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**DEMOCRACY, FREEDOM, AND SCHOOL:
REALIGNING POWER IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND'S SECONDARY
SCHOOLS**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Education

at Massey University, Albany, New Zealand.

Kylie Rochelle Smith

2023

Note for Examiners

Explanation of COVID-19 Impacts

Thank you for taking the time to examine this thesis, which has been undertaken during the Covid-19 pandemic. The New Zealand Government's response to Covid-19 includes a system of Alert Levels which have impacted upon researchers. Our University's pandemic plan applied the Government's expectations to our research environment to ensure the health and safety of our researchers, however, research was impacted by restrictions and disruptions, as outlined below.

For a six-week period from March 26 to April 27 2020, New Zealand was placed under very strict lockdown conditions (Level 4 – [Lockdown](#)), with students and staff unable to physically access University facilities, unless they were involved in essential research related to Covid-19. All field work ceased and data collection with humans was restricted to online methods, if appropriate. The restrictions were partially lifted on April 27, but students and staff were not generally allowed back into University facilities until May 13.

Ongoing disruptions have also been encountered for some students due to uncertainties over the potential for future Covid-19-related restrictions on activities, and a Covid-19 cluster outbreak based in Auckland in New Zealand on 12 August 2020 led to the imposition of rolling Level 2 ([Reduce](#)) and Level 3 ([Restrict](#)) conditions until 23 September 2020. Auckland campus based students remained on Level 2 until 7 October 2020.

This Alert Level system continues to be utilised throughout 2021, and in particular from 17 August 2021 when the whole of New Zealand again moved to Level 4 lockdown for an extended period. The Auckland region remained in alert level 3 or 4 for a number of months. Please see the [NZ Government website](#) for more information on lockdown dates.

These changing Alert Levels have meant that some research students had experimental, clinical, laboratory, field work, and/or data collection or analysis interrupted, and consequently may have had to adjust their research plans. For some students, the impacts of Covid-19 have been substantial as they may have had to significantly revise their research plans.

Overseas travel is not permitted by the University and restrictions have been placed on the New Zealand borders which are closed to non-New Zealand citizens and permanent residents. This meant that international students who were based offshore at the time of lockdown, were unable to return to New Zealand. A small number of offshore students were provided permission to return to New Zealand in early 2021. Many students have also suffered from anxiety and stress-related issues, and have had financial impacts, meaning their research progress has been significantly delayed.

This form, as completed by the supervisor and student, outlines the extent that the research has been affected by Covid-19 conditions.

Please consider the factors listed below in your assessment of the work.

This statement has been prepared by the candidate's supervisor in consultation with the student and has been endorsed by the relevant Head of Academic Unit.

Student Name: Kylie Smith

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Date: 09-Oct-23

Thesis title: Democracy, Freedom, and School: Realigning Power In Aotearoa New Zealand's Secondary Schools

Considerations to be taken into account. Note: This statement will remain in the final copy of the thesis which will be available from the Massey University Library following the examination process. *[Enter key considerations here for the examiners. This can include but is not limited to change of scope, scale, topic, focus; limitations in relation to data collection, access to necessary literature or archival materials, laboratories, field sites; disruptions as a result of lockdown and various alert levels, medical or health considerations etc]*

Kylie won a TeachNZ scholarship releasing her from work from Jan 2020 to Sep 2020. She planned to use this time to collect and collate data.

Her original methodology was to observe schools and workshop with students. She used Jan, Feb and early March 2020 to liaise with schools and arrange visitation etc.

In March 2020 the nation went into lockdown and everything was put on hold. Not being aware of what was to come, rather than cancel everything instead Kylie arranged new visitation times with the schools. Unfortunately, the date for school visitations keep getting pushed out.

Around June it became evident that travel would be restricted long term, so it seemed necessary to change the schools in her study. She sought out local schools, which were less democratic than the original participating schools. This was extremely difficult as schools were facing logistical difficulties and access was highly restricted, however two schools agreed to participate.

In August it became evident that Covid-19 restrictions would last until at least the end of the year. One of the local schools pulled out due to clarity of long term covid restrictions. Kylie changed her data collection process again to the one presented in the thesis. Interviews were conducted over September and October, before she returned to full time teaching.

ABSTRACT

This comprehensive study explores positive impacts of democratic systems enacted within secondary schools on students. Responses to democratic practices within schools (including collective decision-making, deliberative discussion, diverse ways of being, and freedom of movement and expression) are examined and analysed. Additionally, the hidden curriculum created by structures and processes inherent in democratic participation is critically reflected on, including consideration of how democratic processes relate to individual and collective well-being within the school environment.

The study adopts a qualitative grounded theory research methodology to comprehend the outcomes of learning within democratic settings. Participants, including alumni and staff from two different democratic school environments, share their perspectives through semi-structured one-on-one interviews and question-and-answer emails. Data collection and analysis were conducted concurrently, and the data analysed using constant comparative analysis.

Democratic building blocks, based on a foundation of respect for the student as a whole human, emerged from the data. Organising school structures around democratic ideals, reflective of indigenous models of democracy, and aligned with Lundy's model of space, voice, influence, and audience aimed at implementing Article 12 of the UNCRC, is seen to cultivate a learning environment where diversity is embraced and respected. Effective communication skills are honed through authentic and meaningful deliberative dialogue, enabling students to value diverse perspectives. Alumni valued the challenge of navigating agency in a safe supportive learning environment and felt empowered to contribute and participate towards a strong collective school community.

Implications from the research underscore the potential of democratic systems to create more equitable educational environments, enhancing well-being by aligning the hidden curriculum with critical and culturally sustainable pedagogies. The study highlights the importance of continual dialogue and reflection and advocates for active integration of democratic principles within schools to facilitate challenges to oppressive structures. It further stresses the need for adults to approach schooling from an epistemology of trust in and support for the student, enabling genuine equitable dialogue and fostering a sense of dignity, significance, and belonging among students. Ultimately, the research offers tangible examples of schools where student-defined well-being is prioritized and provides a forward-thinking approach based on democratic principles to empower students.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Recently I went ice skating, not a common activity in Aotearoa New Zealand. While there I was struck by the learning going on across a wide range of abilities and ages. Adults helping teens, teens helping young children, young children helping adults. Beginner adults falling over, young children doing spins and leaps. Teenagers laughed with their friends as they hung out together while skating around children taking formal lessons with instructors. Skaters of all ages would stop to check on strangers who had fallen over. Through shared interests, relationships are formed. This type of scene is the inspiration for this research.

I owe a huge debt to the participants in this research, who made time to talk with me in 2020, during the global pandemic, and to School 1a for allowing me to visit in 2021, between COVID-19 lockdowns. Hearing their stories was such a joy and inspiration and I truly hope I have done them justice in how I represented their ideas in this thesis. If I could have used all their words in this thesis, I would have. Similarly, if I could have used only their words, I would have.

I wish to make particular thanks to Bobbie Hunter and Ksenija Napan, my amazing supervisors, who both challenged me to think further and supported me to keep going when things were falling apart. My heartfelt thanks go also to Generosa Leach for stepping in and pushing me through at the end of the journey.

A big thanks to my family and friends who supported me throughout this; Mum, Dad, Trevor, Justine, Raewyn, Victoria, and everyone else who offered support in various ways. Andrew, AJ, Dylan, and Satori; it has been a rough few years, but we got through as a family. Thanks for your patience, love, and support. Love you more than infinity.

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GLOSSARY

Ako	Reciprocity in learning and teaching
Hapū	Sub-tribe comprised of related family groupings or extended family group
Hui	Meeting; public assembly
Iwi	Tribe
Kaupapa Māori	Collective vision, aspiration, and purpose of <i>Māori</i> communities
Koha	Gift, donation or offering
Kohanga Reo	Language nest usually for early childhood
Kura Kaupapa	School following a Māori philosophy
Mahi Tahī	Collaboration
Mana	Prestige, personal importance
Manaakitanga	Acknowledging mana
Pākehā	Non-Māori / New Zealand European
Tangata	People, persons, human beings
Tangata Whenua	Indigenous people (of Aotearoa), born of the land of their ancestors
Tapu	Being set apart, sacred, untouchable, sacrosanct
Te Tiriti o Waitangi	The Treaty of Waitangi
Te ao Māori	Māori world / Māori worldview
Tino Rangatiratanga	Autonomy / self-determination
Wananga	Knowledge / learning / deliberative discussion; higher education, e.g., tertiary
Whānau	Extended family group

Whanaungatanga Making connections

Whare Wananga House of learning; university

LIST OF ACRONYMS

BOT	Board of Trustees
DMIC	Developing Mathematical Inquiry Communities
ERO	Education Review Office
IDEC	International Democratic Education Conference
IDEN	International Democratic Education Network
IEP	Independent Education Plan
IEM	Independent Education Meeting
LA	Learning Advisor
NCEA	New Zealand Certificate in Educational Achievement
NZ	Aotearoa New Zealand
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (UK)
SVS	Sudbury Valley School
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Chapter One Introduction

In today's dynamic world, schools need to keep pace with societal and technological changes. Yet, despite new initiatives aimed at keeping pace with technological shifts, many teenagers still prepare for an unknown future in institutions designed in, and for, a different societal reality. Democratic systems embracing inclusive participation and deliberative dialogue towards shared consensus offer an alternative to the traditional authoritarian structures often found in mainstream secondary schools. It is within this democratic context to secondary schooling that this research, *Democracy, Freedom, and School: Realignment Power in Aotearoa New Zealand's Secondary Schools*, is situated. The primary aim of the thesis is to evaluate the impacts on students resulting from democratic structures in secondary schools. In this chapter I outline the key aim of the research, background contexts, motivations for the study and provide an overview of the thesis.

Background Context of the Study

Diversity can be found in many expressions; culture, ability, ethnicity, skin colour, religion, family type, family background, socio-economic conditions, learning styles and needs, and many other features. There is increasing recognition of diversity in Aotearoa New Zealand's schools, as well as calls for equity in meeting diverse needs. Yet, most secondary schools tend towards sameness in delivery of the course content and processes, following strict pre-determined subject-based timetables and age-based class rolls which leave little time for diverse learning pathways, student voice and participation in structural decision-making, or informal relational learning. Many such schools implement conventional structures and hierarchical systems which reinforce anti-democratic authoritarian epistemologies and, when assumed to be

the requisite norm, can limit community, and multicultural, gender and class voice (Fielding & Moss, 2011; Hood, 2015; Osborne, 2001).

The *United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) sets out a number of precepts guaranteeing children and young people the right to leisure and play, freedom of expression, culture, information, participation, and knowledge of their rights, among other things. Particularly relevant to the current research is Article 12, which sets out a child's right to participate in decisions that affect them. Testimony to the importance of this article is the number of reports pertaining to its implementation, including *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship* (Hart, 1992), *Pathways to participation: openings, opportunities and obligations* (Shier, 2001), 'Voice' is Not Enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Lundy, 2007), and *Every Child's Right to be Heard: A Resource Guide on the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child* (Lansdown, 2011). These articles and reports emphasise the need to create greater opportunities for student voice on matters students wish to express their opinion on.

There are calls for reform of outdated traditional systems in schools aimed at improved student well-being, participation and voice, and enhanced inclusiveness by both domestic (e.g., Bolstad, 2011a; Bourke & O'Neill, 2022; Hood, 2015; Milne, 2017) and international (e.g., Apple & Beane, 2007; Dewey, 1916/2011; Fielding & Moss, 2011; Lundy, 2007) researchers and educators. Strategies including Te Kotahitanga Effective Teaching Profile (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, & Richardson, 2003), *Ka Hikitia: Accelerating Success 2013–2017* (Ministry of Education, 2013), and more recently, *Te Hurihanganui* (Ministry of Education, 2019) aim to provide deliberative practices that support student voice and participation through

culturally sustainable pedagogies guided by kaupapa Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand schools. Other researchers, including Bolstad and Gilbert (2012), have suggested unbundling, an approach that looks to rebuild school structures from the ground up rather than tinkering around with existing systems.

Democracy offers a possible framework for schools to structure systems that meet modern pedagogical goals and UNCRC obligations. In the context of this thesis, the concept of democracy centres around collective decision-making, equitable participation, inclusion of diversity, and freedom of voice and expression. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to analyse if western democracy delivers this ideal. Literature discussing democracy in the realm of education takes two research pathways. One involves teaching democracy as part of the curriculum as an abstract idea that students will participate in as adults (Education Gazette editors, 2020; Lange & Print, 2012; Potter, 2020; Reeves, 2017; Wood, 2019; Wood et al., 2013); the second pathway enables children to experience democracy in action as they actively contribute to and participate in democratic systems within the organisational structures of their schools (Apple & Beane, 2007; Aronowitz, 1993; Beane, 2017; Dewey, 1916/2011; Englund & Sockett, 2000; Fielding & Moss, 2011; M. Glassman & Patton, 2014; hooks, 2003; Shor, 1993).

This research focuses on the latter, in keeping with studies that see democracy not only as a political or organisational system, but also a set of values and moral codes around individual freedom, collective responsibility and shared decision-making that must be learned through ongoing day-to-day practice. Research down this pathway tends to revolve around community input in curricular and school policy making (Apple, 2004; Apple & Beane, 2007; Osborne, 2001), in-class deliberative democratic discussions (Englund, 2006; Thornberg, 2010a;

Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012), and/or schools that identify as ‘democratic’ or ‘free’, where student voice is equal to that of staff (Greenberg, 1987; Hecht, 2010; Neill, 1995).

Despite differences in interpretation and delivery, the one aspect of democratic education most consistent in the literature is that if our goal is to raise future citizens who truly understand democratic values and processes, this must be learned by doing. Democratic educators recognise that learning is not defined by classroom boundaries. As such, this thesis takes the position that reform for student participation, inclusion, and equity should also not be limited to classroom pedagogy but take place throughout school life. Schools with school-wide democratic structures, offering adult-student partnerships, provide opportunity to research student well-being within this context.

Rationale for the Research

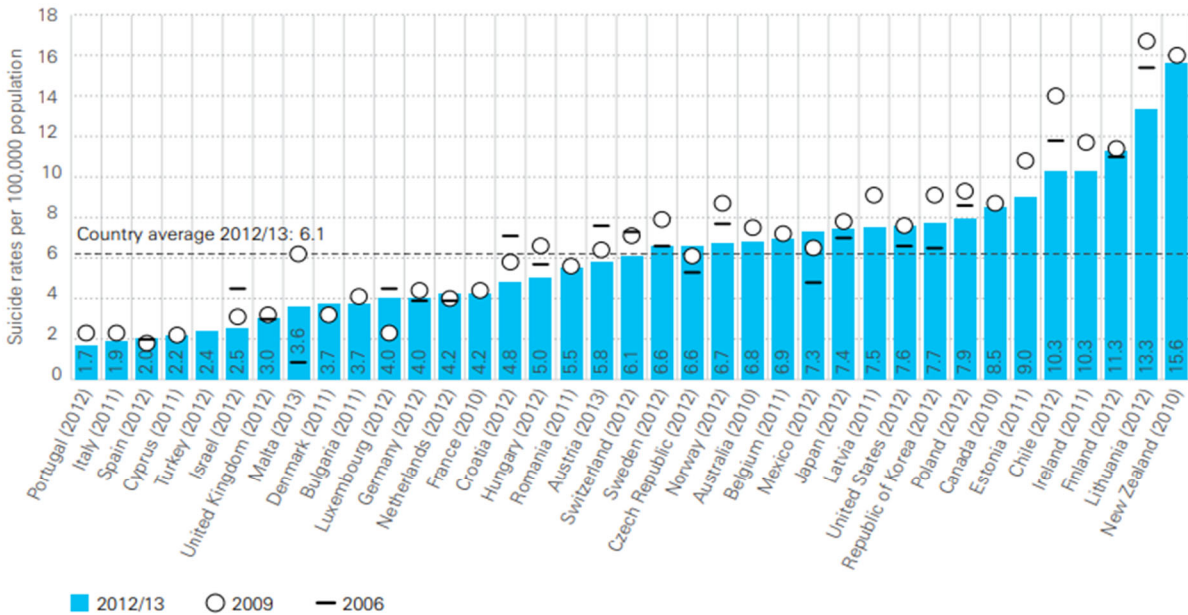
Today’s youth are being socialised within school structures and systems embedded in values laden with outdated historical, ideological, and cultural influences, designed in a time when imperialistic, authoritarian attitudes were dominant. Students who face significant responsibility and decision-making outside of their school environments are not always given the same trust or opportunity to practise, develop or analyse personal and/or communal responsibilities within school. Innovative learning pedagogies encouraging critical thinking and co-construction in classroom environments may lose purpose when they appear to contradict a hidden curriculum defined by traditional school systems, structures, rules, and purpose. There is a risk that the meanings adolescents construct from conventional school rules and structures oppose the values and thinking skills we expect them to learn and model in the classroom.

Well-being for secondary aged students is of concern, and issues such as bullying and self-harm are prevalent in general discourse. Research from Ireland by Burke and Minton (2019) indicates that (in that country at least) student well-being declined progressively once students entered secondary education. The Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand Mauri Tū Mauri Ora (2023) advise that “In 2021/22, nearly one in four (23.6%) young people aged 15–24 years experienced high or very high levels of psychological distress, up from 11% in 2020” (para. 2), with Māori and Pasifika youth being particularly vulnerable. Further, in 2018, Aotearoa New Zealand had the third highest reported bullying rate in the OECD. Aotearoa New Zealand also holds one of the highest youth suicide rates internationally, particularly for youth aged between 15 to 24.

Figure 1 shows international youth suicide rates for high income nations, 2009 to 2013.

Figure 1

Suicide Rates of Adolescents Aged 15–19 per 100,000 Population, Based on the Latest Available Data (2009–2013) (Brazier, 2017)

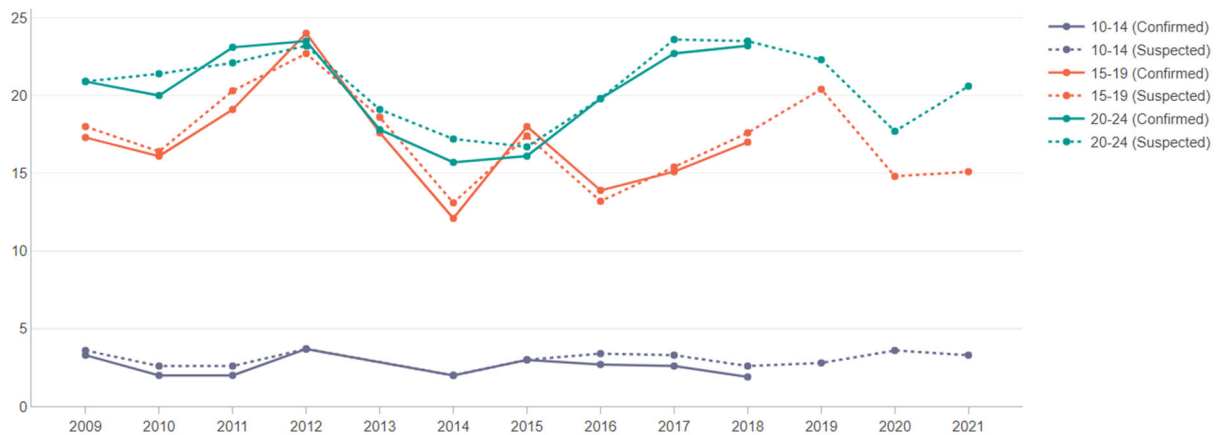


Note: The country average is unweighted. Figures are three-year averages around the year in brackets. Earlier estimates are averages for the three years preceding. Data are missing for Greece. Most recent data for Iceland (c2008, 5.4), Slovakia (c2008, 2.5) and Slovenia (c2009, 7.6). Missing countries: Greece, Iceland, Slovakia and Slovenia. [c=around]
Source: WHO mortality database, 2016.

