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Democracy in the classroom

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Abstract

This paper presents the case for a progressive education that embraces notions of democratic values in the classroom, and an education for democratic citizenship. Informed by John Dewey's and Martin Buber's philosophies of education, and Homi Bhabha's concept of 'third space' work, the paper examines the problematic and contested issues of emancipation and empowerment for learning in the classroom and across the school. Democracy in schooling requires a learning environment where teachers and student are encouraged and empowered to engage in mutual dialogue over matters to do with teaching and learning. Acknowledging this requirement, and the traditional agential and power-related positioning of teacher-student relationships and role identities in the classroom and across the school, this paper argues for the creation of learning environments where classroom practice is democratically 'top-down' teacher-guided and 'bottom-up' student informed.

Key words: Democratic learning environments, student-teacher relationships, John Dewey, Martin Buber, Homi Bhabha.

Introduction

"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."
([Maya Angelou](#): author of I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings)

Informed by Dewey's (1916, 1936, 1963) and Buber's (1925, [2004], 1947 [2002]) accounts of what it is to be educated, and Homi Bhabha's concept of third space work, this paper presents the case for a progressive education that embraces democratic values in the classroom. It explores the idea that the school could become a place in which teachers and students create a space where classroom practice is democratically teacher-guided and student-informed. Achieving this outcome will, however, not be easy. Step into a typical English school and the frequent absence of mutual dialogue in teacher-pupil relationships will be noticeable. Equally noticeable will be the privileging, and delivery by teachers, of 'top-down' policy-inspired initiatives and practices to improve standards of learning among students.

In this climate, ask young person about their school experiences, and the chances are that they will remember how they are often made to feel in the classroom. For example, in a study where children were asked about their experiences during circle time, they spoke of occasions when they had done something wrong, and how it was discussed during circle time. Explaining their feelings on such occasions, they spoke of 'feeling guilty', of 'feeling ashamed when it's me', of feeling anxious in case 'someone talks about me, and it being 'a horrible feeling when someone says your name' (Leach and Lewis, 2012). In another study, curious about the attractions of joining, and the incentives for staying in, the Sea Cadets for her teenage daughter and group of her friends, Cox (2013) uncovered the young people's negative experiences of schooling, compared with the pleasures of being a member of the cadets:

It's like you are two different people. At school, you have to be what they want you to be. You wear a mask so you all look the same. At cadets, you can take off your mask and be yourself.... At school, it's this is what you need to do, this is how to do it, go do it. At Cadets, it's, you can do this, this or you can do this, so go and decide how you go about it.... At school, its, if you want to get 'these results', there's only one path to it, whereas at Cadets, you build your own path (Cox, 2013).

Listening to the voices of these young people, we begin to appreciate how much of the business of education is *done to*, rather than *with* children. Illustrating the realities of this, when researching young people's perceptions of the role and value of shared 'gathered' silence in a Quaker school community, Wood and Tribe (2016) unearthed powerful insights into the 'busyness' of their everyday experiences, and the extent to which large parts of their lives are controlled by others, in, and outside, school:

It's very, very personal (silence) and I think that the thing I like most about it, that no one is telling you what to think..... outside of silence there's so much stuff you could be doing, on your phone, speaking to other people, but having our silence, our community silence, is a chance for us to get away from the sort of rush and busyness that we face in our lives outside of it; it's a chance for us to just think about irrelevant things or very important things, it's completely up to you but it's what you choose to think about (p.149)

Aware that many young people probably have similar experiences reminds us why, at school, children learn by experience that it is normal for other people to organise their lives, and the easiest response is to co-operate with a system that dictates what, and how, they should behave and learn. To understand how this has come about, we need to look back on how policy has influenced the direction of changes in education over the years.

