions habitual. For example, as is common with men of my generation, there came a time when I realized that my thinking, and far too often my words, were sexist and shameful. There then came a period of reforming my habits of speech and altering my patterns of thought as well. During this period of re-formation, I was acting in ways that were better than I was by habit. But, if this continues long enough, my habits, not just my actions, will be reformed. And it is critical to note the foundational premise of this essay: democracy requires *this* change in me; *to the extent that I do not re-form my sexist attitudes, my ability to function as a democratic citizen is diminished and democracy is thereby weakened*. To argue that in a democracy one have a right to be sexist is to miss the point: it is precisely as a member of a democratic polity that I have an obligation to *not* exercise this supposed “right.”

Two questions that draw the attention of educators, policy makers, and philosophers of education alike are: How do we prioritize that purpose of education — citizenship preparation and education, with the other tasks of education? And, how does one go about this project of forming democratic citizens? In this essay I will primarily be concerned with the second question.

Ideally, there is not a conflict between the different purposes of education. Purposes other than formation of democratic citizens are, in an ideal situation, within the overall goals of citizenship. Preparation for the world of work is obviously part of what schools are meant to do. Since citizens must, among other things, be self-supporting and contribute to the common good, preparation for the world of work need not interfere or compete with preparation for democratic citizenship. However, market capitalism, unrestrained by democratic governance, seeks and rewards an entirely different set of virtues than those enumerated above, including acquisitiveness (once known as greed — significantly, a vice, not a virtue at all) and competition. The democratic virtues may coexist in an individual with the capitalist ones, but one or the other will be somewhat attenuated. The central problem of American democracy in the beginning of the twenty-first century is that the needs of democracy are subordinate to the demands of capitalism, rather than the reverse. But that is an argument for another essay.

The central concern of this essay is: What does education for democratic life look like? Are there ways that teachers can act and structure their classes to foster democratic virtues? In this essay I will examine Paley's educational practice, and, to a lesser extent, Meier, in the light of Dewey's theory of democracy. Each of these educators has made her class or school into an incubator for democracy, where children learn to act in ways that democratic citizens must. The premise of this essay is that it is a mistake to think that education for democracy emphasizes the child's freedom. If "democracy" is the rich and robust social life lived in common for the common good that Dewey envisioned, then the teacher must limit children's freedom in ways that foster the virtues that are necessary for democratic life. This is the heart of Paley's Paradox.

In all her books, but perhaps most concretely in *You Can't Say You Can't Play*, Paley shows us how children learn to be members of a democratic society not by experiencing maximum free choice, the exercise of *their* "rights," but by learning to give maximum attention to the rights of others. Indeed, the central fact of her curriculum that year was that in the public spaces of democratic life, such as school, there is no right to exclude others. The lesson was that democracy is about the well-being and safety of all members. With this blunt rejection of the "rights" objections to her rule against exclusion, she teaches her children much about what democratic society is. There is no doubt that she is limiting the freedom and liberty of some children. But her point is that not every freedom, not every liberty, and certainly not every desire is a right; there are things that we simply must not do in democratic life. And, having worked with children all her life, she is not of the Romantic notion that, left to themselves, children will somehow discover how to be good. As she puts it: "Story is never enough, nor is talk. We must be told, when we are young, what rules to live by. The grownups must tell the children early in life so that myth and morality proclaim the same message while the children are still listening."<sup>6</sup>

Up to this point I have argued the general point that democratic life is at least as much about the common good as it is about individual rights and freedom. It is a matter of connection and belonging at least as much as (and probably more than) independence. American democracy is so problematic precisely because it forgets this (I take the view that the conception of democracy herein examined is consistent with Dewey's notions of democracy as shared life). The exercise of individual liberty must be constrained by a concern for the common good. Complexity is added by the fact that, if the resulting polity is to have any claims to be democratic, the constraints must be voluntary, which is why education is so important; it is a means to instill and/or foster the disposition to be so self-restrained.