Figure 2 shows Aotearoa New Zealand suicide rates across three youth age cohorts from 2009 to 2021, establishing that we maintain high rates.

Figure 2

Rate of Suicide Deaths Across 10-14, 15-19, 20-24 Age Groups, 2009–2021 (Coronial Services of New Zealand Purongo O te Ao Kakarauri, 2023)



Source: New Zealand Mortality Collection (confirmed suicides); Ministry of Justice's case management system (suspected suicides). Rates are age-specific and per 100,000 population.

West (2004) discusses how tragicomic hope, prophetic justice, and Socratic questioning interplay in a deep democracy. He describes prophetic justice as a commitment to “justice and kindness that attend to the unjust sources of human hurt and misery (...) to shatter deliberate ignorance and wilful blindness to the suffering of others” (p. 114). West (2004) believes the ideals encompassed in a prophetic commitment to justice is echoed in Christian, Islamic, and other religious and cultural moral guidelines. These ideals, to empower hurt and suffering peoples by disestablishing oppressing and indifferent structures, can be aligned not only to the ideals of democracy. These ideals also align to the values of the New Zealand Curriculum, namely “equity, through fairness and social justice” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 10), and the Ministry of Education’s *Statement of Intent 2021-26* which aims for a more inclusive and

equitable education system (Ministry of Education, 2021). Furthermore, when thought of in terms of education, prophetic justice aligns to the theories of Freire (1968/2018) which aim to humanise oppressed peoples through a process of conscientization.

Many youths today are hurting, and there is need to consider measures which may improve their well-being. Schools structured around democratic principles offer potential solutions for inclusive reform that empower youth across diverse cohorts and improve student well-being, through favouring democratic decision-making, learner autonomy, and freedom of time and movement above conventional structures of hierarchy and control. It is pertinent, therefore, to explore how democratic processes within secondary school environments impact adolescent students, to build on the growing body of evidence supporting democratic school structures.

Motivation for the Research

My motivations in pursuing this research have been two-fold. Firstly, the confusion I felt as a child who loved learning yet experienced trauma at school left me curious about alternative systems, and secondly as a teacher who tries to enact the values we expect of students, yet always comes up against system-related barriers.

Growing up, I was what is often known as a transitory student. I moved schools many times, most of the moves being due to my family moving around the country. This taught me about differences in the cultures various communities and schools hold and provided me with experiences of a range of pedagogical approaches. I started school in a largely Pasifika community in South Auckland, moving to a small rural community in the South Island, then back to Manurewa. We then moved to a predominantly Pākehā community on Auckland's North

Shore, back to the South Island, this time to Christchurch, then back to the North Shore, and later to an inner-city high school for a year. I also spent a year attending school in Czechoslovakia on student exchange.

I have a passion for learning. Discovering new things, making connections to existing knowledge and solving problems is what brings me joy. I love learning now and I loved learning as a child. My passion means high engagement and I also tend to pick up new learning very quickly. So, with respect to learning, I loved school. I got on well with my peers and all I wanted to do was learn. Unfortunately, I also experienced a confusion of trauma. I was constantly in trouble and did not understand why. Despite school reports with consistent straight A's for both effort and attainment, I was often labelled troublesome, precocious, or just plain naughty. A later diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Disorder was somewhat redeeming. It was not only that I did not understand adults, but that adults often did not understand me (or perhaps did not take the time to). It is interesting to reflect that despite my difference and the judgement I felt from teachers, I nearly always felt accepted by my fellow students.

Some teachers did understand my passion for learning, communicated openly with me, and taught with what felt to me like a pedagogy of love. In these classes I flew. Other teachers taught with what felt like unjustified control and unnecessary authority; the classic “do as I say and not as I do” mentality, which I did not understand. In these classes, I felt the need to fight for social justice, and being a child without the skills to competently disagree, my fight for justice was, more often than not, without much luck. I was asked to leave two schools for refusing to apologise after standing up against what I thought was unjust behaviour from staff.

In my late teens, my school experienced a spate of student suicides. The suicide of a close friend when I was 16 further added to my confusion and my need for systems that support improved social justice and that attend to students as whole beings worthy of self-dignity. While Aotearoa New Zealand's suicide rate peaked in the 1990s (the time I was at secondary school), as highlighted above we still currently have one of the highest youth suicide rates in the world. Many young people do not feel safe, included, or understood.

As a teacher in training, it was wonderful to see the changes in pedagogical approaches that work towards improved student well-being, developing greater equity and social inclusion. However, when I started teaching, I still felt myself butting against traditional institutional systems that have been outdated for a long time. A pedagogy of equity and inclusion was talked about, but I could see it was still not always felt by students. I firmly believe we need to do better. Democratic schools appeared to offer an equitable solution, which intrigued me. Imagine, as a teenager, learning in an environment where one could be themselves and learn according to their learning style in an appreciative environment. I was determined to explore what mainstream systems could learn from democratic schools.

Research Aim

This research explores how school structures designed around democratic processes impact adolescent students in Aotearoa New Zealand. It investigates practices which reflect the democratic ideals of shared decision-making, freedom of expression and movement, individual learning paths and appreciation of diverse ways of being, of two subject schools from different regions of the country, open over different time periods. The inquiry investigates how democratic processes in secondary school environments impact adolescent students, including

exploration of the hidden curriculum created by rules, structures and processes within the subject schools and consideration of how democratic processes relate to individual and community well-being within the school environment.

A Note on Terminology

The focus of this study is primarily on schools organised around a democratic model. While the study in no way precludes consideration of democratic classrooms or education about democracy, the key focus is on how democratic institutional systems and structures of a school can impact students. I have favoured the term democratic schooling, as opposed to democratic education, in the hope that the research contributes towards building improved school systems.

Te reo Māori words which express a meaning not easily translatable into English have been used in the thesis. Te reo Māori is one of three official languages in Aotearoa New Zealand, the other two being English and New Zealand Sign Language. In Aotearoa New Zealand the active promotion of te reo Māori is notable, particularly within the education system and other government institutions, including education, and state TV and radio. A result of this active promotion means that many te reo Māori words have become part of the everyday language. Conceptual definitions are offered in the Glossary.

Overview of the Thesis

The thesis is presented in nine chapters. In this chapter I have outlined the research aim, background context and rationale for the research. This is followed by a review of literature relevant to the study in Chapter Two. In Chapter Three, I outline the theoretical background, methodology and research strategies. A very brief description of the two key secondary schools participants attended as students or worked at as staff is presented in Chapter Four, to provide

context for the findings. In Chapters Five, Six and Seven, I present the research findings. Alumni and staff perspectives on academic, social, and emotional well-being outcomes resulting from democratic school structures are highlighted and analysed to reflect both individual empowerment and community cohesion. In Chapter Eight I discuss the theory emerging from the data with respect to the extant literature. The thesis is concluded in Chapter Nine, including discussion of implications of the findings, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter Two Literature Review

It could be argued that democracy is so much a part of our lives in the western world that it has become an accepted norm. Nonetheless, it is also recognised as a concept at risk. Within education, conversations about the impact of education and democracy include consideration of educating about democracy and the need for education to maintain an effective democracy.

In the previous chapter, I provided the introduction, background, and rationale for this study. In this chapter, I review relevant literature. Democracy is defined in the first section, followed by an exploration of differing understandings of democracy comparatively and historically. Democracy in traditional te ao Māori, as well as contemporary understandings of tino rangatiratanga, is examined. How children and young people participate in democratic settings is addressed in the next section. Particular regard is given to Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The section, Bottom-up Participation for Greater Well-being, starts with a review of literature that relates the well-being of students, critical pedagogy, and democratic student participation, before moving on to discussion around the hidden curriculum and student participation. Also included in this section is a look at diversity within Aotearoa New Zealand's school. An examination of literature on democratic schools is then presented. Finally, I introduce arguments suggesting that adults need to continually review their own epistemologies with regards to student well-being, agency, and participation in decision-making, before concluding the chapter.

Democracy in Context

Democracy can be defined in several ways. Ercan and Ganon (2014) state “democracy is an essentially contested concept” (2014, p. 5). Biesta (2015) argues that by its very nature,

democracy must be continually contested, redeveloped and reinterpreted. Democracy is an open, dynamic concept; one that lends itself to different perspectives, epistemologies, and understandings simply by its core root of 'rule by the people'. People come with different perspectives, epistemologies and understandings, and these change over time. A concept that reflects ways people have a collective voice would manifest itself differently between different time periods, cultures, groups, and collective needs.

Democracy has become the aspired-to governing system of most of the world's nations (Alshurman, 2015; Cunningham, 2002; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Radcliff, 2004; van den Doel, 1979). Testament to this is the increase in democratically-run governments. While hard to exactly determine a democratic nation, Iskahan (2012) suggests that there were approximately 20 countries considered as democratic in 1900, increasing to 123 (or 65% of the world's nations) in 2005. Desilva (2019) gives figures for the growth of democratic countries with populations over 500 000 people, rising from 25% in 1977 to 57% in 2017.

The history of democracy extends beyond the 20th century. A broader historical analysis of democracy as rule by the people supports the claim that democracy has been a preferred way of political and social organisation throughout recorded time (e.g. Chou & Beausoleil, 2015; Ercan & Gagnon, 2014; R. Glassman, 2017; Isakhan, 2015, 2016; Isakhan & Stockwell, 2011b, 2012; Muhlberger & Paine, 1993). R. Glassman (2017) discusses campfire and kinship democracies of hunter gatherer and tribal societies, where collective decision-making for survival was a need. Isakhan and Stockwell (2011a) highlight that to limit the history of democracy to the standard western narrative not only gives us a very narrow picture of its true story but is, in itself, undemocratic. Opening the history and discussion of democracy to include

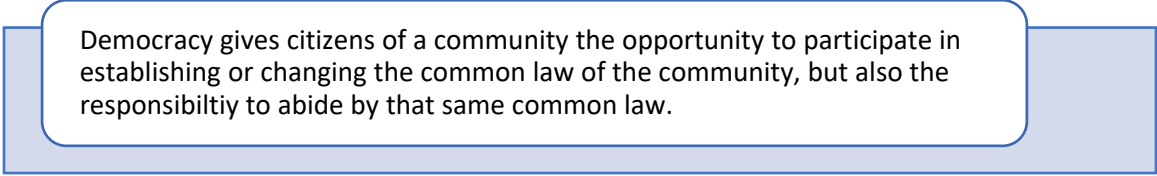
the complexity of understandings beyond the well-known European narrative, acknowledges that there is no one pure form of democracy, but rather an imperfect struggle by all peoples for a more inclusive form of collective decision-making.

So, what then is democracy? A precise definition is somewhat elusive. Heywood (2017) indicates this by including the wording “democracy implies” (p. 36) in his definition of the term, before going on to define several different types of democracy as they relate to differing political ideologies. Isakhan (2012) argues that “defining democracy is a difficult and perhaps ultimately futile exercise” (p. 4). Similarly, Biesta (2015) notes there is “a real danger that democracy has so many meanings that it has ceased to have any meaning at all” (p. 122). Contemporary media discussion and political propaganda tend to (inaccurately) merge democracy with capitalism creating dangerous misinterpretations (Fielding & Moss, 2011; Parenti, 1996). More recently there has been a rise in conspiracy activists using false interpretations of democracy to support their own causes, focusing on specific aspects such as individual rights, while conveniently forgetting to balance their own rights alongside those of others (Chapple, 2018; Papaioannou, 2023).

In this study, a broader definition is offered. Isakhan (2012) provides one that offers breadth to consider the different ways and times in which democracy has been practiced yet narrow enough to provide specific standards to determine what a democracy is (see Figure 3, below). Essentially, democracy gives people, as citizens of a community, the opportunity (and right) to participate in establishing or changing the common law of that community, but also the responsibility to abide by this same common law.

Figure 3

Definition of Democracy (Isakhan, 2012, p. 8)



Democracy gives citizens of a community the opportunity to participate in establishing or changing the common law of the community, but also the responsibility to abide by that same common law.

In 2022, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, reminded us “people want their voices heard (...) and to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives” (Bachelet, 2022, para 24). Democracy is a way to do this and is the favoured political system globally, including within Aotearoa New Zealand. Nonetheless, for democracy to be sustainable we need a participative population who understand its fundamentals, their rights, but also their responsibilities (Bachelet, 2022; Dewey, 1916/2011; Englund & Sockett, 2000; Ercan, 2019; Freedom House, 2018; R. Glassman, 2019; Parenti, 1985).

While, on the one hand democracy is the favoured system globally, on the other hand researchers and academics have raised concerns about significant threats to democracy (Bachelet, 2022; Ercan, 2019). In 2020, the Bennet Institute for Public Policy Cambridge reported that global dissatisfaction with democracy was at an all-time high and more recently we are seeing these concerns being discussed in mainstream news and on social media. Identified threats include the failings of democratic institutions to address financial crises and climate change, growing inequalities, disinformation and exploitation of social media, lack of trust in elected members, and low voter turnout (Bachelet, 2022; Bennett Insitute for Public Policy Cambridge, 2020; Ercan, 2019). Bachelet (2022), notes that exclusion and lack of transparency

in decision-making leads to cynicism and distrust. Aotearoa New Zealand research indicates that it is timely for Aotearoa New Zealand to review the impacts of low participation and high misinformation on the nation's democracy (Chapple, 2018).

In the next section, I examine democracy from a non-Eurocentric perspective. Isakhan and Stockwell (2011b, 2012) suggest that in the quasi-democracies of traditional, ancient, and indigenous communities sits a basis for future full democracies that embrace the cultures and values of the diverse and modern communities each democracy serves. Such research is particularly useful when considering democracy within a multicultural setting, such as Aotearoa New Zealand.

Different Perspectives of Democracy

Democracy is a broad, and dynamic concept. The breadth of the concept, and a lack of education and praxis in democracy may cause misunderstandings. Several researchers agree that many western political theorists and historians take a narrow perspective on the history and development of democracy and there is a persistent lack of acknowledgment of the history of democracy outside of the well-worn Eurocentric narrative; outlining its progression through ancient Greece, England's Magna Carta, the French Revolution and its development and promotion in the USA (Chou & Beausoleil, 2015; Isakhan, 2015, 2016; Muhlberger & Paine, 1993).

This western understanding of democracy gives the perception that democracy is a Eurocentric idea and creates biased understandings of the concept (Chou & Beausoleil, 2015; Isakhan & Stockwell, 2011a). Muhlberger and Paine (1993, p. 26) blame "ignorance and the concentration of historical research" for the Eurocentric perspective on democracy becoming the

commonly accepted norm (at least among westernised countries). Democracy from an etymological viewpoint it can be defined as ‘rule by the people’ stemming from the origins of the Greek word *demokratia* (demos meaning people and kratos meaning rule). Isakhan (2015, 2016) however, counsels that it is vital that we do not confuse the Greek etymological basis of the word democracy with the history of the concept itself.

A number of theorists and researchers counter this commonly accepted history of democracy with accounts of democracy being practised in ancient India (Muhlberger, 2011), China (Keating, 2011), medieval Iceland (Pires Boulhosa, 2011), by indigenous Australian peoples (Behrendt, 2011), indigenous tribes of Canada (Paine, 2011), across the Middle East (Isakhan, 2011) and within Islam (Abdalla & Rane, 2011). Muhlberger and Paine (1993) outline democracies in various regions in Ancient China, and Buddhist scriptures encouraging democratic practices. They discuss the practice of democracy in small agricultural villages through village councils (formal and/or informal) in ancient Scandinavia, precolonial Malaysia, America, Burma (now known as Myanmar), Africa, and, significant to Aotearoa New Zealand, make mention of Māori democratic practices (Muhlberger & Paine, 1993). These authors assert that the quasi-democratic practices and limitations of suffrage that are used to argue against the democratic persuasion in indigenous, tribal, or localised societies, are also found in the western history of democracy.

The perceived failings of democracy in many non-western nations relate more to the forced installation of democratic systems and structures based on western ideals, and not to the more commonly accepted reason that democracy as a concept is foreign to non-western nations (Muhlberger & Paine, 1993). Nations would likely have greater success upholding a democracy

if they were given room to develop their democracy around their own unique cultures and histories of rule by the people. Muhlberger and Paine's 1993 article discussing this notion is important. Their work added a new chapter to the body of literature on democracy, arguing that indigenous groups were not uneducated savages ruled by force by merciless tyrants, but rather sophisticated communities, working together to achieve a common goal. If given the opportunity to maintain or if necessary, rebuild their societies based on traditional values and perspectives of common rule by the people, rather than being forced to implement western democratic structures that may not align to cultural values and ideals, these nations might have more democratic success.

Characteristics of Democracy

Democracies can be hard to sustain (and the bottom-up, participatory systems appear to promote greater sustainability), nonetheless, millions of people throughout time and around the world risk their lives willingly for democracy (Muhlberger & Paine, 1993). The imperfection of democracy could also be its value. It is through the processes of free speech, equal participation, deliberation and debate, and openness to constant change that society can respond to the diverse needs of the people within it. Characteristics of democracy, including inclusivity, participation, response to the will of the people, elective practices, deliberative mechanisms, debate, free speech, equal access to information, diversity, egalitarianism, non-hierarchy, and accountability, are discussed below.

The predominant narrative of democratic history tells of ancient Greece, and its well documented practice of allowing all citizens the right to vote in a public assembly (Goody, 2012; Held, 1996; Isakhan, 2016; Radcliff, 2004). The crux here hangs on their definition of citizen. In

classical Greece a citizen was limited to a small minority of the total population - wealthy (land owning) men - to the exclusion of non-land holding men, women, slaves, immigrants, the uneducated and anyone unable to undertake military service (e.g., disabled people) (Isakhan, 2011). This can be contrasted, for example, to indigenous Australians who encouraged participation in decision-making from all members of the clan regardless of age or gender (Behrendt, 2011). Democracy should be inclusive and participatory. As such citizens should have the right to participate in decision-making and have their views considered. Democracy is responsive to the will of the people. While in the Greek example inclusion was countered by their narrow definition of citizen, modern understandings of a citizen do provide for more inclusive participation. However, whether all citizens and cohort groups are fully aware of their rights to participate, or have appropriate access to participate beyond voting in parliamentary elections, is unclear.

In modern western democracies deliberative mechanisms are available. Elected representatives debate issues in the parliamentary chamber, or in committee settings (e.g., Select Committees) and citizens participate informally or through formal submissions. These deliberative mechanisms, methods of debate and inclusive measures of participation differ between democracies. Behrendt (2011) describes decision-making in indigenous Australian society as a collective and extended deliberative process in which anyone had a right to speak. Rather than vote for a majority, the decision-making process was more of a deliberative process towards consensus building. To be able to participate fully and debate issues at hand, citizens need equal access to information. Open access to public meetings assists in this. The presence of deliberative mechanisms enables citizens or their representatives to share information and to

debate the diversity of perspectives a society contains. Many African clans and tribes embraced complex systems of groupings that allowed inclusive and participatory practice in political decision-making. Members of the Kikuyu tribes of Kenya were members of different councils and common interest groups such as peace or religious councils, gender, age, or labour groups, as well as whole clan and tribal meetings (Kizza, 2011). Appointment to specific groups was open to anyone who earned the privilege, regardless of gender or age. Particularly relevant to this research, Kizza notes that these groups served both as educational institutions as well as a platform for political voice.