Policies informing practice in education today have deep roots in long-standing decisions in the UK, and in other countries, to finance the expansion of compulsory and post-compulsory education in the belief that this 'investment' from the public purse will deliver a knowledgeable and highly skilled, employable workforce to meet the needs of business and an expanding economy (CEDEFOP, 2005; DBIS, 2016; COM, 2005; OECD, 2014). In this environment, it follows that there is no shortage of contested policies and 'top-down' recipe-driven approaches to deliver improvements in teaching and learning (Clarke and Phelan, 2015, 2017; Ferguson, 2013; Owen, 2014; Pring, 2015). Adopting the logic of neoliberal market fundamentalism and the positivist inspired management language of 'target setting', 'performance indicators' and measured 'learning outcomes', the UK's policies for educational reform embrace the notion that competition between schools to continually self-

improve will ensure they remain focused on raising overall levels of pupil achievement, and ‘drive up’ standards in education. This restless search for continuous improvement, supported by effective self-evaluation of teaching practice and the tracking of student learning outcomes, is said to be the hallmark of school effectiveness (Ball, 2013; Clarke, 2012; Clarke and Phelan, 2015, 2017; Demetrious and Kyriakides, 2012: 150; Hurley, 2013; Sammons, 2008).

To accelerate this agenda, the incoming coalition government in 2010 embarked on a programme of giving schools more of the responsibility for managing their continued improvement. However, claims to be enhancing school autonomy while at the same time imposing a top-down regime of rigid forms of teaching a prescribe curriculum and high stakes testing to measure improvements in children learning is contradictory. The upshot is that, faced with the ever-present prospect of an Ofsted inspection¹ to ensure schools continue to improve, teachers learn how it is safer to co-operate with, rather than to challenge, a system of schooling that acts to silence and marginalise the democratic voices of teachers and students in major decisions about teaching, learning and curriculum development.

An alternative ‘bottom-up’ approach

In contrast to this ‘top-down’ approach, an alternative debate about school improvement adopts a more ‘bottom-up’ approach, taking as its starting point the notion of democratic schooling, and the argument for the emancipation, or liberation, of students, teachers and educational establishments from knowledge and practices prescribed by others (Stenhouse,

¹ The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills is a non-ministerial department of the UK government, reporting to Parliament via the Department for Education. Ofsted is responsible for inspecting a range of educational institutions, including state schools and some independent schools. It also inspects childcare, adoption and fostering agencies and initial teacher training, and regulates a range of early years and children’s social care services (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted>).

1983; Wilkins, 2011). To enable their silenced and marginalized voices to be heard, critics argue that education should enable young people to benefit from the ‘accumulated wisdom’ handed down to us through the ages (Dewey, 1916), and involve them in the processes of *deepening* social democracy in the wider community (for example, Clarke and Phelan, 2015, 2017; Colucci-Gray et al., 2013; Dewey, 1916; 1935; 1963; Frost and Durrant, 2003; Pring, 2015). For Dewey, education for democracy is a social process. Being active citizens in the life of a community, personal growth and the growth of democracy are all key elements in his philosophy of education:

Unless democratic habits of thought and action are part of the fiber of a people, political democracy is insecure. It must be buttressed by the presence of democratic methods in all social relationships (Dewey, 1987: 225).

Conceived in this way, education can be an integrating force, not for creating uniformity, or the denial of contested views, opinions and practices, but in the sense of empowering future citizens to make sense of the experienced world, and, hopefully, to make ethically-based judgements about matters of shared concern in the school and the wider community, and to engage in collective action (Olsen et al., 2004: 270-271; Pring, 2015). In contrast, the very antithesis of such a community would be one where communication is stifled, ideas discouraged, received assumptions remain unchallenged, power is wielded over people and there is little, or no, personal growth and community development. The teacher, according to Dewey’s perspective, is not there to ‘deliver’ ‘top-down’ government or business directives. Rather, their essential, transforming role is to preserve and pass on the benefits of a liberal education - ‘the best that has been thought and said’ (Arnold, 1869) - ‘in the literature, poetry, history and science that we have inherited’ (Pring, 2015: 25). Of course, Arnold’s quotation has also been used to justify and impose a curriculum, most recently by Michael Gove in a letter to Tim Oates, chair of the expert panel, in response to the report from the

expert group on the national curriculum (2013-

<https://ioelondonblog.wordpress.com/2013/06/21/the-best-that-has-been-thought-and-said/>).