I will now point out the ways that Paley and Meier prepare children for the demands of democratic citizenship, precisely by the sorts of limits they place on their children. As a sub-point, I will argue that children are not yet full citizens and therefore do not have the sorts of rights that come with citizenship; they are properly subject to the authority and guidance of adults, and that indoctrination is one important aspect of education, especially (and this is the heart of Paley's Paradox) education for democratic life. Both these educators firmly believe in the importance

of a robust democratic society. They recognize that we must not allow children emphasis on independence before they are capable of democratically responsible independence, or let children believe that democracy is nothing more than their pursuit of their happiness. To make this mistake is to doom democracy to mere formalities, with no substantive meaning or value.

#### PALEY'S PARADOX: LIMITS AND FREEDOM

*You Can't Say, You Can't Play* tells the story of the year in which Paley saw — really *saw* — that her children were mean to each other, specifically that they were hurting each other through simple common acts of exclusion from games and activities in the classroom. Now to say that she saw this for the first time does not mean that she had not noticed it before, but that she had not seen it as a problem about which she could do something. She had seen it, of course — all teachers *see* the exclusion and teasing in the younger grades, just as they see the cliques and status in the older grades. But she had seen it as “the way things are,” as “kids can be cruel,” or “life can be tough.” Indeed, even after reading the book, this is a common view among my students — that Paley was not so much ignoble as misguided in her intervention. Since exclusion and cruelty are part of the real world, it is good for kids to get used to that fact early. A safe classroom where certain kids were not made aware of their status would ill-equip them for the savagery of the world they would face outside of school.

But for Paley, her new way of seeing the interactions among her students required her to act. And whether we view her actions as democratic or not depends a great deal on exactly what we mean by democracy. The process was democratic in one sense: when she felt the need to act she began to conduct a series of discussion, among her kindergartners and also with her former students now in the upper grades, about whether she should make the rule that students against exclusion in school. The general sense of the students was that she should not — that it might be a good idea in theory, but that it would not work. There was among the children also the concern for rights: the rule would interfere with the rights of the children to select their own playmates. And this is the principled objection to the new rule — the “democratic” objection, if you will. And this is, of course, a real issue, for democracy means little if it does not mean that individuals have rights, among them the right of choosing one's associates (in kindergarten terms, one's playmates).

Paley's response to this concern is to distinguish between the *rights* one has in one's private space and the *obligations* one has in public spaces. She is not drawn into the “my rights versus your rights” sort of debate that so often bedevils this sort of discussion in the rhetoric of liberal democracy. Paley cuts through that thicket directly, making the claim that there is no right of exclusion in the public square.<sup>7</sup> Her point is not that children (and adults) do not have rights in the public square. Her point is that excluding others is not one of the rights that we have. Further, her argument is that children need to learn that fact early on if democracy is to work.

This is strikingly like Meier's opposition to privatizing school choice.<sup>8</sup> In her argument against privatization, Meier holds that choice is probably a necessary condition for true school reform because school reform will require that schools,

families, and students all work together, and school choice is the best way to make this happen. However, Meier cautions us that there is a difference between choice between public schools under public control and choice that includes private schools that would be funded by vouchers or some similar method. The difference, she says, goes to the heart of the nature of democracy. In the case of private schools, each individual chooses the sort of education his or her child will receive; there is accountability in this system, as its advocates proclaim, but there is no *public* accountability. That is, there is no public beyond the collection of individual consumers to whom the board of directors must account for the education they provide. Public schools, on the other hand, are funded by the public, and they provide a set of choices that are approved and funded by the public (at least potentially).

Meier points to the long-term contribution of public schools precisely in that they require that we work together on a common project. In admitting that disputes over public policy can become pretty acrimonious, she argues that it is this very fact that gives them their value for democratic life. In language very like Paley's, she claims that, "if democracy survives such hostility it's because we assume we're members of a common club, stuck with each other."<sup>9</sup> Once again, the point is that education for democracy is not itself democratic, at least it is not about freedom of choice, but restriction of choice. Paley's children also learned that they are "stuck with each other." They spent much of their time that year negotiating the meaning and implications of the policy of non-exclusion. The lesson was the meaning of inclusion: under what conditions does it apply and in what ways?