Democracies in principle are non-hierarchical. As such, all citizens are equal, and no one is above the rule of the law. This egalitarian approach can be seen in tribal and clan-based political systems. In indigenous Australia, Behrendt (2011) notes that no one had ultimate power, although some people were more influential than others (decided by group consensus based on merit). This resulted in the British, who were used to a clear chain of representative power, struggling to know who to negotiate with as there were no assumed leaders. Incongruously, forms of hierarchies can be noted within Greek and Middle Eastern democracies. Isakhan (2011) argues that an upper class appeared to hold greater power in classical Greek and Middle Eastern democracies. While participation was compulsory, Isakhan believes that for most Greek citizens this would have consisted of simply listening and voting, and parliament limited discussion to the elite, wealthy and well educated. Noting a hierarchy in the political groups of some African groups, Kizza (2011) still notes egalitarian participatory practices and socio-political influence. Measures of accountability for those in influential positions are important. Checks and balances should be in place to ensure those in leadership positions remained competent or did not exploit

their influence. The Baganda people exercised this through the bottom-up processes, where those in power positions were answerable to those at lower levels (Kizza, 2011).

The decentralised system of clan-based indigenous Australian communities meant that participation was, more or less, a way of life (Behrendt, 2011). Kizza (2011) also notes a strong community culture of participation and community-based responsibility in the African democracies she discusses. Through a system of interest group participation, measures of accountability, and consensus decision-making each person in the community had a voice and a significant role in governance from puberty onwards. It appears that while Greek citizens were compelled to participate through attending and voting in assemblies, the lifestyle of the tribal societies of Australia and Africa reinforced ongoing participation in the socio-political democracy. This both safeguarded the sustainability of the system and ensured the will of the people was served through democratic self-rule. Ake writes “democratisation is not something that one people does for another. People must do it for themselves, or it does not happen” (as cited in Kizza, 2011, p. 124). Collective agreement-making or collective governance was persuasive among indigenous and ancient societies (Behrendt, 2011; Stockwell, 2011). Such bottom-up participative systems allow room for political pluralism in organised diverse societies (Kizza, 2011).

An important aspect of a democracy is the notion that citizens need the virtue to appreciate others and to accept the rule of the law. Behrendt (2011) argues that small close knit indigenous Australian communities meant social pressure was generally an effective deterrent to wrong doers. Of course, grievances did occur and formal and informal meetings to deal with issues of justice were organised. With over 500 separate clans in Australia there was a need for

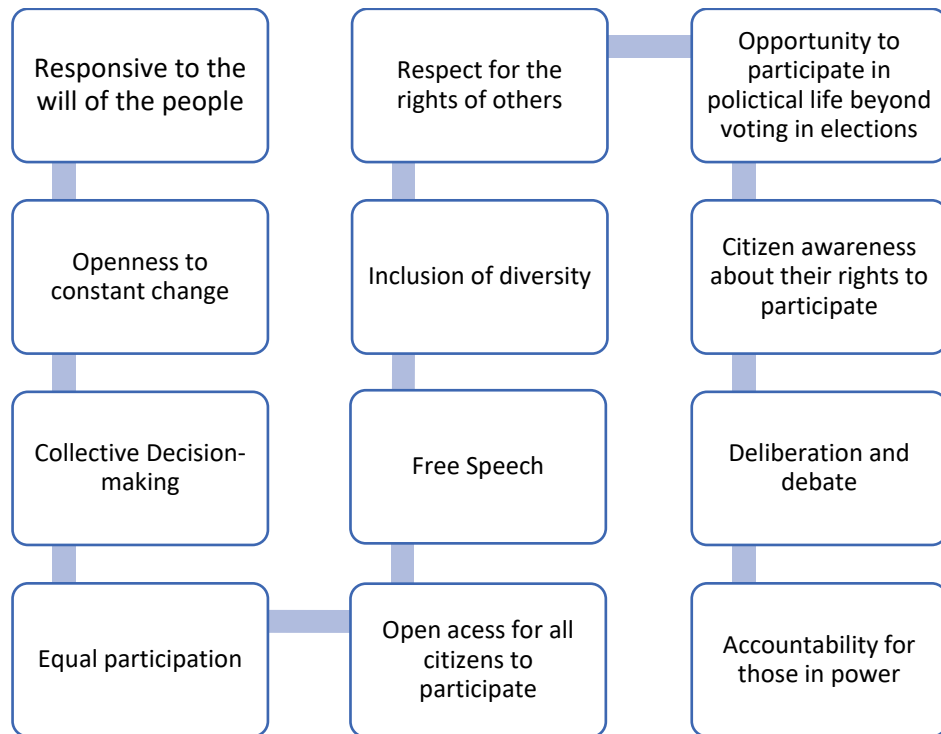
justice between clans, should one feel aggrieved by members of another. Behrendt describes a system where representatives from each clan would come together and sit across from one another, to hear perspectives from both sides and deliberate to find a resolution. She argues that the indigenous Australian approach to decision-making through group consensus is a form of direct democracy.

Drawing on consensus decision-making within and between communities, extended deliberative processes and expert consultation groups (such as gender groups), Behrendt (2011) claims that indigenous Australians had a more sophisticated system of democracy than the colonising British. As discussed above, the complexity of this indigenous model of inclusive, participatory, decentralised socio-political decision-making, that did not require a leadership hierarchy, was difficult for British colonisers, who were used to a more structured, authoritarian hierarchy, to understand and negotiate (Behrendt, 2011). A similar differentiation is found in traditional African tribes, where the decentralised, collective systems were a strength. “Consciousness was communal; everything was everybody’s business, engendering a strong emphasis on participation. Standards of accountability were even stricter than in Western societies.” (Ake as cited in Kizza, 2011, p. 124).

Figure 4, below, illustrates the characteristics of democracy found in the literature discussed.

Figure 4

Summary of Characteristics of Democracy Discussed in the Literature Review



Democracy in Pre-colonial te ao Māori

A key postulation in my research is that there is a need to ensure citizens have a solid understanding of the processes and fundamentals of democracy and that this must be learned by doing, rather than taught as an abstract concept in an authoritarian institution. It has been established that the very nature of democracy allows nations and communities to create their own democracy, based around their unique diversity of cultures and values. Each rendition of democracy must be open to internal debate and change, as and when necessary. Any democracy in Aotearoa New Zealand must have a solid understanding and representation of Māori epistemologies and take consideration of documents such as *te Tiriti o Waitangi* (the *Treaty of*

Waitangi) and the *Treaty of Waitangi Act 1975* which establish a relationship agreement between the Māori and the Crown (Smith et al., 2021).

Traditional Māori lived within a complex socio-political system, that established a baseline for family, village, tribal and intertribal social, economic, and political relationships (Smith et al., 2021). Most of the characteristics of democracy established by Isakhan and Stockwell (2011b, 2012) were practiced in traditional Māori socio-political practices, including deliberation and debate, response to the will of the people, equal access to information, free speech and participation, accountability of leaders, and the civic virtue required to appreciate the rights of others. After spending considerable time living with various Māori hapū in the mid 1850's, not long after the signing of *te Tiriti o Waitangi*, Shortland (1856) concluded, “no people in the world are greater lovers of freedom than the New Zealanders; and the best idea to be given of the political constitution of their society will be to describe it as a democracy, limited by a certain amount of patriarchal influence” (p. 227).

Rather than rules, guidelines were established in traditional *te ao Māori* and collective discussion of precedents took place when establishing any appropriate course of action. Durie (2012) notes that “Māori legal order was values-oriented, not rules-based” (p. 10). Rather than relying on coercive authority, leaders instead depended on a good understanding of the complex mix of oratory skills, kinship ties and customary norms to establish their case in public assemblies (Smith et al., 2021). Maintaining the ongoing support of your collective group was a vital part of leadership, and provided accountability of leaders (Durie, 2012). Both Durie and Shortland (1856) describe the use of precedents during collective decision-making, noting that contact with Europeans brought unusual circumstances for which precedents had not been set. In

determining a way forward, Shortland writes, the subject would be “thoroughly discussed by themselves, and every knotty point argued according to principals recognized by Maori [*sic*] law, till they had arrived at conclusions” (1856, p. 231).

Jenkins and Harte (2011) offer a comprehensive overview of how Māori children were educated during the pre-European and colonial settlement eras. Two factors significant in their report relate here. Firstly, Māori children were (and are) raised under a kaupapa of love. They had a great deal of freedom in their decisions and movements. Children were protected and never punished. Mistakes were considered a part of learning and indiscretions were overlooked. Adults who chastised children, including their own offspring, were themselves scolded and sometimes retribution for the offence was sought (Smith et al., 2021). Shortland observed “freedom given children, made them bold, brave and independent in thought and act” (as cited in Jenkins & Harte, 2011, p. 22). “The children were tapu and therefore untouchable so that confidence in themselves and their abilities developed” (Jenkins & Harte, 2011, p. 22).

Secondly, Māori children participated actively in the day to day lives of their parents and all aspects of life were accessible to them. This participation included, significantly, children attending and openly participating in whānau, hapū and iwi hui. Children were seen to ask questions of respected chiefs, who answered them willingly, acknowledging the learning opportunities this provided, while respecting the inherent mana of the child (Smith et al., 2021). Early European observers noted that Māori children were often ahead of their British counterparts in development (Jenkins & Harte, 2011). Strong links can be seen between the traditional rearing practices of Māori and the participative approaches of democratic schools.

Tino Rangatiratanga in Modern Education

In his account of the struggles of the Māori people in Aotearoa New Zealand, Walker (2004), outlines the many avenues in which Māori are striving to follow their own path towards tino rangatiratanga. With respect to education, he gives the examples of Kohanga Reo, Kura Kaupapa and Wananga and Whare Wananga as vital but under-resourced steps towards future self-determination. Other education related areas in which Māori have sought to maintain their own knowledge, skills, customs, language and cultural values, and beliefs include bilingual programmes in state schools, inclusion of kaupapa Māori principles in mainstream pedagogy and the promotion of culturally sustainable pedagogies.

Many deliberative democratic practices are reflected in strategies aiming to support student voice and participation through culturally sustainable pedagogies guided by kaupapa Māori, in Aotearoa New Zealand schools. Relationships, collaboration, and dialogue feature strongly in these pedagogical strategies (Bishop & Berryman 2006, 2009; Penetito et al. 2011). Together, these call for teachers to build communication-focused relationships with and between students, developing teachers who are open to truly listen and act upon the perspectives of Aotearoa New Zealand's diversity of students and who find ways to include student voice in curriculum and classroom decisions (Savage & Hindle, 2011). These are discussed in more detail in UNCRC Participation in Aotearoa New Zealand's Educational Settings and Schools as Places of Diversity, later in this chapter.

Participation of Children and Young People in Democracy

How do children fit into a modern democratic system? Currently in Aotearoa New Zealand the legal voting age is 18. Children and young people cannot vote for a political

representative through formal voting procedures. Nonetheless, simply by existing, children participate in the socio-political system, with or without a voice (Apple, 2004). As established previously, voting is not the be all and end all of a democracy and as such young people in Aotearoa New Zealand do have some opportunity, and in fact a legal right, to participate democratically. The notion of democracy as a way of living is essentially embraced by the United Nations (UN).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Adopted by Aotearoa New Zealand in 1993, the UNCRC has been ratified through specific youth-focused strategies, including the *Agenda for Children and the Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa*. UNCRC influence can be seen in aspects of the *New Zealand Curriculum for English Medium Learning* (henceforth NZ Curriculum). For example, citizenship is recognised as a significant future-focused issue. Nonetheless, Lundy (2020) challenges Aotearoa New Zealand to take the opportunity to formally incorporate key UNCRC provisions in education legislation, as was done in 2019 with the *Oranga Tamariki Act 1989 (Children's and Young People's Well-being Act 1989)*.

Bourke and O'Neill (2022) pinpoint Articles 12, 13, 28, 29 and 30 of the UNCRC as being particularly relevant for teachers and schools to consider when working with students. Article 12 of the UNCRC is a highly complex, important element of the convention, and a key principle of democratic participation for children (Hart, 1992; Lansdown, 2001, 2011; Lundy, 2007). Shier (2001) writes "Article 12 has been identified as one of the most radical and far reaching aspects of the UNCRC (...) and also as one of the provisions most widely violated and

disregarded in almost every sphere of children's lives” (p. 108). This article has also been cited as a key reason the United States of America has not signed the UNCRC (Lundy, 2020).

Article 12.1 states:

Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

How one initially interprets Article 12 depends on the epistemology through which they view it (Lansdown, 2001). Lundy (2020) offers us a detailed legalistic viewpoint from which to understand it and reminds us that it is a legal right for children, not an ideological guideline that adults can choose (or not) to follow. While a child does not express his or her opinion in the same manner as an adult, we cannot dismiss this as an inability to form a viewpoint. Consider a crying child; the crying is the child’s way of expressing a need. It is up to the adult to make the effort to understand the viewpoint and to provide a response that the child can understand (Lansdown, 2011; Lundy, 2020). Lansdown (2001) reminds us that not only are children interested in participating in decisions that affect them, failing to listen to their perspectives can and does result in mistakes in their education and care.

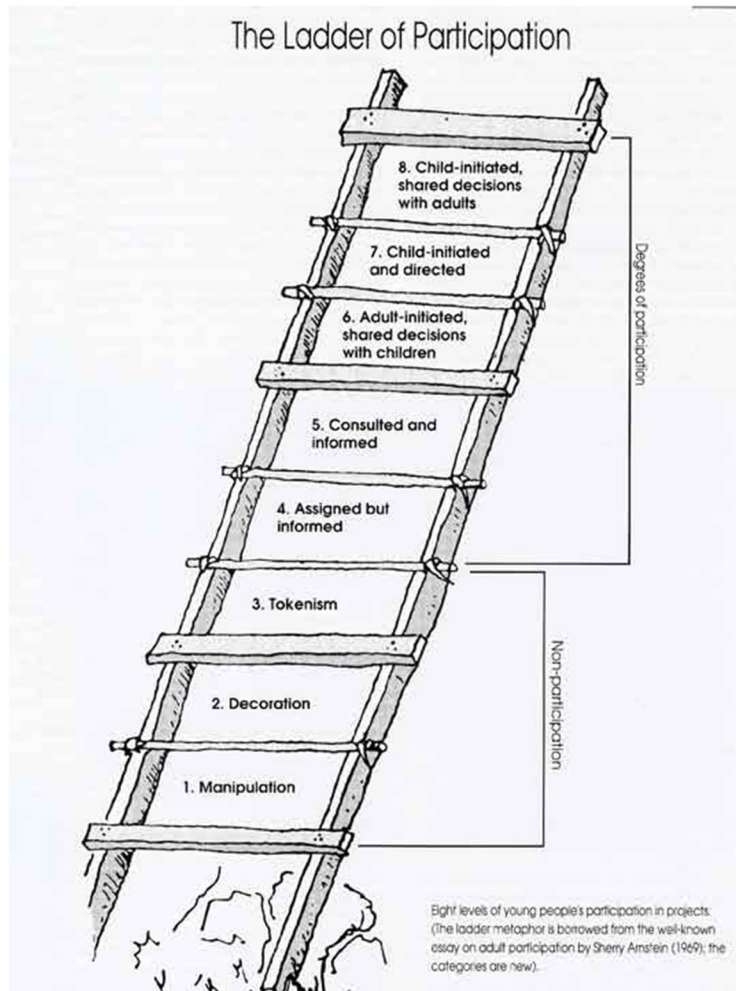
There is presently a disconnect between Article 12 itself, adult understandings of the article, and children’s experiences of its implementation (Lundy, 2020). Lansdown (2011) notes “full implementation of Article 12 continues to be impeded by many long-standing practices, cultures and attitudes” (p. 4). Furthermore, the structures and systems in most conventional schools and classrooms are contrary to what is needed to implement proper participation (Elwood & Lundy, 2010; Hart, 1992; Hood, 2015). Many teachers and school administrators

spoken to by Lundy (2020) claimed to be aware of the convention, however showed a lack of real understanding of the requirements of Article 12. In most cases, despite adults claiming they have listened to the children's perspective, the children stated they did not feel listened to, that they were not confident in speaking up, or that their opinion had not been seriously considered. Opportunity for true participation in decision-making, rather than simply consultation or tokenism, is considered necessary to fulfil the requirements of the UNCRC. True participation is defined as shared decision-making, as opposed to adults seeking student input on specific matters (Hart, 1992; Lansdown, 2001, 2011; Lundy, 2007; Shier, 2001).

In response to this disconnect participation models to aid implementation of Article 12 have been developed. Perhaps the most renowned of these is *Hart's Ladder* (shown in Figure 5) which identifies 9 different stages of youth consultation (Hart, 1992). The ladder represents different forms of participation rather than a hierarchy (with the top step being an end goal) (Hart, 2008). *Hart's Ladder* and *Shier's Pathway to Participation* (Shier, 2001) are presented by the New Zealand Government as best practice models for organisations seeking youth voice and participation in decision-making (Ministry of Social Development, 2003; Ministry of Youth Development Te Manatū Whakahiato Taiohi, 2018, 2020). More recently Laura Lundy's model of *Space, Voice, Audience and Influence* (Lundy, 2007) has moved to the forefront of this field (Bourke & O'Neill, 2022).