Aware of these dangers, and especially in these times, we can extend this argument to present the case for the democratising of teacher-student relationships and research processes in education (Stenhouse, 1983; Freire, 1996; 2013; Illich, 1995; Colucci-Gray et al., 2013; Frost and Durrant, 2003; Wilkins, 2011). Credited with promoting the idea of the teacher as researcher, Laurence Stenhouse (1983), argued that teachers should be empowered to critically examine prescribed knowledge and practices, and to discover, and own, forms of knowledge and ways of working for themselves. Acknowledging this agential bottom-up approach, and its roots in the literature about the learning organisation and professional learning communities (Bolam et al., 2005; Hargreaves, 2007; Stoll et al., 2006: 229; Stoll and Seashore; 2007; Wenger, 1998), the self-improving school is portrayed as a place where teachers learn to 'share and critically interrogate their practice in an on-going, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-orientated and growth-promoting way' (BERA-RSA, 2014; Bolan et al., 2005, cited in Watson, 2014: 18; Colucci-Gray et al., 2013; MacGilchrist et al., 1997; Sharp et al., 2005; Wilkins, 2011). Which reminds us why, for Dewey, it is important to create a moral, inclusive community within a school. A community where relationships are not those of power enforcement from outside, or within, the school. Rather, a community in which there is a commitment to the sharing of values, reciprocity of relationships, a plurality of voices and mutual respect. It is about the readiness on the part of teachers and students to create democratic learning environments in the school and in classrooms. Learning environments where they can listen to, learn with, and from, each other.

Of course, a democratic, 'bottom-up' approach to school improvement could easily become a problematic and contested journey, and particularly when the deep-seated socially constructed, hierarchical positioning of teacher-student relationships is open to challenge.

Watson (2014: 19) reminds us that learning can introduce disequilibrium and disorder. In the pupil voice discourse, it is argued that young people have a democratic right to be heard on matters they consider important, and not just as a means of raising levels of achievement. Critics argue that ways of engaging them as important ‘influencers’ of policy, decision-making and change in schools need to be considered (DfES, 2004; Ferguson et al., 2011; Fielding, 2007; Guarjardo et al., 2006; O’Boyle, 2013; Klein, 2003; Macbeath, 2006; Ruddock et al., 1996; Teltler and Balzer, 2011). The reality, on the other hand, is that student voice has become ‘politicised’ and ‘incorporated into managerial rhetoric’ (Wisby, 2011:37, cited in Hall, 2017:182), and is often channelled to maintain a power relationship in which privilege is assigned to the adult’s, rather than to the student’s authentic voice (Cruddas, 2007; Hall, 2017; Stern, 2007; Stern, 2013; Thomson and Gunter, 2006) It is claimed adults prescribe the space in which:

[What] is sayable, and crucially, what is heard, are circumscribed by teachers and hence ‘pupil voice’ becomes a means by which pupils may be effectively silenced in schools (Watson, 2014: 26)

As mentioned earlier, the spaces in which children’s voices are prescribed are frequently located within positivist-inspired interventions for achieving school improvement, improving student behaviour, and promoting their social and emotional development (Arnot and Reay, 2007; Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009; Elwood, 2013; Gillies, 2011; Leach and Lewis, 2013; O’Brien and Moules, 2007; Watson, 2014). Consequently, a context is created in which the child is perceived and treated as an ‘*It*’ rather than a ‘*Thou*’ (Buber, 1947). Informed by Martin Buber’s best-known work, *I and Thou (Ich and Du)* (1925), this paper explores the potential for creative dissonance within the classroom, and across the school, when the business of education is democratically teacher-guided and student-informed. It presents the case for democracy in the classroom, and across the school.