The question at issue here is a variation of the general question of moral education: "How does one become good?" In this context, the specific question is, "How does one acquire the virtues required to function as a democratic citizen?" Both these educators understand that these virtues are not naturally part of human nature, or at least not automatically so. While perhaps natural to us as potentials, the virtues of democracy require fostering if they are to be realized as actualities. Hence, in both Paley's classroom and in Meier's school, there is what we might think of as democratic constraints; constraints are placed on the behavior of young people in an effort to foster in them the habits of action that express the virtues of democracy. The thesis of their life's work is that democracy is more than freedom coupled to a willingness to leave others alone. Indeed, in both situations young people are confronted by the idea that democracy consists of adults, as Meier puts it at one point, "getting in their face." That is, if we are to have democracy, we must shape the actions of the young and constrain their choices so that, as adults, when constraints can not so easily be applied, and even less so in the name of democracy, constraints will not be needed since the democratic virtues will have been properly fostered in the young. Democracy requires that its citizens do the right thing, and do it freely. But this in turn requires that at some point they and their dispositions and their habits have been properly shaped.

The idea that preparation for democratic citizenship is best done by placing limits on the freedom of the young is counterintuitive. The principled objection is that to so constrain children in their choices will limit their freedom, depriving them

of their right to self-determination. As a father of two now-grown daughters, I am fairly certain that this claim gives far too much weight to the ability of adults to prevent children from making choices of their own as they grow up. This hunch of mine is probably also related to my own maturation; I was born in 1947, which makes me a member of both the conformist Eisenhower years of my childhood and the rebellious Woodstock Generation. My parents would be as bemused as I at the claim that rearing children within a particular and strong framework of ethical and social beliefs and constraints prevents one's children from making contrary choices as adults.

Be that as it may be, I would like to argue a slightly different point: children do not have the sort of rights that are posited when one speaks of freedom of choice and self-determination. The reason for this is simple: children do not have the capacity for this kind of choice, this kind of freedom. Freedom requires not just the political framework that supports its exercise. More fundamentally, the exercise of this sort of freedom requires the ability to exercise it. So we must consider, "What does that require?" "And in what way are children not capable of its exercise?"

#### THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN

What are the rights of children? For surely it would not do to say they had none. And yet both these educators, out of concern for the democratic development of the young people in their care, impose specific and, in some ways, objectionable restraints on the choice and the actions of the young. This in itself is not so remarkable; adults do this with children all the time. What is noteworthy, though, is that they do so in order that the young will become fit for democratic citizenship. How can this be? How can these "undemocratic" restraints be a proper, indeed, perhaps a necessary, part of education for democracy?

The first question to consider is that of children's rights. What rights do children have as children, and are those rights different for children in a democratic polity? Children do in fact have certain rights, but they are not the same rights as adults have. For example, children have the right to be cared for and protected by the adults around them. Adults do not have this right. Children have the right to be educated, and the adults around them have a corresponding obligation to provide that education. Adults have rights to education, but are obligated to make provision for this themselves. Children have the right to live in a decent society, but that also must be provided by the adults who care for them. They have the right to be prepared for the demands that their society will place on them, but they have no way of knowing what those demands will be, and even less idea of how to prepare to meet them; this too is the responsibility of the adults who care for them. There are other examples of this, but these will illustrate the basic point: while it true that we recognize and value the rights of both adults and children, it is false to assume that the rights of both are the same.<sup>10</sup> Children have the right to be cared for; adults have, in one sense, the "right" to care for them poorly, but adults have no right to actually do so.