Figure 5

Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation (Hart, 1992, p. 8)

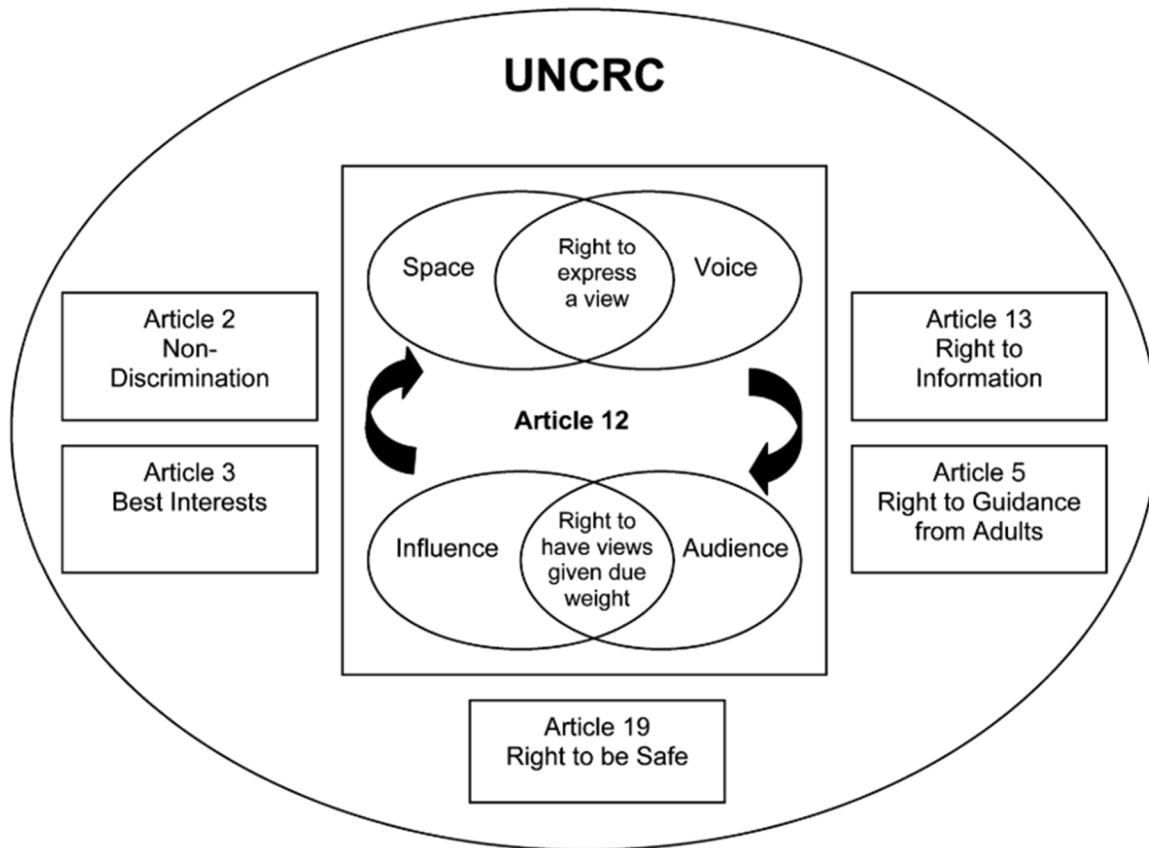


Lundy's Model Conceptualising Article 12

Lundy's model (shown in Figure 6) is a compelling one. Lundy (2020) attributes the interest in her model to its legalistic approach which narrows down Article 12 generalisations and conceptualises it by unpacking the specifics, as well as linking other relevant provisions of the UNCRC. The model highlights key elements of Article 12, while still recognising the overlapping functions and related articles (Lundy, 2007).

Figure 6

Lundy's Model Conceptualising Article 12.1 (Lundy, 2007, p. 932)



In order to express their views, children need the opportunity, or space, to do so.

Providing space addresses the requirement for parties to ensure implementation of this right. This space needs to be inclusive (Article 2), safe (Article 19) and universal. Voice refers to the right to express those views freely. Note this is a right, not a duty. Article 12.2 gives children the choice in their mode of expression. While all children are capable of forming a view, children who need guidance in expressing their viewpoint have the right to guidance under Article 5. Audience and influence ensure that the child's viewpoint is given due weight. Children's

perspectives must be listened to, not just heard. Children must be given feedback on their perspective, showing that their viewpoint is understood and explaining the influence their perspective had on the final decision (Lundy, 2020). Neither should opportunity to have their voice heard be only given as a reward to good behaviour (Lundy, 2020). Lundy (2007, 2020) raises a number of myths that she found to be prevalent among adults working with children, when interpreting Article 12. Regardless of adult concerns or misunderstandings, children being able to express their viewpoint on issues that affect them is an inalienable right. It is not something that can be put to use only on issues which adults predetermine as appropriate for consultation.

Finally, Lundy (2007, 2020) warns us of the danger of equating efforts towards student voice with the requirements of Article 12. Student voice alone does not meet the obligations of Article 12. Further work is needed by the education sector and Lundy (2020) challenges us with the following goals: i) ensure those in the education field have a real understanding of the requirements of (at the least) Article 12; ii) identify the educational benefits of this provision; and iii) identify best practice and practical strategies to help schools better implement this provision. She writes:

There is a need for greater awareness of the fact that respecting children's views is not just a model of good pedagogical practice (or policy making) but a legally binding obligation. As a minimum, those working in the education sector need to know that Article 12 exists, that it has legal force, and that it applies to all educational decision-making. (Lundy, 2007, p. 930)

The Government of Ireland has incorporated Lundy's model into a national participation framework for departments and agencies working with children and young people, to guide decision-making and listening to youth voice. Bourke and O'Neill (2022) suggest that the framework's checklists may provide useful guidance to "determine whether and the extent to which children are at the heart of decision-making in day-to-day curriculum, learning and assessment practices within the classroom and in broader policies and protocols that govern the schooling community" (p. 8).

UNCRC Participation in Aotearoa New Zealand's Educational Settings

Research on student participation in school decision-making, specific to Article 12, increased at the turn of this century (A. Gray, 2002; Shier, 2001). In Aotearoa New Zealand, the Education Review Office (ERO) (2003) identified ways that schools were including students in decision-making. Strengths identified at the time included: i) student involvement in classroom decision-making; and ii) student voice in school-wide matters through student representatives. ERO recommended that schools develop further provisions and systems to promote universal student participation in decision-making, to ensure all voices were heard. "Schools sampled did not create additional opportunities to ensure that all students (inclusive of ethnicity, sexual identity, disability, religious belief and gender) had opportunities to participate in school decision-making" (Education Review Office, 2003, p. 1). While there were initiatives for student representatives in some organisational decision-making, concerns were raised about how these representatives were chosen, and whether they truly represented the entirety of concerns, needs and various cohorts across a diverse student body.

UNCRC Article 30 has particular relevance to Aotearoa New Zealand as it provides additional rights to Māori children as indigenous, and minority children, access to enjoy and participate in their own culture, language, and religion (Bourke & O'Neill, 2022; Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). Research and practice that supports student voice and participation can be found in examples of culturally responsive pedagogies focused on the learning experiences of Māori students. These include (but are in no way limited to) *Te Kotahitanga Effective Teaching Profile* (Bishop et al., 2003), *Ka Hikitia: Accelerating Success 2013-2017* (Ministry of Education, 2013); *Kia Eke Panuku: Building on Success 2013-2016* (Ministry of Education, 2013) and most recently the *He Hurihanganui* project (Ministry of Education, 2019; Te Hurihanganui Mātanga, 2019). Together these call for teachers to build strong working and dialogical relationships with and between students; developing teachers who truly listen to the perspectives of Aotearoa New Zealand's diversity of students and who find ways to include student voice in curriculum and classroom decisions (Savage & Hindle, 2011). This aligns with the goals of many culturally responsive and sustainable pedagogies internationally, which seek, among other things, to redistribute the excessive power of white, colonial cultures in many educational settings (Delpit, 1988; Paris, 2012). Relationships, collaboration, and dialogue feature strongly in these pedagogical practices (Bishop & Berryman, 2006, 2009; Penetito et al., 2011).

Alongside this valuable work, values, principles, and competencies supporting democracy as a way of life are included in both the NZ Curriculum and the Ministry of Education's *Statement of Intent 2021-26* (Fordyce, 2012; Ministry of Education, 2007, 2021; NZ Political Studies Association, 2018). This includes competencies of participating and

contributing, relating to others and critical thinking; values of diversity, equity, and community and participation for the common good; and principles of inclusion, cultural diversity, community engagement and future focus including citizenship. The curriculum holds a vision of young New Zealanders who are connected and actively involved in the wider community. Greater opportunities for student voice is also a key feature of the Bullying-free NZ School Framework (Bullying Prevention Advisory Group, 2023) (discussed in greater detail in the section Changing Mindsets, later in this chapter).

The issues raised by ERO in 2003 (that schools need stronger, more transparent, and equitable processes in student participation in organisational decision-making) still seem to have not been widely addressed. There appears to be little evidence of increased student voice and participation in school decision-making outside of the classroom environment, nor guidance for school communities (staff, students, and whānau) on developing suitable participative systems and processes, specific to an Aotearoa New Zealand state secondary school setting. Furthermore, there is little indication that equitable and inclusive democratic participation outside the scope of the classroom has even been considered thoroughly.

Indications of frustrations with the administrative requirements from education policy and legislation (and with ERO itself) that tend to widen the gap between ideology and reality regarding student participation, rather than bridge it, have been expressed in the literature (Hood, 2015; Milne, 2017). There is also indication that school leaders appear to struggle balancing the expectations, obligations and responsibilities of their positions and the recognised need for greater student participation (Fordyce, 2012).

Democratic processes in school settings are not a well-recognised concept in Aotearoa New Zealand. A gap between theory and practice has been identified, where despite discussion, intentions, and recommendations there is little evidence of meaningful participation or teaching of democratic principles in Aotearoa New Zealand's schools (Hood, 2015; Varnham, 2005a, 2005b). School governance boards are required to have one student representative. Of this student Board of Trustees position, Varnham (2005a) observes "one student alone in all probability will find it difficult to express their views freely in such an environment" (p. 55). This may discourage many from applying for this position. She notes a scepticism among Aotearoa New Zealand students who see formal channels for student participation, such as student councils, as tokenistic and ineffective.

Undertaken in response to Aotearoa New Zealand's ratification of the UNCRC and specifically Article 12 (Education Review Office, 2003) the ERO report (discussed above) lists the most common ways schools in Aotearoa New Zealand promoted student participation. This includes student representatives (e.g., prefects, student councils), peer support initiatives, student feedback surveys, curriculum topic options, student participation in cultural initiatives, informal contact, and extra-curricular opportunities. Many of the inclusive strategies identified rely on a subset of students or an individual chosen by student and staff vote, with staff having the majority input. The descriptions of many of these practices listed in the report appear to be implemented, monitored, and reviewed, by adults.

The ERO report states "it is important that schools consider the extent to which they are able (and willing) to take into consideration the views of students alongside other stakeholders before undertaking any consultation exercise" (Education Review Office, 2003, p. 22). This

statement appears, ostensibly, to give the impression that schools can decide for themselves which issues students should be consulted on and to what extent their opinions will be considered. This somewhat authoritarian attitude to student participation in decision-making can be seen in much of the discussion and research on student voice and participation (Lundy, 2020). Lundy's work (discussed earlier in this chapter) refutes the legitimacy of such a position.

In the *Sixth Periodic Report Submitted by New Zealand under Article 44 of the Convention, due in 2021: Convention on the Rights of the Child* the NZ Government states that “there are a range of mechanisms embedded in New Zealand’s education legislation that ensure children are enabled to have meaningful input into decisions that affect them at school” (*United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: sixth periodic report by the Government of New Zealand 2021*, 2021, p. 33). However further detail on what these are is not provided in that particular section of the periodic report. Relevant mechanisms mentioned which may apply to Article 12 in relation to secondary students include the student Board of Trustees representative, and measures for students to dispute BOT decisions. Other initiatives mentioned in the report include support of student-driven anti-bullying strategies.

Youth are finding new and changing ways in which to engage politically and civically. While youth voting is in decline in Aotearoa New Zealand and around the world, youth are engaging in political issues through other avenues, for example the ‘Fridays for Future’ climate strikes, online social media activity and consumer activism (Barrett & Pachi, 2019; Wood et al., 2017). In Aotearoa New Zealand a decline in voting rates exists across all age cohorts (Wood, 2019). Barrett and Pachi (2019) argue that while the development of new participative approaches is positive, a decline in voting and face-to-face community engagement is a concern.

Their research supports claims that to improve long-term political engagement, youth need to learn these skills in open democratic schooling environments and by having first-hand experience with meaningful democratic processes such as school parliaments and councils. Despite this, a youth driven campaign to lower the voting age in Aotearoa New Zealand to 16 (for the general elections) has recently been stalled by the Government, despite the Supreme Court of New Zealand declaring it a breach of the *New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990* (Make it 16, 2023; RNC.co.nz, 2023).

Aotearoa New Zealand's NCEA (National Certificate of Educational Achievement) Social Studies curriculum requires active involvement in a social action, and students can earn credits for these participatory actions. This programme has been upheld as exemplary (Wood, 2019). However, it is also noted that this is an optional course, for senior students only (Years 11-13), and is offered in very few secondary schools. Research shows that specialised skills are required for teaching active participation (Wood et al., 2017). This aligns with claims by Neill (1995) and Greenberg (1987) that working in a democratic schooling environment is in many ways more challenging than traditional school environments where teachers are in control.

Apparent in the research is the slow progress of innovation and change towards greater student voice and participation outside of the classroom within the secondary school sector. Several researchers urge that the traditional hierarchical, authoritarian, and hegemonic school structures that dominate many secondary schools must change before we are able to see meaningful student voice and participative systems in these schools (Hood, 2015; Milne, 2017). Additionally, Varnham (2005a) argues that such changes will not only promote individual

student well-being, they will also improve the well-being and effectiveness of the school community.

Bottom-up Participation for Greater Well-being

Young adolescents are identified as needing informal relational learning and supportive role models more than content-based formal learning or authoritarian leadership (Carnegie Council, 1990; Mercogliano, 2011). Many initiatives in Aotearoa New Zealand include or are focused on student well-being, as schools and Government increasingly recognise its importance on student behaviour and academic outcome (Education Review Office Te Tari Arotake Matauranga, 2016). Included are culturally responsive pedagogical initiatives, including those discussed in the section UNCRC Participation in Aotearoa New Zealand’s Educational Settings earlier in this chapter), such as *Te Kotahitanga* project (Bishop & Berryman, 2009) aimed at ensuring “Māori students are enjoying and achieving education success as Māori” (Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 5). The ERO report *Wellbeing for Success: A Resource for Schools* identifies the Māori concepts of manaakitanga, whanaungatanga, ako and mahi tahi as “fundamental to supporting students’ well-being” (Education Review Office Te Tari Arotake Matauranga, 2016, p. 6).

A 2021 report for the NZ Ministry of Education on bullying highlighted a correlation between educational achievement and bullying, with lower-achieving students being at higher risk of experiencing bullying, and Pākehā students reporting the highest rates of being bullied (Mhuru, 2021). Mhuru (2021) notes that ‘students with a weaker sense of belonging were found to also report that they were bullied and achieved poorly compared to those with a stronger sense of belonging’ (p. 5).

Alongside bullying, student absences (both pre- and postCOVID-19), are a concern for Aotearoa New Zealand schools. As part of work towards addressing declining student attendance the Education Review Office (2022) undertook a survey of parents and students, looking at learner, family, school, and community influences impacting poor attendance rates. Learner factors given as reasons for truancy related to basic needs not being met at school, mental health issues, students feeling unsafe, poor relationships with staff and peers, lack of purpose seen in the learning, and lack of success as a learner. The authors noted that the social and cultural climate of the school, relationships between learners, and how teachers respond to the needs of each individual learner were identified as key school factors.

Figure 7, below, shows responses from learners when asked what schools could do to “promote a safe and positive social environment” (Education Review Office, 2022, p. 116).

Figure 7

Learner voice on how schools can create a safe, positive environment (Education Review Office, 2022, pp. 116-117).

Learners

Learners told us schools can do more to promote a safe and positive social environment by improving responses to bullying, support for mental health, interactions with teachers, and addressing racism and discrimination.

“A safe school environment. More senior learners and teachers in a specific safe space to help with bullying.”

LEARNER

“Learners would go to school more often if there were actually GOOD support systems there for them, and if their mental health issues were taken seriously by the school and their parents.”

LEARNER

“Teachers could be more reasonable when you make a mistake. They assume you will be trouble if you have done one thing wrong. They give up on kids too easily.”

LEARNER

“Treat everyone the same – no matter their ethnicity.”

LEARNER

Secondary-aged learners are frustrated with some traditional school practices including start times, seating plans, uniforms, and compulsory subject choices/activities.

“Make some activities optional – don't force learners to do things they aren't comfortable doing.”

LEARNER

“More freedom in class – no seating plan by default.”

LEARNER

“If school started later you would have less people sleeping in and people that live far away would have more time to get to school.”

LEARNER

“Give us more independence – more like uni. Especially if we are getting the work done.”

LEARNER

Democratic processes in schools may offer an avenue to improve well-being. In a study by Davies and Kirkpatrick (2000) democratic processes in schools in Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, and Sweden were examined. Their findings demonstrate that these countries actively promote, and resource extensive legislative initiatives based on bottom-up student participation across all levels of their schooling. Students were found to be happier and emotionally stronger, and have fewer disciplinary problems, including those in schools in low socio-economic areas. Students felt heard. The authors note the democratic processes that best enhance student well-being include:

- Formal channels for pupils to lobby for change
- Strong, equitable relationships between students and staff
- Well-resourced student councils, student representatives and student unions (with financing) across all levels of governance (school, local, regional and national)
- Democratic initiatives rooted in strong (and regularly reviewed) legislation
- A strong school culture supporting student participation at all levels (noting that legislation, while vital, was not enough on its own)

Davies and Kirkpatrick (2000) suggest that while democratic processes are time-consuming, the overall benefits that arose justified the time and costs.

Critical Pedagogy and Democracy

Dewey's (1916/2011) work focused on concepts such as democracy, student self-direction, community, moral development, and aligning experience with education. He maintained that to sustain a healthy democracy, we must prepare students through active engagement. To do this, Dewey argued, schools should function as community democracies

(Dewey, 1916/2011, 1938/2015). Dewey believed in a reflective approach to education (Brown & Sawyer, 2016) and “viewed change and growth as in fact the nature of things” (Apple & Teitelbaum, 2001, p. 194).

Freire is another highly regarded and world-renowned educator whose work is particularly relevant to this study. Like Dewey, Freire also argues that we can develop greater social justice and equity through a more participatory education (Dewey, 1938/2015; Freire, 1968/2018). Au (2007) writes: “it is hard to over-emphasize Freire’s importance to progressive, social justice, radical, and critical educators in the U.S. and around the world” (p. 171). Critical pedagogy, based on the work of Freire, is intertwined with democracy (hooks, 2003; Shor, 1993). Glassman and Patton (2014) link the ideas of Dewey and Freire, noting the “focus on the importance of democratic values in a fair, well-functioning society” (p. 1353).

The aim of critical pedagogy and democratic educators towards the goals of social justice and equity is illustrated by Beane (2017):

In a robust democracy, social justice and equity are taken seriously. For this reason, educators who want to teach the democratic way are in a constant search for high achievement for all young people, especially those who are non-privileged and for whom difficulty in school cannot be offset by family wealth or influence. (Beane, 2017, p. 1073)

Two key ideas of Freire (1968/2018) centre around the oppression and dehumanisation of people through systems that deny them voice and dignity. Freire argues that learning in education systems that support authoritarian teacher control models and maintain a culture of silence dehumanises students and creates cynicism. He suggests that a more humanising approach to education, that reflects the real and actual experiences of students, allows dialogue and critical

reflection of their circumstances, and supports agency, empowers students to become agents of change (Freire 1968/2018).

The work of hooks is closely intertwined with that of Freire, with hooks offering a black, feminist perspective (hooks, 1994). Hooks (2003) writes that the key work of democratic educators is to overcome dominating structures and fight for social justice, and states that the key tool of a democratic educator is conversation. Au (2007) links Freire's works to dialectical materialism.

Critical pedagogy in education requires that teachers not only encourage students to think critically about the social and economic structures impacting their learning, but that educators also do this. This includes educators reflecting on their own biases (Freire, 1968/2018; hooks, 1994; McLaren & Leonard, 1993). Despite their popularity, the work of Dewey and Freire has not been implemented widely in classrooms. Apple and Teitelbaum (2001) point out an irony of Dewey's highly regarded reputation and wide recognition as an educator, arguing that while "Dewey is generally recognized as the most renowned American educator of the twentieth century (...) Dewey's own ideas never really permeated the classroom realities of the American education system, despite his central place in academic discourse throughout this century" (p. 194). Hooks (2003) makes a similar observation about the work of Freire, noting that authoritarian school structures impede student potential to freely express their perspectives.