Martin Buber’s philosophy of education

Returning to the argument for democratising approaches in education, it is interesting to recall why Martin Buber rejects the idea of an either/or situation between top-down and bottom up approaches. Just as Dewey argued vigorously for the central role of teachers as the custodians of the ‘accumulated wisdom’ handed down to us from previous ages (Dewey, 1916; 1935; 1963), so Buber also recognises the need for teacher-guided as well as student-informed practice in the classroom. To appreciate the foregrounding of Buber’s philosophy of education, it is important to recall the experiences he lived through during his long life. Born in 1878, and brought up in the Jewish Hasidic tradition in central Europe, Buber experienced the last phase of the Enlightenment. Later, he was witness to the violent upheavals and changes brought about by the First World War, and the violence of the anti-human Nazi regime in Germany, leading up to the Second World War. Then, from 1938 until his death in 1965, he accepted the call to be the Professor of Sociology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. There, he spent his remaining years in Palestine, which, after the ‘third’ Jewish war of independence, became the state of Israel in 1948.

Throughout these turbulent times, Buber pursued a consistent course as he developed what others might call his philosophy of democratic education. What concerns Buber is our wholeness of being in one world, where we encounter the possibility of many different relationships. In particular, he examines our capacity to experience the world in terms of two basic forms of relationships – the ‘*I-Thou*’ and ‘*I-It*’ relationships (1925, 2004). ‘In the beginning is relation’ (p.20). It is through the encounter with the *Thou*, the other, that man first becomes himself, an ‘*I*’. Using the analogy of the sculptor and the gardener to explain his philosophy of education, Buber outlines two basic I-It forms of education (1947)². The

² This paper is translated as ‘Education’ in Buber’s *Between Man and Man* (1947). It was an address to the Third International Educational Conference, Heidelberg, August 1925

first form models the teacher as the gardener, who creates and tends the environment to allow the student's innate abilities to blossom. Whereas, the sculptor model imagines the teacher's shaping of the student's raw capacities into an imagined finished outcome. Recognising that we understand things in objective as well as subjective ways, Buber contrasts the '*I-It*' way of knowing with '*I-Thou*' knowledge. When describing the '*I-Thou*' relationship, words such as dialogue, meeting, encounter, mutuality and exchange are frequently used to stress the importance placed on the mutual existence of two beings - an encounter of equals who recognise and are in mutual dialogue with one another (Buber, 1947; Guilherme and Morgan, 2009: 567). The '*I-Thou*' inter-human relationship is about dialogic mutuality, where our '*I*' perspective is ontologically open to, and recognises, the '*Thou*' of others as independent of our '*I*' pre-judgement (Olsen 2004: 17, cited in Guilherme and Morgan, 2009: 567). In contrast to the ontological openness of the '*I-Thou*' relationship, in the '*I-It*' inter-human relationship there is a notable absence of dialogue. Rather than being recognised as an equal, the other being is objectified as a resource to be manipulated and controlled. (Guilherme and Morgan, 2009: 567).

Buber's observations about relationships have significant implications for the way we construct notions of democratic learning environments in the classroom and across the school. For Buber, the teacher can only educate when there is an authentic dialogic relationship with students, based on mutual trust and respect, and when the views, needs, capacities, interests of the student and the teacher, and the prescribed role of the teacher are recognised and accepted in the relationship. This is said to happen when the teacher perceives and begins to understand things from the student's perspective without losing control of their perspective as teacher, and when the student agrees to accept the teacher's guidance (Guilherme and Morgan, 2009: 569). In other words, Buber understands that both the '*I-Thou*' and the '*I-It*' relationships are constituent elements in one's education in a

democratic environment. It is impossible to have the one without the other. He also recognises the natural tendency for the '*I-Thou*' relationship to naturally slip into an objective or instrumental '*I-It*' relationship, and the potential for the '*I-It*' relationship to become a subjective or spiritual '*I-Thou*' relationship (ibid.; 567). Consequently, he rejects the idea of an either/or situation between the teacher-guided and a student-informed approach in education (Buber, 1925). When too much emphasis is placed on the instrumental role of the teacher as the expert provider of facts and information, the teacher and the student can easily find they are caught up in an '*I-It*' relationship. On the other hand, when too much emphasis is placed on the role of the student as an independent learner, it is difficult for the '*I-Thou*' relationship to emerge because of the implied absence of input and guidance from the teacher (Guilherme and Morgan, 2009: 568). Consequently, communion and dialogue are key terms in Buber's philosophy of education.