So we must ask, what are the relevant rights that children properly hold as children in a democratic society? There is not the space in this essay to entirely answer this question, but it is important to sketch out that, in general, children have



many rights as dependent human beings. But these are human rights and are not the issue here; here, we are concerned with the political rights held by children. Again, we are dealing only in generalities here, but in general children's political rights are limited. They are not the full-blown civil rights enjoyed by adults. This is simply because those full-blown civil rights of adults are connected to the civil obligations that adults have that children do not. Similarly, the exercise of freedom also requires the ability to foresee consequences of one's actions, which children also do not have in any robust sense. These lacks are simply related to the nature of childhood. Children do not have the sort of rights that adults have because they have neither the responsibilities that require these freedoms nor the ability to properly exercise them.

Dewey is helpful in this respect. Freedom requires intelligence, he points out in *Democracy and Education* and again in *Experience and Education*. This is because one who is unable to adjust one's actions in accordance with one's long-term ends loses the ability to make one's projects fruitful, to turn one's desires and efforts into accomplishments. But this is just what children cannot do; they cannot do the sort of long-term coordination of their actions with their desires that makes freedom real instead of nominal. The notion of "freedom" that is the reality of childhood is the idea of simply doing what one wants at the time," of following every impulse. But this makes a mockery of freedom. This is no new insight. Not only Dewey, but Plato and Aristotle have pointed out that slavery to one's immediate desires, one's impulses, is a debilitating form of slavery, and no freedom at all. Once again, it makes some sense to say that one has the right to choose that sort of life, but, even if that is so, one also has the responsibility as an adult to do all in one's power to make certain that the children in one's care do not do so.

This is what Paley and Meier show us in practice. They do not try to balance competing rights. Instead they put the rights that their children have in the context of the rights and responsibilities of adults and the rights and responsibilities that their children will have as adults. At the heart of the hidden curriculum of their practice is the message that no one has the right in a democratic society to act in ways that diminish the society that has nurtured them. They may and should critique and suggest and push for change, but they have no right to act in ways that benefit themselves at the expense of democracy, understood as the Deweyan project of mutual striving and mutual thriving. Their pedagogy is aimed at the developing democratic citizens by shaping the actions of the children they teach. Their message is not that the children have no rights. Indeed, their teaching gives students a great deal of voice and choice in making decisions within clearly defined boundaries. However, and this is the paradox, the deepest habits of democratic life are, in a real sense, forced on the children. If democratic citizens are to exhibit the sort of self-restraint and self-discipline, even at times self-denial, that are the cornerstones of a substantive democracy, this can happen only if responsible adults require of children that they are inclusive in the public spaces of our schools. This is only a denial of children's rights if we fail to acknowledge the responsibilities of democratic life. But it certainly a denial of the children's will, even the collective majority will of the students in their ignorance of the demands democracy will make on them. This is just

why the classroom that restricts children's freedom in the right ways is the best way to prepare children for the later exercise of responsible freedom in a democratic society.

- 
1. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916); *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1927); *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Books, 1938); and *School and Society* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980).
  2. Michael Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984).
  3. Nicholas C. Burbules and Suzanne Rice, "Communicative Virtues and Educational Relations," in *Philosophy of Education 1992*, ed. H.A. Alexander (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1993).
  4. Philip W. Jackson, Robert E. Boostrom, and David T. Hansen, *The Moral Life of Schools* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993).
  5. Emile Durkheim, *On Moral Education: A Study in the Theory and Application of the Sociology of Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1961).
  6. Vivian Gussin Paley, *You Can't Say You Can't Play* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 110.
  7. *Ibid.*, 22.
  8. Deborah Meier, *The Power of Their Ideas: Lessons from a Small School in Harlem* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).
  9. *Ibid.*, 7.
  10. This is a good area in which to point out the ambiguity and inadequacy of rights language in general: while it may indeed be the right of a parent, for example, to be unduly harsh with a child (short of legally defined abuse), no parent has the right to do so. Similarly, while we might at some point argue that children have the right to choose their own path in life, even if that means that they will not pay back the society that nurtured them, no child has the right to do that.