The same disconnect between the theory of critical pedagogy and its implementation in practice has been noticed in Aotearoa New Zealand (Hood, 2015; Varnham, 2005a, 2005b). Looking at processes to address anti-social behaviours in schools Varnham (2005b) notes a culture of control in many schools often undermines efforts to implement more democratic

approaches, despite such approaches being found to be more effective than traditional measures of discipline. In order to address the imbalance of power between staff and students seen in many schools, which impacts negatively on school culture and student well-being, Varnham proposes a change in culture guided by training and formal policy initiatives. She writes:

Research suggests that school processes, including behaviour management, are still, in all the comparative jurisdictions, largely based on the authoritarian hierarchical model of ‘them’ and ‘us’. A change in culture may be achieved only gradually. It requires policy development at a national and school level, followed by training at teacher education level and training existing staff to widen the view from teaching to practicing democratic processes. Student participation generally, in order to be effective, must be seen by all to be meaningful and authentic, not tokenism. (Varnham, 2005b, p. 99)

The explicit inclusion of the use of culturally sustaining practices, communicating and critical pedagogies in Phase 1 of the developing Common Practice Model (Te Poutaha Curriculum Centre, 2023), scheduled to be rolled out to schools in 2024, is a one small step towards meeting this goal.

Critical pedagogy in education requires that teachers not only encourage students to think critically about the social and economic structures impacting their learning, but that educators also do this. This includes educators reflecting on their own biases (Freire, 1968/2018; hooks, 1994; McLaren & Leonard, 1993). Reflecting on Freire’s influence on her own teaching practice, hooks talks about the need for teachers to be vulnerable and accept the possibility of chaotic learning spaces. Hooks (1994) writes:

All too often it is assumed that if you “give students the freedom”—and it’s a mistake to think we’re talking about giving students freedom rather than seeing it is a project that teachers and students are working on together—there will be chaos, that no serious discussion will ensue. That’s the difference education as the practice of freedom makes. The bottom-line assumption has to be that everyone in the classroom is able to act responsibly. That has to be the starting point—that we are able to act responsibly together to create a learning environment. All too often we have been trained as professors to assume students are not capable of acting responsibly, that if we don’t exert control over them, then there’s just going to be mayhem. (pp. 151-152)

This vulnerability, raised by hooks (2003) is also discussed by Varnham (2005a) who reminds us that “any change is scary” (p. 100). However, the promise of more inclusive school culture, which in turn would contribute towards a more inclusive society, makes it fear worth overcoming (Brown & Hamilton, 2016; P. Gray & Chanoff, 1986; hooks, 1994, 2003; Varnham, 2005a, 2005b).

In their review of democratic teaching practices in the classroom, Collins et al., (2019) identified obstacles teachers faced when implementing such processes, including difficulties gaining administrative, peer or parent support and tensions arising from traditional control-based pedagogical approaches. The authors found that the best way to deal with such tensions is to discuss them in a democratic environment (Collins et al., 2019). This somewhat ironic finding illustrates the value of democratic deliberation in consensus building.

Tensions between democratic and capitalist values have also been identified as having an impact on critical pedagogy and democratic practices in schools (Fielding & Moss, 2011; Giroux & Giroux, 2008). Fielding and Moss (2011) argue that students (and their parents) should be considered as citizens of a school community, rather than consumers of an educational product.

They assert:

There is a fundamental distinction between a marketized system of education that treats schools as businesses and parents as consumers pursuing self-interest through individual choice and a democratic system of education that treats schools as public institutions and parents and children as citizens, capable of engaging in a democratic way of life and democratic forms of relationship, including participation in the making of collective choices. (Fielding & Moss, 2011, pp. 59-60)

Giroux and Giroux (2008) argue that the competitiveness of capitalist neoliberalism undermines democratic values and civic discourse. Conversely, they contend, it is through democratic reflection in education and other public spheres, where teachers take critical positions, that societies can rein in neoliberal fundamentalism and other extremist positions, and instead promote democratic alliances and social justice. They write:

[Critical] pedagogy is based on the presupposition that it is not enough to teach students to break with accepted ideas. They must also learn to directly confront the threat from fundamentalisms of all varieties that seek to turn democracy into a mall, a sectarian church, or a wing of a punishing state (...) public education is about more than job preparation or even consciousness raising; it is also about imagining different futures and politics as a form of intervention into public life. (Giroux & Giroux, 2008)

The Hidden Curriculum and Participation

Education is essential for a democracy to flourish. Democracy is not a succinct means to an end but rather an ongoing process; a cycle of inquiry and debate, that moves with the changing and dynamic needs of the society it serves (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). It is hard work and constant effort. It involves stepping outside one's own interests and finding common ground between contradictory perspectives (Apple & Beane, 2007). Not giving youth the skills needed to participate actively in civic society not only puts democracy at risk but is also a form of oppression towards those without the cultural capital required to participate (Freire, 1968/2018). Critical pedagogy is intertwined with the practice of democracy. Critical pedagogy aims to give learners the skills needed to participate in and change society and invites them to question the world they live in and the knowledge they are presented (Giroux, 2011; Shor, 1993). However, if we teach students to question, without allowing them to question the systems and values of the environment in which they learn, we are unjust.

Following a theoretical framework of social-constructivism, children and youth construct understandings and give meaning to their lives from the experiences they encounter. There is a risk that the meanings adolescents construct from conventional school rules and structures oppose the values we are hoping to model (Apple, 2004; Giroux, 2011). The deeply ingrained traditional structures of hierarchy and authority in many mainstream schools imply a hidden curriculum of dependence and a lack of trust that may cause cynicism and moral confusion for youth, many of whom meet significant responsibilities outside of school (Thornberg, 2006, 2010a; Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012). This hidden curriculum of social control and forced compliance is potentially counteractive to explicit learning goals encouraging students to voice

their perspectives and think critically about their worlds (Hood, 2015). A hidden curriculum created by school structures gives lessons on “what and whom the school values (...) about justice, power, dignity and self-worth” (Apple & Beane, 2007, p. 14). Democratic approaches to education critically question the taken for granted systems and attitudes in schools, asking whom they serve and what is their purpose.

A review of qualitative research on bullying by Thornberg (2011) indicates that the social norms created through school structures and culture contribute to bullying, harassment and social exclusion of individual students in schools. Thornberg’s study identifies authoritarian and “autocratic structures and procedures and hierarchical channels of communication”, alongside a “discourse of normality (...) and the competitive ethos of school” (2011, p. 260). Secondary school structures have changed little since the colonial model of secondary schooling was introduced universally in 1937 (Hood, 2015). Aspects of our system that usually remain unquestioned, for example grading and ability grouping students, aged-based student grouping, disciplinary procedures, set class timetables, standardised assessments, subject based lessons and a focus on academic qualifications, all provide a hidden curriculum through which students make sense of their worlds; one which does not suit today’s world and may also cause cynicism, confusion and resistance among youth (Apple, 2004; Fielding & Moss, 2011; Milne, 2017; Thornberg, 2010b).

Schools as Places of Diversity

Recent strategies encouraging schools to better meet the needs and values of Māori and Pasifika communities, reflect Aotearoa New Zealand’s diverse society. The *Ka Hikitia* strategy (raised earlier in this chapter in the section discussing UNCRC Participation in Aotearoa New

Zealand's Educational Settings) reinforces the work of Mason Durie (2011) seeking that Māori be allowed to succeed 'as Māori'. This work is important in progressing understanding about needs of not only Māori learners, but also other cultures (Berryman, 2014). However, we still have a long way to go in recognising the diversity of cultures and needs in Aotearoa New Zealand's schools. Strategies that promote diverse needs are often stunted by taken-for-granted norms moulded by white hegemony. Milne (2017) writes of the hypocrisy of the *Ka Hikitia* strategy which, while seeking that Māori be allowed to learn as Māori, then contradicts itself by measuring the success of Māori achievement through 'white' quantitative goals. A rhetoric of multiculturalism and diversity is lost within everyday practices and overarching goals, systems and structures which reinforce a hidden curriculum of white values, knowledge, and epistemologies (Delpit, 1988; DiAngelo, 2011; Gillborn, 2005; Hood, 2015; Milne, 2017).

Small, but positive, steps towards the goal of multiculturalism and celebrating diversity can be seen in many schools. Milne (2017) described one New Zealand college as comprising 2 schools; one following a Māori educational epistemology and the other a Pasifika worldview; allowing their students to learn as Māori or as Pasifika students (Milne, 2017). Two New Zealand secondary schools have been acknowledged for positive outcomes for all learners, particularly Māori students. Influenced by the work of Mere Berryman, these schools attribute their success to increased acknowledgement of their students' cultural and social, as well as academic desires, strengthened relationships with Māori communities, and allowing Māori to learn as Māori (Austin, 2018; Chumko, 2018). Culturally sustainable practices require not only teacher reform but also school leader, middle management and wider community commitment to change (Berryman, 2014).

Initiatives that focus on in-class pedagogy help to reflect democratic values in the classroom. One such example is the *Developing Mathematical Inquiry Communities* (DMIC) professional development project which operates within many schools across the nation, including some at secondary level. Integrating aspects of Complex Instruction (Cohen et al., 1999), DMIC has been developed to suit the diverse mathematics classrooms in Aotearoa New Zealand, with particular focus on the needs of Pasifika children (Hunter et al., 2018). The programme recognises the importance of developing student abilities in and access to dialogue and deliberation, and the importance of these in learning. The professional development participating schools are undertaking includes nine intensive staff workshops and regular in-class mentoring over a three year period, indicating the time needed for teachers to adjust mindsets and pedagogy. The DMIC programme recognises the need to question and disrupt traditional institutional and colonial values common in mainstream schools to establish more equitable student outcomes (Hunter, 2009; Hunter & Hunter, 2022).

Several researchers agree that introducing small changes within well-established institutional structures, without questioning the historical and monocultural perspective in which they were developed, does little to address the cultural needs of diverse communities, and supports a hegemonic hidden curriculum that disenfranchises indigenous cultures (Apple, 2004; Gillborn, 2005; Milne, 2017). This argument raises questions fundamental to the current research; how does democracy interplay with Aotearoa New Zealand's diverse cultural values and needs? Is democracy simply just another western ideal used as a pretence for bi- or multiculturalism or does it support Māori ideals to live and learn 'as Māori', or those of other cultures to learn 'as themselves'? Embracing the principles of equality, freedom, and collective

responsibility, democracy offers promise for a society built on mutual respect, tolerance, and cooperation (Osborne, 2001; West, 2004). We are challenged to embrace this opportunity to create a truly multicultural democracy (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

Neurodiversity and Democratic Choice in Education

Diversities other than culture also exist within Aotearoa New Zealand (Harbott, 2017). Diversities include disability, gender, sexuality, linguistic, socio-economic situation, family type, and geographical situation (i.e., rural versus urban living) (UNESCO, 2023). Harbott (2017) notes a gap in diversity research: “Current education on diversity (...) fails to address the diversity within groups; the people who do not match their given labels or fit the social norms” (p. 20). She writes that teacher attitudes towards normalising diversity are vital to ensuring comprehensive inclusivity.

Self-directed learning, often accompanied with the analogy of the student being in the driving seat of their education, is a common concept used in Aotearoa New Zealand schools currently (Ministry of Education, 2020). In her book *A Different Way to Learn: Neurodiversity and Self-Directed Education*, Naomi Fisher (2023) looks at self-directed education for neurodiverse students. She reminds us that a focus on adjusting the educational environment rather than changing the child is important in self-directed education, noting: “self-directed education focuses on changing the environment rather than changing the child, creating an environment which is flexible enough to accommodate difference and facilitate learning” (Fisher, 2023, p. 34). Fisher includes democratic schools among the types of educational facilities offering proper self-directed education.

Reflecting on a discussion with the principal of the longest running democratic school (and daughter of A.S. Neill), Zoe Readhead, Fisher (2023) discusses the impact of compulsion in schooling on a student's education. Fisher suggests that if a form of compulsion is at play, then learning is not self-directed. To support this claim, she writes:

I was on a panel recently with Zoe Readhead, Principal of Summerhill School in Leiston, Suffolk and when asked how education needed to change, she said that young people need to be able to get up and leave. This single fact would transform how we do education. There must be a space to say no. If there was, then schools would work very differently. (Fisher, 2023, p. 66)

Neurodiverse students often encounter difficulties and even trauma at school. Fisher (2023) explains that often it is not the academic learning that is problematic but the school environment itself, pointing to a focus on standardisation, comparisons of students and a focus on academic achievement as some of the aspects of traditional schooling impacting neurodiverse students negatively. She notes that many neurodiverse people benefit more from an environment of acceptance rather than from being pathologised. Self-directed education, such as that provided at democratic schools, allows students to follow individual developmental trajectories, providing improved outcomes for many neurodiverse students (Fisher, 2023).

Democratic Schools as a Distinct Typology

Difficulties in defining and understanding the many different layers of meaning in the concept of democracy make it even more important to determine how democracy in schools might look (Apple & Beane, 2007). Despite differences in interpretation and delivery, the one aspect of democratic education most consistent in the literature is that if the goal is to raise future

citizens who truly understand democratic values and processes, this must be learned by doing from an early age. Fielding and Moss (2011) distinguish between democracy “as an organisational form, but also as a way of being in the world” (p. 43). Further, they argue that democratic fellowship is a necessity of any functioning democracy and seek that schools act as agents of democratic fellowship.

Praxis is considered in this thesis as process combining reflection, action and theory (Au, 2018). The praxis of democracy in the realm of education can be considered along a continuum (Harber, 1995). Broadly speaking, one end of the scale involves teaching democracy as part of the curriculum, as an abstract idea; something that students will participate in as adults. The other end involves letting children experience democracy in action as they actively contribute to schools that employ democratic organisational structures (Dobozy, 2007). This section focuses on the latter, in keeping with the notion of democracy as a set of values and moral codes that must be learned and understood through ongoing day-to-day practice (Alshurman, 2015; Dewey, 1916/2011; Fairley & Wilson, 2017; Fielding & Moss, 2011; Greenberg, 1987; Tikoko et al., 2011). This research stance tends to revolve around community input in curricular and school policy making (Apple, 2004; Apple & Beane, 2007; Singh & Osborne, 2001), in-class deliberative democratic discussions (Englund, 2006; Englund & Sockett, 2000; Thornberg, 2010a, 2010b; Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012), and/or schools that identify as democratic, where student voice is equal to that of staff (Hecht, 2010; Korkmaz & Erden, 2014; Moore, 2017; Neill, 1995; Osório, 2015).

There is a growing praxis focused on a distinct model of schooling, that claims the title Democratic School. Summerhill School in England (established 1921) has been noted as a starting point for this progressive type of education (Gray & Chanoff, 1986; Hobson, 2001;

Korkmaz & Erden, 2014; Neill, 1995). Similarly, Greenberg & colleagues founded a democratic, free school in 1968, in the USA (Greenberg, 1987). There is now a network of these schools worldwide. The first school thought to include the word democratic in its name is the Democratic School of Hadera, in Israel (Hecht, 2010). Fisher (2021) notes that the Hadera schools are the largest democratic schools in the world. Schools that formally identify themselves as democratic can also be found in India (Ahmad, 2017), Philippines (Corpus, 2018; Moore, 2017), Brazil (Osório, 2015), Netherlands (Osório & Shread, 2018), Japan, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Israel (Valeeva & Kasimova, 2015) and Australia (ADEC, 2023). Furthermore, there is a small but growing body of international research promoting such schools (Aquarone, 2021; Feldman, 1997, 2000; Feldman & Gray, 1999; Fisher, 2023; P. Gray & Chanoff, 1986).

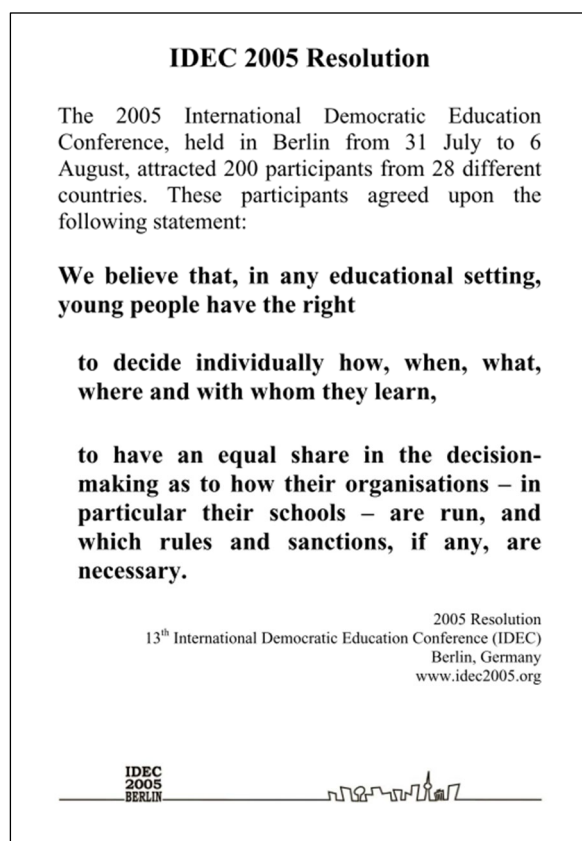
Similar schools in Aotearoa New Zealand also exist. A primary school in the North Island, has been following democratic methods of teaching, for children up to Year 6 (age 11-12) for the past 40 years. Newer schools in the North Island include a one-day democratic school for primary aged children and a forest school for ages 5 to 18. Similar schools in the South Island include a designated character primary school following democratic principles that opened in 1966 and a composite school catering to students ages 5 to 20 with a focus on participative education and individualised learning plans.

Many democratic schools around the world have collaborated to form various organisations supporting the praxis of democratic schooling as a distinct typology. The International Democratic Education Network (IDEN) is one such group (IDEN, 2019). In 2005, the International Democratic Education Conference (IDEC) outlined their collective understanding on what entails a democratic school; expressing the twin goals of young people

being able to follow their own learning pathway and having the option of being involved in school decision-making, equal to adults. The resolution is broad, allowing individual schools and communities to determine how this might manifest within their own unique communities. The full resolution is shown in Figure 8, below.

Figure 8

International Democratic Education Conference Resolution (IDEC, 2005)



Freire (1968/2018), Shor (1993) and Codd (2005) note that a fundamental change from traditional to more progressive pedagogies is a long-term process. However, after more than 100 years of development democratic schooling remains an alternative to the status quo (Apple &

Beane, 2007; Blaisdell, 2000; Fielding & Moss, 2011; Neill, 1995). Nonetheless, just as democratic schools are becoming more prevalent around the world, research discussing democratic processes in schools is also growing internationally (Alshurman, 2015; Feldman, 1997; Fielding & Moss, 2011; P. Gray & Chanoff, 1986; Greenberg, 1987; Hecht, 2010; Korkmaz & Erden, 2014; Moore, 2017; Osório, 2015; Osório & Shread, 2018; Otani, 2001; Valeeva & Kasimova, 2015). Aotearoa New Zealand-based research specific to this field exists, although is not prolific (Peck, 2009; Rapatahana, 2017; Vaughan, 2002).