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Given the importance of dialogue, community and mutuality in Dewey's and Buber's philosophies of education, it has challenging implications for historically dominant, hierarchical '*I-It*' informed conceptualisations of teacher-student relationships. Although one would hope that teachers and students will be empowered, and allowed, to explore ways of working together that are informed by '*I-It*' and '*I-Thou*' relationship thinking, practice in schools today, as in the past, is often dominated by '*I-It*' thinking. When a school is deemed to be failing, in danger of failing, or at risk of losing its '*outstanding*' school status during the Ofsted inspection process, the enforced concerns of leadership are typically short-term. Prescribed '*I-It*' strategies, which typify intervention for 'turning around' schools, include a preference for the '*top-down*' imposition of 'proven' managerial-led solutions to deliver improvements in teaching practice, and student behaviour and learning; strategies that usually say to the student, 'we know what is best for you, your job is to listen and do as you're told' (Wilkins, 2011: 132). When recognising that they are trapped in this position, the challenge

for schools is to discover ways of moving towards a situation where pedagogy is teacher-guided and student-informed. This requires the creation of new forms of teacher-student social relationships and power dynamics in the classroom. Stern (2013:45) reminds us that Buber considers a 'real lesson' to be one which is 'neither a routine repetition nor a lesson whose findings the teacher knows before he starts, but one which develops in mutual surprises' (Buber, 1947, 2002: 241). Real, democratic conversations are dialogic, unpredictable, and full of surprises (Stern, 2013:46).

Building I-Thou relationships in the classroom: A case study

In social theory, the concept of a '*third space*' is used when exploring Bhabha's (1994: 2) notion of the '*in between spaces*' that are seen to exist between binary descriptors of difference. For example, the '*I-It*' relational positioning of teachers as the source of knowledge, wisdom and understanding, and students as '*in-need*' beneficiaries of prescribed programmes of teaching and therapeutic education (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009; Leach and Lewis, 2013; Clarke and Phelan, 2015, 2017). In contrast, the concept of working in '*in-between spaces*' is used when exploring alternative '*I-Thou*' informed ways of teaching writing (Ryan and Barton, 2013: 71) and elementary mathematics (Flessner, 2009), and when working at the boundaries of established professional activity and expertise to support vulnerable young people and families (Edwards *et al.*, 2010).

An important feature of these in-between spaces is that they '*are likely to be invisible in that they are not written into organisational charts or job descriptions*' (Whitchurch, 2013: 21). They are also, potentially, 'sites of struggle' (Law, 1992:4), in which the 'relational effect' can give rise to what Buber describes as the shock of truth (1999:4). An example of this is when Crisp (2011) examined the implications of allowing and empowering students to observe teachers and offer feedback on their teaching practice in his school. Aware of a gradual change in his pedagogy, whereby lessons had become more student-informed, with

him acting as facilitator rather than an expert imparting knowledge, the study explores the need to listen to the voices of students and teachers; and examines how increased student voice can lead to further, and perhaps, unexpected developments in the way power is distributed and used in the classroom. Participants in the study were: the author (Crisp, 2011, (a senior member of staff in the school), one of his teaching colleagues and her critical friend; and four Year 10 student observers. Around the lesson observations, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with the students, the teacher and her critical friend. Before the first lesson observation, the students were also asked to write a creative vignette focusing on their emerging understanding about the changing power dynamics within the research situation³ (for a more detailed account of the study's design, see Leach and Crisp, 2016).

Acknowledging the shifting power dynamics in the study, the participant's anticipation of the 'shock of truth' can be seen in their expressed feelings of anxiety over the uncertainty of what was to come; their anxieties over the implications of giving and receiving feedback; and a shared sense of excitement when contemplating the challenging and troublesome 'newness' of the '*I-Thou*' relationships.