Aquarone (2021) claims “regardless of what definition of ‘social justice’ one uses, academic literature is full of examples of mainstream education’s failure to deliver it” (p. 41) arguing that democratic schools are an alternative worthy of greater consideration due to its potential to deliver more equitable outcomes. Surprised at the limited impact democratic schools worldwide have had on the conventional system of secondary education, despite their potential for greater social justice outcomes, Gray and Chanoff (1986) propose fear of the unknown as one reason for the lack of uptake. They suggest that many parents may see less familiar types of education as a greater more risk, and because of this chose the more familiar status quo of mainstream schools.

Characteristics of Democratic Schools

Beyond the 2005 IDEC resolution, a shared vision of what democratic schooling entails is not established (Alshurman, 2015; Alternative Education Resource Organisation, 2019; Gray & Chanoff, 1986; Korkmaz & Erden, 2014). Common themes found in the literature include the exclusion of hierarchical, authoritarian, and culturally biased structures in favour of democratic decision-making, learner autonomy, and freedom of time and movement. Further research is

required before finding a consensus on the definitions and characteristics of democratic pedagogies, education and schooling; if, indeed, a common interpretation is appropriate (Apple, 2004; Apple & Beane, 2007; Fielding & Moss, 2011; Neill, 1995).

Recognising the lack of cohesion, Korkmaz and Erden (2014) undertook a global study of experts in the field, to establish shared characteristics of democratic schools. The most consistent themes found in their research include:

- Dialogue-based relationships between students, staff, and families
- Equal power and responsibility for staff and students in all aspects of the school through shared decision-making
- Recognising individuality within a framework of collective responsibility
- Flexible, student-led, individualised learning programmes
- A curriculum focused on learners choosing how they should spend their own time
- Freedom of movement
- Basic values of respect, equality, justice, collaboration, individual freedoms, and collective responsibilities
- Creating a culture and environment that supports free-play
- Mixed-age learning
- Rejection of hierarchical structures and authority of adults over students.

Alongside the individual freedom proffered in democratic schools, these schools also require a strong sense of community and a substantial measure of collective responsibility from its school members, both staff and students. The collective responsibility required of students at democratic schools goes further than respecting the decisions of the community. Students are

directly involved in decision-making that affects large groups of students, the entire school community, or even future students with whom they hold only an abstract relationship. Students also have opportunity to challenge decisions, school rules and organisational processes in full school meetings, judicial committees, or other discussions (Feldman, 2000; Korkmaz & Erden, 2014; Lucas, 2011; Traxler, 2015). In a democratic school, major decisions are made collectively, in meetings where staff and students (and in some examples parents) all have equal opportunity to participate. Such responsibility is not to be taken lightly and it appears that, on the whole, students tend to exercise this power with the respect, caution, dialogue and investigation each decision warrants (Gray & Chanoff, 1986; Greenberg, 1987; Hecht, 2010; Neill, 1995). The learning students gain from involvement in such processes has been established in prior research (Harber, 1995; Rietmulder, 2019).

Direct Participation in Formal Democratic Procedures

Democratic schools are designed by the community they serve, to suit their own cultural and practical needs. The students are directly involved in the functioning and well-being of the school (Fielding & Moss, 2011; Korkmaz & Erden, 2014; Rachmiel & Elfaks, 2018). The Democratic School of Hadera (hereafter Hadera), in Israel, for example, is organised around four democratically managed authorities (the Legislative Authority, Executive Authority, Judiciary Authority and Review Authority) that all students and staff participate in equally, that together form the entirety of school management. Overseen by the Legislative Authority, in which all school members are able to participate in weekly, these authorities, and the various subcommittees and working groups established under each, manage all aspects of the school, including; curriculum design, class timetabling, general rules, discipline (of both staff and

students), budget matters, building maintenance, staff recruitment, teacher-student and student-student relationships, determining objectives, implementing work plans, welcoming new students and their families, managing the admissions waitlist, organising holidays, ceremonies or other events, reviewing the work of the other authoritative bodies, and preparing quarterly reviews (Hecht, 2010).

Neill (1995) was the founder and long-term principal of perhaps the longest running democratic school in the world (Lucas, 2011). During his time, weekly meetings at Summerhill School (hereafter Summerhill), in the United Kingdom, were called the General Meeting and occurred on a Saturday night (the majority of students being boarders). Matters discussed revolved around social and group life, social offences, and school laws. Summerhill's weekly meeting differ from Hadera's, as Summerhill had no pre-elected positions. A different chairperson was appointed each week and the position of secretary was voluntary. Unlike Hadera and many other democratic schools not all decisions related to school organisation at Summerhill School were open to vote. Staff were appointed by Neill, and Neill and his wife made executive decisions on furniture, budgeting, health and safety, bedrooms, meals, and textbooks (Neill, 1995).

As illustrated above, democratic schools are established through collaborative processes of dialogue using democratic principles (Korkmaz & Erden, 2014). As such, the schools and their constitutions are grown organically, based around the needs of the community each serves. Importantly, this collaborative process is ongoing, meaning school constitutions and processes are open to change over time according to the needs or wants of the respective communities. The

structure of each democratic school, therefore, is unique; dependent on the school community both past and present (Greenberg, 1987; Hecht, 2010).

Many democratic schools have modelled their school governance meetings on the system of sociocracy. A system of democratic decision-making where power is distributed evenly and intentionally, sociocracy provides avenues for diverse groups to be included in all decision-making through an organised and transparent system of dialogue, negotiation and distributed leadership (Rau & Koch-Gonzalez, 2018). Research on democratic schools in the Netherlands, that follow sociocratic democratic processes, found students aged 6 to 18 actively involved in direct democratic processes, making decisions on a wide range of issues, both minor and major, regarding both the long-term organisation and day-to-day running of the schools. Students interviewed felt that the sociocratic process of consent-giving through cooperation and compromise gave them a feeling of inclusion, empowerment, and belonging. Adults felt that students learned compassion, equity, understanding and diplomacy (Osório & Shread, 2018).

Concerns regarding the ‘tyranny of the majority’ must be considered (Cunningham, 2002; Heywood, 2017). Schools run by democratic management face the risk of decisions being made in favour of a majority or a particularly powerful lobby group. Wilson (2015) highlighted this issue in her study of a small democratic school in the USA, where she found one middle class male holding power over a meeting she observed. Student participants in a more recent study noted that the key to equitable participation was participants being aware of their own responsibility to raise their voice against potential hierarchies (Aquarone, 2021). The need for critical debate of processes, rules, systems and structures, traditions, and epistemologies, in a way that not only empowers the oppressed but disempowers the oppressor, has been highlighted

as a key element of a true and deep democracy (Freire, 1968/2018; McLaren & Leonard, 1993; West, 2004). In a true democracy, citizens need to continually question the status quo.

Democratic schools teach collaboration and citizenship through meaningful participation; giving students opportunity to practise and refine their democratic skills regularly and on an ongoing basis, in a manner that promotes a deep understanding of the ‘hows and whys’ of individual and collective responsibility (Apple & Beane, 2007; Beane, 2017; Fielding, 2004; Fielding & Moss, 2011). Neill (1995), Greenberg (1987), Hecht (2010), Rietmulder (2019), and Traxler (2015) argue that, as they practice collective responsibility and citizenship daily, students from their schools develop in-depth skills in negotiation, collaboration, dialogue, debate and listening, and strong values of empathy and acceptance of others. They learn diplomacy and citizenship hands-on. They learn by doing.

Student-led Learning, Free-time & Learning Through Play

Child-driven free-play, or free time for teenagers, not only helps children make sense of their worlds but also gives space for children to develop physically, emotionally, socially, and cognitively (Ginsburg, 2007; Holt, 2004; Rietmulder, 2019). It provides youth with the courage to explore and create in a serious fashion (so to learn) but without the fear of negative consequences of failure, mistakes, or judgement from others (Bruner, 2006). P. Gray (2013) notes a correlation between a decline in free-play and an increase in mental health concerns. He writes: “over the past half-century or more we have seen a continuous erosion of children’s freedom to play and, corresponding with that, a continuous decline in young people’s mental and physical health”. The importance of play in the development of a child, and free time in the development of a teen, cannot be underestimated. Like participation, the UN reinforces the

importance of play for children through its inclusion in the UNCRC (Article 31), thereby making it a universal human right.

Eisen (1990) researched children's play during the Holocaust. He suggests that children placed in the highly traumatic situation of living in ghettos and camps used play and imagination as coping skills, helping them to both transcend and decipher the harsh realities they faced (Eisen, 1990). While adults in the Jewish ghettos and camps in WWII played games (such as chess or card games) to temporarily forget their stark realities, children often invented games based around and directly confronting their dire circumstances, giving them tools to come to terms with the events happening around them, and allowing them to practice the skills needed to survive the extreme situations they potentially faced. Through play, "children bring the realities of their world into a fictional context, where it is safe to confront them, to experience them, and to practice ways of dealing with them." (P. Gray, 2013, p. 169). Eisen notes that, in general, children of the Holocaust were often more able than adults to adapt to and overcome the gruesome and absurd physical and emotional situations they were thrown into, to which he attributes the "unique conflict-resolving qualities" of play (1990, p. 122). Of course, it is not only in such extreme situations that children use play to make sense of their worlds (Ginsburg, 2007; Holt, 2004; Rietmulder, 2019).

There is consensus among play researchers, supported by advocates of democratic schools, that children need the opportunity to control and structure their own play (Ginsburg, 2007; P. Gray, 2013; Rietmulder, 2019). A democratic school environment that encourages and supports child-driven free-play, through a curriculum focused on learners choosing how they should spend their own time (Korkmaz & Erden, 2014), can be argued to be able to better foster

a child's need for play than conventional schools. Democratic schools allow time for free, deep, child-driven play, unmanipulated by adults, with adults and older-aged peers on hand to participate at the child's level, or to assist should they be asked for help, yet without the need for the child to worry about unnecessary interruption (Neill, 2006). Another benefit of free-play in a democratic school environment is that children get to share these learning experiences with mixed-aged peers and adults. This in turn helps adults to better understand the position, interests, values and learning needs of the child (Ginsburg, 2007).

Bruner (2006), Holt (2004) and P. Gray (2013) all discuss experiments where participants were given a challenging learning task either following a playful experience or following being advised it was a serious learning task. Children and adults in a more playful state of mind were more easily able to problem solve, were less likely to become frustrated with mistakes (being more likely to look at mistakes as a learning opportunity than a reason to give up) and were more enthusiastic about tackling challenging tasks than participants in a more serious learning mode. From the experiments in which he was involved, Bruner (2006, p. 60) concludes "for realistic tasks, a playful attitude may in fact have the effects of producing more realistic behaviour". Gray (2013) believes pressure interferes with new learning and with creativity. Bruner discusses a longitudinal study conducted by psychologist, Ericson, who notes that participants in the study who merged play and work as an adult led "more interesting lives" than those who separated work from play (2006, p. 62).

Greenberg (1997) discusses occasions where formal lessons have been established to answer questions and advance formal learning needs that have developed through inquiry resulting from a free-play experience. This includes an example where a group of children, aged

between nine and twelve, learned an entire primary maths curriculum in just a few months of formal lessons, which they had asked for, after noticing – through play – that they were lacking some arithmetic skills. Greenberg noted that because the children had sought him out to teach these specific skills, he was able to set his own expectations around behaviour expectations during lessons, and teaching flowed easily. This type of emerging curriculum is similar to that found in a Regio Emilia school (Fielding & Moss, 2011). Not all democratic schools run their formal lessons this way. Summerhill run formal classes that students can choose to attend or not (Neill, 1995). The Hadera Democratic School runs formal lessons negotiated through the relevant management committee, again which children can choose to attend or not (Hecht, 2010).

Rietmulder (2019) contrasts deep learning through play to traditional academic learning which he believes to be shallow and one-dimensional. In a study of age-mixing at a democratic school, Feldman and Gray (1999) found that children at Sudbury Valley School choose to play in mixed-aged groups, despite there being enough children at the school for them to separate into age-defined groups. They also found that groups who played together formed and re-formed according to interest in the game. Feldman and Gray note older children often scaffolded the learning of younger children through adding increased challenges to their play, without making it too hard that the younger children lose interest and no longer want to participate. They believe children learn this skill naturally through free play.

The lack of opportunity for free play, experienced by many children today, negatively impacts the cognitive, physical, social and emotional well-being of young people (Abbott, 2010; P. Gray, 2013). Children in poverty may be restricted from play due to being forced to work; children in affluent families are often negatively affected by a lack of play through

overscheduled lives (Ginsburg, 2007). The forces of capitalism, which bring an increase in concern for competition, efficiency and productivity has been blamed for this overscheduling (Abbott, 2010). A correlation between the decline in free play since the mid-1950s and an increase in anxiety and depression among youth is noted (P. Gray, 2013). Learning through play is also suggested to help schools better deal with issues of obesity, hyperactivity, stress, and specific learning difficulties (O-Rourke, 2012). Ginsburg (2007) argues that increased time for free play reduces anxiety and stress. He lists the following benefits of free play: development of imagination and creativity; dexterity and physical strength; increased levels of physical activity; improved confidence and resiliency; development of collaboration, negotiation, conflict resolution, self-advocacy, problem solving and leadership skills; and discovery of areas of interests and passions.

Outcomes of Democratic Schooling

Anecdotal evidence of student outcomes of democratic schools presents portrayals of students learning effective relationship building, positive academic learning experiences, development of passions on which to build future careers, development of meta-learning skills including critical and creative thinking, and the long-lasting benefits of these outcomes reaching into careers and higher education (Greenberg, 1987; Hecht, 2002, 2010; Lucas, 2011; Neill, 1995, 2006; Rietmulder, 2019). Unfortunately, formal academic research on the outcomes of democratic schooling is limited (Aquarone, 2021).

Key academic studies of student outcomes have been conducted on students and alumni from Sudbury Valley School (SVS) in the USA. Gray and Chanoff (1986) surveyed over 60 alumni from SVS in the 1980s to determine the impact of democratic schooling after graduation.

Gray and Chanoff found that over 57% of their respondents participated in higher education programmes. Participants who attended university reported feeling at ease with academic staff, having few issues adjusting to the formal structure of university, and felt advantaged over peers who had attended conventional schools in terms of having better self-discipline and a more positive attitude towards their learning. The alumni surveyed also reported positive outcomes in their chosen careers, across a wide range of livelihoods. It is notable that more than half of the respondents had enrolled in democratic schooling due to behaviour or learning difficulties they experienced at conventional school. These outcomes support the anecdotal individual stories of alumni from Summerhill School, presented by Lucas (2011), over 20 years later.

Feldman (2000) studied the moral behaviour of students at SVS. From observations of student interactions at democratic school Feldman found children felt equal to others, they gained a good understanding of weighing differing perspectives, and appreciated being able to express their perspective without fear of being told off. Feldman notes that through meaningful participation in democratic processes, students develop the understanding that “responsibility entails recognition of other people’s needs (...) [and that] a person is responsible for how his / her actions influence others” (2000, pp. 16-17). Feldman and Gray (1999) looked at the benefits of freely chosen age mixing at SVS, finding younger children actively sought the help or company of older children and that older children not only learnt responsibility through these interactions but were able to scaffold and adjust activities according to needs. They also found that mixed aged learning allowed the matching of skills when appropriate, as well as enabling creativity when needed to adjust to different skill levels.

A more recent study of seven students from a democratic school in the United Kingdom, was conducted by Aquarone (2021). Students participating in the study reported positive, egalitarian student-student and student-staff relationships. They received support, space, and time to deal with mental health issues such as anxiety, and appreciated the positive impact of feeling humanised by staff (Aquarone, 2021). Students appreciated the supportive response of staff when dealing with behaviour management, and one student discussed the benefit of having space to be themselves with regard to gender diversity. Students viewed their experiences at democratic school as positive, compared with the more negatively viewed experiences that peers, or they themselves, encountered at conventional school.

Analysing the findings through a social justice framework, Aquarone (2021) found key elements of recognition and representation coming through the data, noting an interdependent relationship between these two concepts. She believes that for more inclusive school environments, policy is needed to give student democratic participation greater weight in mainstream schools (Aquarone, 2021). Highlighting potential tension around the redistributive element of social justice due to conventional school qualifications not being compulsory at the school studied, Aquarone (2021) notes “participants were clear that academic engagement is by no means debased or discouraged at Harbourside; many described feeling intellectually challenged and academically supported” (p. 52). Similarly, Greenberg (1987) noted that in his school (Sudbury Valley School) student choice and decision-making based on interest and readiness allows faster progress through the standard curricular. The argument that children and teens are more productive learners when given the choice to attend class is also supported Neill (1995) and Rietmulder (2019).

In a study across four schools in Australia, Dobozy (2007) observed that schools that enact democratic structures within their organisational systems provide highly effective learning of citizenship skills for students. She notes differential treatment of students according to needs, and school rules that emerged organically, developed as moral guidelines rather than strict directives, were regarded as important.

Opposing Arguments

Not all research supports universal student voice and democratic structures in schools. It can be argued that children and young people need clear boundaries and to learn traditions of ideology and authority (Schutz, 2001). Arguments resonating a neoliberal discourse and individual versus collective interests also apply. Wilson and Scarbrough (2018) believe that individualism is over-represented in democratic schools, where students follow their personal interests for short term gain, failing to consider long term goals or collective needs. Such schools, they say, give wealthy children opportunity to opt out of the mainstream public education, which, “speaks to the paradox of neoliberalism” (p. 90), where concepts such as diversity and democracy become marketed for individual interests and thereby removed from goals focused on public interest.

The argument that much of the discourse on democratic schools fails to regard is the primarily middle-class origin of the students, raising the issue of cultural capital (Wilson, 2015, 2016). Metro College in Auckland enjoyed success in its early days, when it attracted students from creative left-wing families seeking an alternative to mainstream education. However, as the school started taking increasing amounts of students excluded from other schools, the academic vigour and overall success of the school declined (Chisholm, 2013). Neill (1995) noted that

although Summerhill School, in the UK, helped many wayward students to turn their lives around, an increasing number of such students can upset the overall balance of the school. The current school leader points out that in a democratic school, such as Summerhill, it is the children who have to deal with the behavioural issues of other students and for this reason, staff at Summerhill currently vet new students to ensure they will not be too disruptive to the existing community (Wilby, 2013).

In a study on a small free school in USA (in which the researcher did not divulge their research interests to the school), Shuter (1973) found differences between ideology and practice, noting an atmosphere of competitiveness. Shuter concludes that the strong influence of external social norms within the school environment make the ideology of such schools an impossibility. In a more recent study on a democratic free school following the Sudbury Valley model (but again a small sample of five staff and 13 students), Wilson (2015) similarly found that societal norms around gender and age tended to be replicated informally in the democratic school environment. Wilson concludes that lack of structure allows organised groups or more advantaged individuals to establish inequitable power relationships within the school environment (Wilson, 2015; Wilson & Scarbrough, 2018).

Gray and Chanoff (1986) acknowledge the limitation of their study due to the largely middle-class cohort of students. Nonetheless they conclude that democratic school offers opportunities for social stratification. They reason that the school they studied “is a community of people that centres around democratic values that involve notions of individual integrity and respect” (p. 209) and note the range of other diversities empowered within the school. Similarly, Aquarone (2021), while also noting a majority white, middle-class cohort of students in the

school she studied, points out empowerment of students with other forms of diversity within the school, including special education needs and gender-diversity. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Freire (1968/2018) and Dewey (1938/2015) both argue that participatory democratic structures support equitable outcomes for diverse students, including those who are economically disadvantaged. Hooks (1994, 2003) and Giroux (1993) both maintain the importance of democratic educators in dismantling cultural hegemonies.

Aquarone (2021) also found tendencies towards hierarchies emerged at democratic school however, notes that the egalitarian democratic structures provided opportunity for staff or students to challenge these when they did start to emerge. She gives the following example of the rebalancing power between staff and students:

Nancy explained that staff have greater control over certain areas of school life, such as curriculum development and safeguarding. She did not see this as problematic in itself; however, she felt that greater staff authority meant that ‘lines can get blurred occasionally. And then that’s when it starts spiraling into [being] non-democratic’. Both Nancy and other participants noted, however, that when this ‘spiral’ occurs, it generates a responsibility for students to mount a challenge to the prevailing distribution of power. What is crucial about Harbourside is that there are structurally embedded – and institutionally powerful – fora for recourse through which community members can challenge emerging inequities or concerns. This helps ensure that ‘representation’ is not something that is merely paid lip-service. (Aquarone, 2021, p. 50)

Lack of academic rigour is also highlighted as a negative in democratic schools. Metro College was closed after repeated ERO reports claiming the college to have failed its students

academically (Chisholm, 2013) and Summerhill has received reports from the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) seeking that the school ensure all students participate in formal academic learning (Wilby, 2013). Again, this argument is disputed by research. For example, (as discussed in the section outlining Outcomes of Democratic Schooling, earlier in this chapter) Gray and Chanoff (1986) found that students graduating from Sudbury Valley School suffered no academic disadvantage, and in most cases graduating students felt more privileged by their experiences at democratic school as they journeyed through higher education and/or embarked on careers.

Opposition to progressive, democratic schooling based on arguments of neoliberal underpinnings is noted. However, supporters of the democratic model believe that giving students the opportunity to live by the values and morals of democracy in a schooling environment is one way to counter the negative effects of a consumer driven, individualistic, market economy (Fielding & Moss, 2011). Youth in democratic schools have been observed as gaining a greater sense of belonging and respect for others, as well as a more refined sense of responsibility (Feldman, 2000; Hecht, 2010). If empowering students is a long-term goal, a framework for participatory practices appropriate to schools in Aotearoa New Zealand is essential.

Other Forms of Democratic Schooling

Leo Tolstoy's Polyana School, established in the 1860s for local peasant children is an early example of a democratic school setting (Blaisdell, 2000; Fisher, 2021). John Dewey has an extensive portfolio of work on upholding democratic values in schools (Apple & Teitelbaum, 2001). Ivan Illich coined the term deschooling, seeking the disestablishment of schools in favour

of informal learning networks (Illich, 2002). Reggio-Emilia, a region in Northern Italy, has practised an innovative, progressive educational pathway for younger children for more than 40 years. Schools following the Reggio-Emilia approach of discovery and free choice can now be found around the world (Fielding & Moss, 2011).

Many schools in Aotearoa New Zealand aim to achieve similar characteristics without the element of a specific democratic model. The notion of reciprocal learning in Māori culture where teaching is learning, expressing the principle of connectedness and mutuality in the learning process; *ako*, reflects strongly with that of pluralism discussed by Hecht (2002) (Bishop & Berryman, 2009). Flexible, student-led, individualised learning programmes and basic values of respect, equity, justice, and collaboration are a requirement of Aotearoa New Zealand's public schools. Schools that promote growth mindsets, experimentation, collaboration among staff and students, personalised curriculum and individualised pedagogy, and that are future focused, are promoted as leaders of innovative learning by ERO (Education Review Office Te Tari Arotake Matauranga, 2018). The NZ Curriculum allows schools to develop learning programmes around the needs of their learners and communities, and calls for schools to model, encourage and explore values of excellence, innovation, inquiry and curiosity, diversity, equity, community and participation, ecological sustainability, and integrity (Ministry of Education, 2007). The NZ Curriculum has been noted for its flexibility, steps to promote social, emotional, and individual learning needs and its future vision, which lead to quality learning in schools. Nonetheless, it has been argued that for most public schools these characteristics are not adequately fully achieved (Hood, 2015).

Changing Mindsets

A paradigm shift about educational thinking has been called for (Bull & Gilbert, 2012; Fisher, 2021, 2023; Hood, 2015; Milne, 2017). Fisher (2021) argues there needs to be a separation in current thinking that equates education with school. Bolstad and Gilbert (2012), Hess and Meeks (2010) and Mehta and Spillane (2010), talk about the need to dismantle existing processes in schools and rebuild them to meet future focused needs including the empowerment of students as active rather than passive participants in their education. Hess and Meeks (2010) explore two types of unbundling within the schooling environment, named structural and content. The focus of this research is on schoolwide systems and structures, rather than classroom pedagogy or content. Structural unbundling, “in which we loosen our grip on traditional ideas about ‘teacher’, ‘school’, or ‘school system’ and explore how to deliver schooling in new and effective ways”, is pertinent when reflecting on the findings (Hess & Meeks, 2010, p. 41).

The concept of removing outdated and hegemonic institutional structures is not new. Democratic schools offer a model that dismantles authoritarian and hierarchical structures, focusing instead on the goals of equity, participation, and collective justice, alongside student-centred and driven, individualised formal and informal learning (Greenberg, 1987; Hecht, 2010; Neill, 1995). This is a model we can learn from to create a diverse, equitable, and empowering education system in Aotearoa New Zealand. In their master’s thesis, Peck (2009), explores similarities between the ideas of Freire, kaupapa Māori pedagogies, and the democratic school philosophy practiced at Summerhill School. Peck concludes that Aotearoa New Zealand needs more conversation about democratic schooling options such as Summerhill School.

Brown and Hamilton (2016) point out the importance of teacher self-reflection via dialogue, and student exploration through conversation, in understanding and accepting diversity. Au (2018) reminds us to be reflective of our own social location, stating: “our social location enables us to see and understand the world more clearly with respect to our positions and places limits on our ability to immediately understand the world beyond that same position” (p. 183). Linking this perspective to Freire’s critical pedagogy aimed at empowering oppressed groups, Au argues that “the social location of the oppressed and marginalized (as defined by historical, social, cultural, and institutional contexts) is the best vantage point for understanding society because it can provide a clearer, more truthful view of how a society functions” (Au, 2018, p. 185). Medina-Minton (2019) make the case that children could be considered an oppressed group. She argues:

Children are expected to follow the rules set by their parents, teachers, and other authority figures. They must have complete trust in the decisions made by these authority figures, and if they question or become resistant to these rules, children are occasionally labelled oppositional. (Medina-Minton, 2019, p. 439)

Fattore et al., (2016) offer an understanding of well-being from the standpoint of children. Their research highlights the importance of feelings of belonging in social and cultural settings, linked to relationships of trust and notions of agency, for children’s well-being. They remind us that freedom of self-expression aid how one’s ability to belong to certain groups, and “social connections are important to a sense of purpose, meaningfulness and being happy” (Fattore et al., 2016, p. 134). They write:

When children refer to aspects of relationships that contribute to well-being, it is usually within the frame of horizontal relations between adults and children, where opportunities for children to exercise reciprocity, agency and negotiation contribute to experiences of trust (in others, oneself and one's environment), respect (for one's feelings and ideas) and inclusiveness (facilitating agency in private and public spaces). (Fattore et al., 2016, p. 240)

The benefits of dialogue for student learning and well-being are well established in both literature and practice (Bolstad, 2011a; Brown & Hamilton, 2016; Cook-Sather, 2014; Delpit, 1988; Freire, 1968/2018; Lundy, 2007; Ministry of Education, 2015; Mitra, 2018; Robertson, 2017; Shier, 2001). Mitra (2018) points out the link between UNCRC obligations and efforts to increase student voice in school environments. In Aotearoa New Zealand the Ministry of Education encourages student voice in the classroom as an inclusive practice (Ministry of Education, 2015). Further, student voice is one of nine core components of the *Bullying-Free NZ School Framework* (Bullying Prevention Advisory Group, 2023). The nine components of the framework are shown in Figure 9, below.

Figure 9

Bullying-Free NZ School Framework - Whole School Approach (Bullying Prevention Advisory Group, 2023, p. 6)



Concerns about the ability of individuals to objectively weigh collective needs with personal interests continue to be echoed in modern debates on democracy and delineations between individual freedoms, minority interests and collective responsibility (Cunningham, 2002). This continuum between the collective and individual reflects a larger discussion of cultural epistemological difference. A framework of participatory democracy within the wider

school community has been identified as essential for culturally relevant pedagogy (Singh & Osborne, 2001). The individualism of western neoliberal practices impacts negatively on Māori ways of knowing, and strongly held beliefs and understandings around collectivism (Penetito, 2010). If Pākehā society has, over past centuries evolved from collectivism to individualism (Penetito, 2010), we must then inspect how democracy fits into this picture. It is important to understand whether and how democracy supports collectivist ideals.

Researching democratic processes in schools in Jordan, Alshurman (2015, p. 868) found that teachers believed students and parents took advantage of democratic values for personal gain. Tikoko et al. (2011), researching secondary student participation in Kenyan schools, found that despite overwhelming support among teachers for student input in decision-making (83%), teachers' attitudes were largely "informed by the traditional authoritarian mentality" (p. 192). Overall teachers believed there should be strict limits placed on student contribution to decision-making. Furthermore, Tikoko et al. (2011) argue that many measures aimed at encouraging student voice, specifically student leader/prefect systems (measures also found in Aotearoa New Zealand's schools (Education Review Office, 2003)), came from colonial ideals of representative democracy, thereby eroding any participative or deliberative democratic culture being developed.

Reflecting the requirements of the UNCRC, the Swedish Education Act requires that "everyone working in schools (...) promote democratic practices at work" (Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012, p. 44). There are calls that Aotearoa New Zealand has much to learn from education policy in Sweden and neighbouring countries which focus on democracy and equity at structural levels (Channing, 2019; Collinge, 1992). Nonetheless, research from that region supports the supposition that traditional concepts and understandings of teacher-student

relationships still stand in the way of true democratic participation (Thornberg, 2008a, 2008b; Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012). In his 2010 discourse analysis of democratic school meetings, Thornberg (2010a) found that pupil-control discourse dominated the democratic meeting, creating cynicism towards democracy among students, as well as negatively impacting on students' active learning of democracy in practice. This reinforces the need for not only structural measures to reinforce more egalitarian or democratic measures in schools and classrooms, but also avenues for checks and balances where students and staff can feel comfortable questioning power imbalances. Further research on the interplay of traditional authoritarian mindsets with democratic educational ideals is needed. Greater dissemination of information around democratic goals, measures, and outcomes in educational settings is also important.

Newman (2015) argues that flexibility of the 2007 NZ Curriculum and NCEA qualifications in secondary schools have undermined the education system, eroded the role of teachers and reduced academic outcomes for youth. Conversely, some authors argue that the NZ Curriculum and other moves towards more progressive schooling do not go far enough. Hood (2015) maintains that the delivery of learning areas as a list of distinct subjects contradicts the NZ Curriculum's progressive focus. He believes that the reality of implementation, influenced by national assessment requirements and the traditional epistemologies of parents, politicians, and many teachers, means that the delivery of education in most schools has not changed significantly over the past 100 years. Unless we break down the factory model of secondary schooling, which sorts students into age groups, curriculum into subject lists, classes into time-based periods, learning into a linear process, and grades students on arbitrary assessment

standards, we will never be able to successfully implement the student centred, creative and critical inquiry-based progressive models purported to be our aim (Hood, 2015).

Models of decision-making in conventional schools are usually hierarchical or authoritarian, being made by school leaders, and/or by a representative group with limited powers (e.g., a Board of Trustee or a Student Council) (Harber, 1995; Hood, 2015). In such settings students rarely get opportunity to question the organisational structures and rules of the school, including those considered by researchers including Milne (2017), Hood (2015), Tikoko et al. (2011) as colonial, imperialistic and exclusive. An educational approach with democracy at its core, will require more responsive promotion of student worldviews. True democratic and equitable participation requires critical review of traditional authoritarian structures (Angrilli, 1974; Fielding, 2004; Hart, 1992; Mehta & Spillane, 2010; Milne, 2017; Thornberg, 2009a, 2009b, 2010a; Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012; Tikoko et al., 2011; Varnham, 2005a).

In their article *The Rights of the Child and What This Means for Teachers*, Bourke and O'Neill (2022) remind teachers not to forget the power differentials often found in classrooms and encourage teachers to look at measures including collaborative partnerships, a capabilities approach and autonomy supportive teaching. They argue that at the very least teachers should listen to their students, concluding:

Teachers can often unconsciously deny children their rights because they have significant power to shape how children feel about themselves in the everyday interactions and practices that cumulatively “make or break” an adolescent identity as a learner and as a valued member of the class or the school. By listening to what young people say, secondary teachers may be in a better position to decipher some of what goes on in their

own classrooms, and more keenly appreciate the material effects these interactions have on their students. (Bourke & O'Neill, 2022, p. 8)

The argument that traditional structures and mindsets slow the progress of progressive initiatives is compelling. Changing one's mindset takes education, but if those who control education in schools are not willing or able to accept change, we risk remaining with the status quo. Contradictions between conventional schooling structures and modern educational goals can be discerned. Yet, traditions can be hard to break. In discussing the gradual introduction of Freire's critical pedagogy and democratic behaviours into mainstream classes, Shor (1993) notes that time is needed to break the conditioned habits formed by teachers who have both learned and taught in authoritative systems. Critical educators such as Freire (1968/2018), hooks (2003), and Shor (1993) note that teachers who wish to empower and liberate students cannot be authoritarian ones. Hooks writes "as democratic educators we have to work to find ways to teach and share knowledge in a manner that does not reinforce existing structures of domination" (2003, p. 45), warning that "we may unwittingly collude with structures of domination because of the way learning is organized in institutions" (2003, p. 45).

Bolstad (2011a) discusses the problematic nature of the term 'student voice' raised by many education researchers, in that it does not directly address the power differentials between students and teachers. This is an important point, that aligns with many of the arguments outlined in this chapter, in particular those around hidden curriculum, critical pedagogy, student cynicism and dismantling traditional ideas of authority within schools. Concerned by research that showed that many teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand believed there was too much emphasis on student

voice, Bolstad suggests the use of the term youth-adult partnership to help move towards a more transformative approach.

Varnham (2005b) reminds us of the importance to society that adults challenge their existing epistemologies to create healthier school cultures. She writes:

Those attending schools are in their most formative years. Thus it may be said that the school influences, to no small extent, the norms and patterns of behaviour which people carry out the school gate. There is a strong argument that a school culture that values the worth of each young person, by encouraging their participation in all matters within the school community, not only creates healthy school communities but also immeasurably benefits the future direction of society. (Varnham, 2005, p. 100)

A.S. Neill Summerhill CIC, a company working alongside Summerhill School, perhaps the longest running democratic schools in the world, is offering a professional development course for educators, looking at the role of the adult within schooling, starting in October 2023. Due to its newness, there is limited information available on the course at the time of writing. However, the course description promises to assist participants to develop a more reflective practice to better support children's social-emotional well-being (A. S. Neill Summerhill CIC, 2023).

Summary

This chapter started with a discussion of differing understandings of democracy comparatively and historically. A broad concept of democracy was presented, incorporating characteristics beyond voting, including deliberation and debate, collective decision-making, and inclusion of diversity aligning it with various indigenous forms of governance. Democratic

participation of children and young people within democratic settings was explored. Youth participation is embodied in Article 12 of the UNCRC, giving children the right to not only have their viewpoints heard but for their perspectives to be taken seriously. This in turn, is conceptualised in Lundy's (2007) model of voice, space, influence and audience. The relationship between critical pedagogy, student participation in school settings and student well-being was then explored. Schools in Aotearoa New Zealand are places of diversity, and as such inclusive and culturally sustaining educational practices that incorporate democratic characteristics are vital to ensure equitable outcomes. In the following section, I discussed democratic schools as a distinct typology. Democratic schools incorporate democratic characteristics not only in their classroom pedagogy but also within the systems and structures of their schools. Research around contemporary pedagogical practices and goals, student voice and Article 12 suggests that traditional institutional mindsets are outdated and negatively impact students' ability to express their perspectives. This was explored in the final section, where I discussed literature on the need to change traditional mindsets of adult authority and control to more egalitarian understandings of student-adult partnerships to achieve more equitable student outcomes.

In Chapter Three I outline the theoretical background, methodology and research methods of the study. The chapter begins with an outline of the qualitative grounded research methodology and discussion of ethical considerations, followed by detailing the research strategies.

Chapter Three Theoretical background, Methodology & Research Methods

In the preceding chapter I examined literature relevant to the study. In this chapter I outline the methodological foundations and research strategies used. First, I provide an outline of the qualitative research methodology, including a brief description of the ontology and how researcher bias was overcome. A grounded theory methodology (influenced by theories of social justice, including critical theory and child standpoint theory) was used, as it allowed me to analyse the data from a position of open discovery and build theory from the ground up. I then explore ethical considerations of the research, which followed the Massey University Code of Ethical Conduct for Research. Validity and trustworthiness are then discussed. In the final section of the chapter, I outline the research strategies used to collect and analyse the data, present my research question, and detail my sampling methods.

Qualitative Research Methodology

The research, involving secondary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand, necessitated consideration of the complexity of differing understandings and perspectives of students, alumni, and teachers. As such, a qualitative paradigm encompassing a multi-dimensional inquiry was deemed appropriate. An abductive qualitative research methodology advised the strategies of inquiry and facilitated both the explanation of puzzling or surprising findings in the data and development of the resulting theory (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2014; Thornberg, 2012b). The research processes and analysis were informed and interpreted under a framework incorporating theories of social justice, including standpoint theory, and located within a materialist critical perspective (Au, 2018; Fattore et al., 2016; Thompson, 2015).

Materialist Critical Perspective, Standpoint Theory, Theories of Social Justice

Development of the research and analysis of the findings was done through a lens coloured by theories of social justice and child standpoint, and a materialist critical perspective. In line with democracy itself, critical theory seeks to disrupt the status quo and empower all people regardless of race, culture, class, gender, or other difference through the renegotiation of power. Materialist critical theorists recognise that people's perspectives of reality are shaped by cultural, social and historical interactions and structures, and adds an economic lens when considering such interactions to better understand the social world (Thompson, 2015). Similarly, theories of social justice look at questions of equity, fairness, rights and entitlements in experienced realities (Penetito, 2010). Standpoint theory recognises the position of the oppressed group in social relationships in order to find a framework to challenge those in power (Au, 2012, 2018; Hartsock, 2019). In line with the work of Fattore et al. (2016) and Medina-Minton (2019), this research recognises children as an oppressed group within the existing hierarchical, undemocratic structures of conventional mainstream schooling.

Critical Pedagogy and Culturally Sustainable Pedagogy

Theories of social justice, standpoint theory and a materialist critical perspective influence culturally sustainable pedagogy and critical pedagogy; both of which are particularly significant to this research. Culturally sustainable pedagogy seeks “to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (Paris, 2012). Critical pedagogy aims at dismantling oppressive power structures by transforming existing structures that maintain domination and control (Aronowitz, 1993; Freire, 1993; Giroux, 2011).