Right now, I'm wondering why I umm volunteered [pause] only joking! It's just a strange feeling that I'm allowing students to step over a, over a [long pause] line that's been drawn in the sand for a long time. A big part of me wants to give it a go and inside me I know it's the right thing to do' (Participating teacher)

I'm really looking forward to seeing a lesson from a new point of view, and I know what I'm looking for but [long pause] the idea of sitting in front of a teacher, even a nice one like [pause] and telling her what I really think of her teaching – well it just feels a bit weird; like I'm doing something I not meant to. (Student 1)

What if the lesson goes really wrong? I want to be positive but I've also got to tell the truth. If this means anything it must be truthful, mustn't it? Students don't always tell teachers to truth very often, do they? (Student 2)

³ The notable quality of the student's vignettes reflects the work they did in English lessons with the researcher when learning to write and use vignettes.

Admitting that ‘students don’t tell teachers the truth very often, do they?’ shows awareness of the power-related ‘*I-Thou*’ relationship, and the pressures on students to tell teachers what they want to hear. Meanwhile, the second student’s use of the phrase ‘if this means anything’ seems to signal her expressed hope that their observations will bring change, while, at the same time, anticipating that this will not be allowed to happen. All too aware of normally being ‘allowed’ a token voice (Ruddock and Flutter, 2004), the students’ independent and unprompted decision to draw up a ‘charter of values’ to be agreed by all the participants, acknowledges the dangers as well as the democratic rewards, as they and the teacher navigate this previously uncharted space for learning:

1. We will respect the trust we have been given by not talking about our work to friends or other teachers unless the teacher we have observed agrees.
2. We will meet before and after the lesson with the teacher to discuss what we all want from the process.
3. We will meet as a group before we feedback to the teacher. We will do this so we can agree what we’re going to say so we don’t disagree/argue with each other as we feel this could confuse the teacher.
4. Our feedback will always begin with positives and we will try our best to praise what the teacher has done well.
5. We will make suggestions from a student’s point of view, not as an inspector or other teacher.
6. We will ask the teacher what they thought went well and what they would change if they did the lesson again.
7. We will always offer to show the teacher our mind maps so they can read all our observations
8. We will ask if we can watch them teach again in future.
9. We will ask them to give us honest feedback on how useful the process has been.
10. We will ask them to tell at least three other teachers to give it a go!

Appreciating the study’s potential ground-breaking implications, in their creative vignettes, the students recognise the potential vulnerability of the teacher, and demonstrate a powerful degree of empathy which represents a strong basis for ‘*I-Thou*’ relationship building between them and the teacher.

Excerpt from the first student’s vignette

They were repulsed? By whom? Him? A trickle of sweat slithered down his spine and perspiration appeared to have collected on his forehead, he looked at his notes again, he could turn this around he suggested disingenuously to himself. The words once so clear and ordered

were now swimming in front of him. His tongue had caught in his mouth and he just stared hollowly at the writhing ocean of angry faces, their cancerous whispers hissed at him until transformed into vindictive shouts that were viciously spat at him from the now convulsing crowd. His grasp on the once pathetic yet admiring crowd had vanished, wrenched from his hands and he was left with nothing. The power no longer his, he turned and walked off stage...

Excerpt from the second student's vignette

The fog swirled around the woman. Condensation clung to the thin white dress and the fingers of the cold weather plucked at her bare skin. Memories of warm fires in cosy living rooms, servants so easily summoned and tables groaning with food danced before her tired eyes. She was lost and alone in a world she could no longer comprehend.

In both vignettes, the students recognise the teacher's potential vulnerability and demonstrate a powerful degree of empathy with her, suggesting there is a strong basis for '*I-Thou*' relationship building between them. This raises some fascinating questions, such as: as well as writing about the perceived thoughts and feelings of the teacher, are the students also exploring their own feelings of anxiety and vulnerability in this new situation? Is the teacher's identity completely bound up in the cloak of power society bestows upon her? Would allowing students to question and challenge the teacher's authority be as troublesome as the vignettes suggest? Meanwhile, at one point during the interview discussions with the researcher about the experience, and illustrating a gulf that can, and sometimes does, exist between teachers and students, one of the students is at pains to point out that she both likes and respects the observed teacher, whereas some teachers, whom she perceives to be incompetent or wilfully vindictive, are held in contempt by her and other students. As the student succinctly puts it when the researcher expressed surprise at the depth of her feelings about this: '*Well you wouldn't know would you Sir? I bet you've never asked the question before*'. Here, we can see the student understands why the researcher, who she respects and trusts, is unaware of the experiences that give rise to these depths of feelings.

Discussion: education for democracy

As explained earlier, for Dewey (1916), schooling should enable young people to benefit from the ‘accumulated wisdom’ that has been handed down to us through the ages, so that they can actively take part, as democratic citizens, in the processes of deepening social democracy in the wider community. For this to happen, though, will require far more than a framework of prescribed and measured learning outcomes, designed to serve the instrumental needs of business and the economy. It will require democratic school communities. Communities ‘whose members embody in their own practices the values and dispositions of democratic citizenship, and who have the capability to create democratic learning environments’ (Olsen et al., 2004: 269). In contrast to this democratic ideal, studies referred to earlier in this paper reveal the depth and entrenchment of a ‘top-down’ public policy-informed approach that encourages and promotes *I-It* relationships in normal schooling, and hinder attempts by schools to become inclusive democratic communities. It suggests there can be no real and lasting improvements in relationships in the classroom, and school improvement, until this *I-It* relationship norm is addressed.

Appreciating this concern and moving towards a situation where classroom practice is democratically teacher-guided and student-informed (Buber, 1925), will not be easy. Acknowledging the traditional agential and power-related positioning of teacher-student relationships and role identities in the classroom and across the school, the students comments in the aforementioned studies reveal the dynamic, troublesome, and potentially disruptive nature of the journey towards democratic, inclusive schooling – particularly when the strategies used to bring this about cause teachers and students to become ontologically open to each other’s *I-It* and *I-thou* perspectives.

To begin to realise this, in the study where students were allowed and empowered to observe teachers and offer feedback on their teaching practice (Crisp, 2011), the participants

can be seen to ever so tentatively move towards, and to create and occupy, a space ‘*in-between*’ the traditional hierarchical relational and agential boundaries of being a teacher and a student. A ‘*third*’ space in which they can engage in mutual respectful dialogue and reflection, experience a sense of community, create a shared educational practice, and, in so doing, experience the problematic reality of building and maintaining ‘*I-Thou*’ relationships.

Creating this kind of democratic learning environment is seen to be both troublesome and an emancipatory experience for them. Working in the openness of ‘*third spaces*’ requires communication and dialogue between people, resulting in ‘joint and individual sense-making’ (Martin et al., 2011:300), and causes participants to experience the ‘ongoing tension that is essential to critical engagement with one another’ (Whitchurch, 2013:213). The idea of the ‘*third space*’ being ‘*a site of struggle, a relational effect*’ (Law, 1992:4, cited in Whitchurch, 2013:21), resulting in what Buber describes as the shock of truth (1999: 4, cited in Stern, 2013: 4) is evident when the teacher and the students recognise and voice their feelings of transgression and vulnerability. Resulting in the students’ experienced need to produce a ‘charter of values’ to inform their new relationship with teachers, and participant statements such as ‘*doing something I’m not meant to do*’; ‘*crossing a line in the sand*’ across which one is not supposed to transgress, and ‘*students don’t always tell teachers the truth very often, do they?*’ On the other hand, despite revealing their sense of vulnerability, the journey they take is also seen to be potentially emancipatory and empowering for them. Although challenging and at times troublesome for them, their emerging ontological openness to one another’s ‘*I-Thou*’ relationship, and an acceptance of individual responsibility, personal agency and the moral purpose of what they were doing, are said to be the key drivers of educational change (Fullan, 1991 and 1993).

As mentioned earlier, critics of government-inspired *top-down* approaches for delivering change in education have long argued the case for empowering teachers to critically examine

prescribed knowledge and practices, and to discover, and own, forms of knowledge, and ways of working, for themselves. Considering the study's wider implications, it draws attention to idea that, in a democratic school system, teachers and students will be encouraged and empowered to create a space for mutual dialogue about the possibilities for collaborative learning in the classroom. Appreciating and acknowledging the need for this will require schools where classroom practice is democratically teacher-guided and student-informed.

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