There is a socially constructed whiteness that, while being outdated, still pervades all aspects of Aotearoa New Zealand's society and schools (Milne, 2017). Western values and

cultural practices are so embedded in educational institutions and policies that most of us are not even aware of it (Gillborn, 2005). As young people develop their own identity, they do so in educational institutions that purport to be multicultural but are in fact not. Māori and Pasifika cultures, for example, are often celebrated through benign, perfunctory practices, which rather than sustain and empower those cultures, in fact tend to patronise Māori and Pasifika children and depreciate their values and epistemologies (Milne, 2017, p. 55). The research design and analysis were influenced by critical theory, which seeks to disrupt this hegemony and correct inequalities (Osborne, 2001; Penetito, 2010).

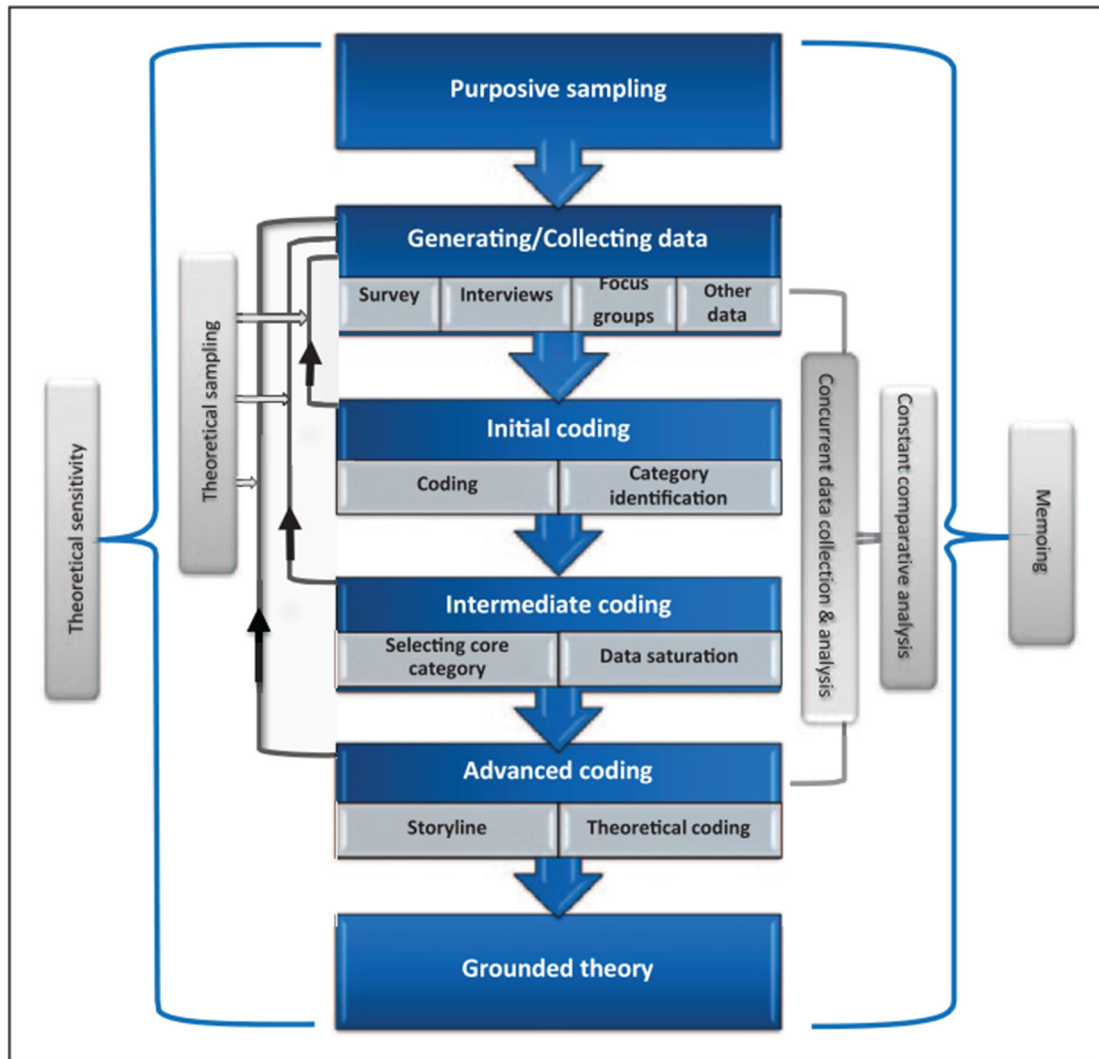
Grounded Theory Methodology

The research methods were guided by grounded theory methodology. In simple terms grounded theory is “discovery of theory from data—systematically obtained and analysed in social research” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 1). Theory, Glaser and Strauss (1967) explain, is something that “explains or predicts something” (p. 31). Grounded theory methodology matched my ontological position incorporating child standpoint theory located within a materialist critical perspective of social justice (Timonen et al., 2018). The range of ideas and multitude of complexities within such a broad ontology influenced me to move away from a purist grounded theory methodology to a more adaptive approach (Chun Tie et al., 2019).

Chun Tie et al. (2019) provide a framework for novice researchers using a grounded theory methodology, highlighting the key processes across the three main genres of grounded theory methodology; traditional, evolved and constructivist. This framework (shown in Figure 10 below) guided the research and influenced the choice of research strategies in the current context.

Figure 10

Research Design Framework (Chun Tie et al, 2019)



Pure, inductive grounded theory was deemed inappropriate for the research due to the requirements of the formal PhD processes, the need to eliminate possible harm the intrusion may have had on the research participants and the existing knowledge and embedded position of the researcher, so a more constructive, abductive approach was taken. Taking a constructivist route to grounded theory offered an analytical methodology that recognised the perspectives, values,

and epistemology of the researcher and provided a methodology in which the participants and researcher could construct meanings together (Charmaz, 2014; Chun Tie et al., 2019; Thornberg, 2012b). Abductive reasoning is considered as being more creative than a pure inductive investigation, allowing a logical yet innovative pragmatic reasoning of surprising leads that may arise from the initial inductive inquiry (Birks & Mills, 2015; Reichertz, 2007; Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012).

Grounded theory methodology allowed me to pursue the research in a manner that was in keeping with the democratic nature of the subject schools; in that shared meaning and understanding were co-constructed through interaction, dialogue, and negotiation (Chun Tie et al., 2019; Hardman, 2013). Furthermore, as there was limited research on democratic schooling in Aotearoa New Zealand, grounded theory methodology allowed me to move beyond a descriptive study towards a more analytical explanation of the interactions and processes in a democratic schooling context, without the need to start with a pre-formulated formal hypothesis (Birks & Mills, 2015; Timonen et al., 2018).

To support objectivity, it is important that researchers continually reflect on and examine their own biases, assumptions, and perspectives when receiving and analysing data (Charmaz, 2014). For myself, this included being constantly aware of my own middle-class, Pākehā perspective and understandings that may affect my interpretation of the data, as well as my experiences working as a qualified secondary and primary teacher. The grounded theory approach assisted in making sure that participants understood that my position was not authoritarian and that there was no judgement of answers; rather, I aimed to work alongside

them, as the experts, in developing understandings of the impacts of democratic systems in school, as experienced by them.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were paramount to ensure no harm was done to any of the participants or schools as part of the research process and outcomes. The research abided to the Massey University Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations Involving Human Participants, Revised Code 2017 (*Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations Involving Human Participants*, 2017). A full ethics application was submitted to the Massey University Human Ethics (Research Ethics) Committee and was approved by the Committee Chair in December 2019 (Appendix A).

Confidentiality was guaranteed to all participants and real names were not used in this thesis document. The purpose, goals and direction of the study were made explicit to all participants and informed written consent was obtained prior to data collection (Appendices B and C). Participants were reminded that they had the right to withdraw at any stage of the research and that their contributions to the data collection would be deleted should they indicate this. Caution was taken to ensure any accidental recording of anyone who had not consented to participate was deleted and not included in the data. Pursuant to qualitative research following a grounded theory methodology, the relationships between myself as researcher and the participants of the study were central to the research outcomes. All interactions were conducted in a friendly and unassuming, yet professional manner, showing respect to the position, perspectives, and culture of the participants.

Quality of the Research

Rather than using terms such as validity and reliability when evaluating grounded theory research, Corbin & Strauss (2015) suggest a framework of conditions of research quality as being more suitable for evaluating qualitative research. The current research has been guided by this checklist. The various conditions outlined by Corbin & Strauss are discussed both within this chapter, and throughout the coming chapters, as and when relevant.

Research Strategies

Due to its evolutionary nature, grounded theory is a process constantly in transition that can be adapted and re-adapted around complex and changing research settings (Waring, 2012). With data collection beginning in 2020 the research settings and strategies were changing and complex. I followed the grounded theory methodology process outlined by Chun Tie et al. (2019), using the coding phases of constructivist grounded theory (initial coding, focused coding, and categorising) determined by Charmaz (2014). In keeping with a grounded theory approach, the interactive and emergent nature of the research process required that the methodology process be both systematic and flexible (Charmaz, 2014). The research strategies were kept sufficiently broad to allow the data collection process to be adaptive to the developing needs of the inquiry.

It was vital that the research strategies addressed the institutional requirements of the PhD programme, the appropriate ethical expectations for research using human participants; and also, were able to adapt to the changing circumstances within schools and general life during the COVID-19 pandemic, which coincided with my data collection phase. This had a significant impact on the design of the research strategies, which needed to change and adapt alongside the constant change Aotearoa New Zealand as a society experienced during that time. The closure of schools for extensive periods, restricted access to meeting with new people, and restricted travel were key impacts from the pandemic on my study; alongside the general widespread stress and reflection that most individuals were experiencing from the changes taking place during that time. I was reluctant to impose myself too strongly on schools during this time, as most were putting extra effort into working with students and whānau to ensure their well-being and general education needs were supported during this period of constant change.

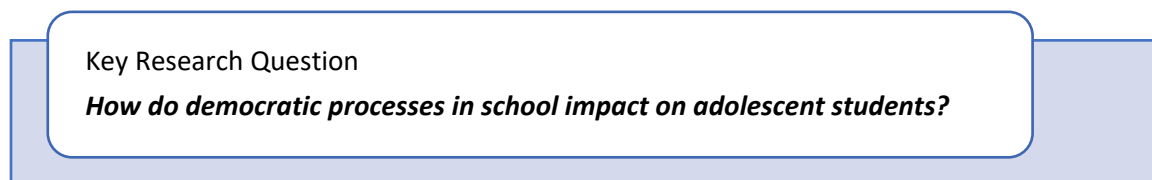
The core phases of constructivist grounded theory methodology were adhered to, being purposive sampling, generating and collecting data, initial coding, focused coding and categorising, and interpreting the theory grounded within the data (Charmaz, 2014). Driven by the data, using the techniques of concurrent data analysis and collection, constant comparative analysis, memoing, theoretical sampling and theoretical sensitivity (Birks & Mills, 2015; Chun Tie et al., 2019), I moved back and forth between these research phases. Constructivist grounded theory also gave me opportunity to review literature prior to beginning data collection.

Research Question

Fundamental to grounded theory is a broad research question that allows the data, rather than the research question itself, to guide the research (Birks & Mills, 2015). The underlying question of any grounded theory study is “what is going on here?” (Ross, 2016, p. 44) and this question underpinned the data collection and analysis phase. A key research question also guided the process from the beginning. This question was kept deliberately broad to allow an open investigation of democratic processes within schools and avoid imposing any extant theories or preconceived ideas of the researcher on initial data collection, as much as possible. This key research question was ‘how do democratic processes in school impact adolescent students?’. The prevailing focus of the inquiry, therefore, was how democratic processes happening within schools, impacts students. This included an investigation of the hidden curriculum created by rules, structures and processes within schools and the consideration of how democracy relates to a range of worldviews found in Aotearoa New Zealand’s schools. Alongside this focus, supplementary questions arose and were in turn investigated as the data collection stage progressed.

Figure 11

Key Research Question



Literature Review

In keeping with institutional requirements, familiarity with the topic in order to defend a formal research proposal (and ethics application) prior to beginning data collection was required and undertaken. This included a thorough literature review. While not commonly supported within the original forms of grounded theory, most contemporary grounded theorists argue for the need to meet organisational requirements, such as an early stage literature review or a strong topical knowledge base, within the research strategies (Chun Tie et al., 2019). An in-depth review of prior research around the key research ideas of democracy and deliberative democracy in schools, student participation in schooling systems, structures and organisation, and student choice, freedom and learning autonomy was undertaken. This process was essential to inform the PhD confirmation process, and shaped the school data collection strategies. Key ideas from the literature review informed the data collection, coding and analysis processes in accordance with Thornberg (2012a).

Generation and Collection of Data

Essentially, data collection consisted of a mixture of semi-structured interviews and question-and-answer email conversations with alumni and staff from two democratic secondary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand. Interviews were conducted with 21 of the 23 participants. Eight of these interviewees provided further information via email after reflection on the interview, either of their own accord or in answer to a supplementary question from myself. A further two participants choose to communicate solely via question-and-answer email conversations, due to issues related to COVID-19 and time restraints. The two schools were sited in different regions of the country and open during different time periods (one closed in 2001,

the other opened in 2003). A site visit (observation only) of one of the schools was also undertaken.

Participating schools. The original intention of visiting schools changed due to COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns. The change of focus from students to alumni meant I could now liaise with participants directly rather than through participating schools. I chose two key secondary schools, both of which I knew championed systems and values that strongly aligned with those of the democratic schools discussed in the literature. One of the schools had already agreed to participate in the research prior to COVID-19 and were happy to continue under the new research design. The other was a school that was no longer open yet had championed itself as a state integrated democratic school during the time it was open. The two schools were sited in different areas of the country and one opened two years after the other had closed. Geographical, time period, size, and structural differences between the two schools promised interesting comparisons.

There are very few schools in Aotearoa New Zealand, and even less so at secondary level, who formally recognise themselves as democratic schools aligned with a formal democratic education organisation. To identify possible participating schools, I instead used the characteristics of a democratic school collated by Korkmaz and Erden (2014), outlined in Chapter 2. Both participating schools aligned closely with these characteristics. It should be noted that students at School 1a are not directly involved in key decision-making around administration and the sanctioning of rule breaking. Nonetheless, its philosophy and special character does meet the other characteristics outlined by Korkmaz and Erden. Furthermore, of particular note is its large roll size comparative to most democratic schools. Helpful to validity

when extrapolating findings, both schools were non-fee-paying, designated character or otherwise alternative state schools, followed the national curriculum and participated in the national examination system. The Ministry of Education (2022) define a designated character school as:

State schools that teach the New Zealand Curriculum but have developed their own sets of aims, purposes and objectives to reflect their own particular values.

They may have a commitment to a particular philosophy or culture. (para. 5)

School 1 / School 1a. School 1 and School 1a are essentially two different iterations of the same school. School 1 was a designated character secondary school catering to students in Years 9 to 13, which merged with a similar designated character primary school in 2014, becoming the current School 1a (catering to Years 1 to 13). Participants attended (or taught at) the school either before or after the merger, or both. School 1a is located in the central business area of a South Island city. The school does not currently identify as being a democratic school. However, alumni interviewed considered the school as democratic, and descriptions of the school proved to align closely with the characteristics of democratic schools listed in the literature review. At the time of data collection School 1a had a school roll of over 650 students.

School 2. School 2 was a democratic school catering for Years 9 to 12, located in central business area of a North Island city. The school was established in 1977 and was closed by the Ministry of Education in 2001 after 8 years of poor reviews from the Education Review Office, despite ongoing and extensive opposition from the school community. School 2 had an average roll of just over 100 students.

Other democratic schools discussed in the data. Most participants had also attended as students, or taught at, other democratic and/or mainstream schools and their experiences at these were also relevant to the data. In the written results the names of these schools have been replaced with descriptors such as democratic primary school or mainstream secondary school.

Sampling. In grounded theory methodology, purposive sampling is used to provide the initial data (Chun Tie et al., 2019). Accordingly, both the settings and the participants within each were initially chosen using a purposive sampling technique. The flexibility of purposive sampling proved to be beneficial when trying to conduct research within the wider COVID-19 environment.

Repeated, unpredictable cycles of lockdowns, restricted entry to schools during non-lockdown periods and limits to face-to-face contact meant that visiting schools as a researcher in Aotearoa New Zealand during 2020 & 2021 was not a feasible option. My initial plan of observations & workshopping with students and staff from three separate schools had to be abandoned. Two of the schools initially contacted were no longer able to accept visitors, and domestic travel outside of my local region was often under unpredictable temporary bans. Instead, I choose to undertake one-on-one semi-structured interviews, and/or email correspondence with alumni and staff from two schools that fit closely within the democratic characteristics outlined in the Literature Review. Informed written consent was sought from all participants (see Appendices B and C). Interviews proceeded in three different groupings.

Group 1: School 1/1a Alumni. Contact had already been made with School 1, who were initially expecting me to visit for 3 weeks. Instead, we agreed that a staff member put a notice on my behalf on the school's alumni Facebook page seeking participants. Alumni responded

through direct message to me. Some alumni reshared the post and/or tagged peers who they thought would be interested, adding a snowball technique to the original purposive sampling process (Morse, 2007). Within 24 hours, 18 alumni had expressed an initial interest in being interviewed. All 18 were sent details about the research. Eight respondents completed the consent forms and were interviewed.

I was able to meet face-to-face with one participant and Zoom interviews were conducted with five. Two of these six later sent follow up emails adding more detail to their interview comments and two answered a supplementary question I submitted via email (also included in the data). Email correspondence in the form of question-and-answer email conversations were conducted with two. Interviews with participants from Group 1 took place between 16th May 2020 to 28th June 2020.

Group 1 alumni attended School 1/1a at various periods between 2003 and 2015 (see Table 1). All eight Group 1 participants later attended university. Table 2 shows the other schools attended by Group 1 alumni.

Table 1*Alumni Attendance Dates at School 1/1a*

Participant	Years Attended	School 1 or 1a	Grade Levels	Number of Years
Jason	2004-2008	School 1	Years 9-13	5
Hannah	2009-2010	School 1	Years 12-13	2
Hugo	2011-2015	Both	Years 9-13	5
Brooke	2005-2008	School 1	Years 9-12	4
Anahera	2008-2010	School 1	Years 11-13	3
Jackson	2008-2011	School 1	Years 9-12	4
Caitlin	2010-2014	Both	Years 9-13	5
Ryan	2008-2012	School 1	Years 9-13	5

Table 2*Other Schools Attended by School 1/1a Alumni*

Participant	Democratic Primary	Other Democratic Secondary	Home school	Mainstream Primary	Mainstream Secondary	University
Jason	√					√
Hannah				√	√	√
Hugo	√					√
Brooke	√			√		√
Anahera	√			√	√	√
Jackson	√			√	√	√
Caitlin				√		√
Ryan	√		√			√

Group 2: School 1/1a Staff. Following interviews with the School 1/1a alumni, an email was sent on my behalf by a senior staff member to all staff at School 1a. Four staff contacted me

and all four were interviewed via Zoom. One of the staff interviewed later sent a follow up email adding more detail to their interview comments. Interviews with Group 2 took place between 24th August 2020 and 21st September 2020. All staff participants were working at School 1a at the time of interview. Table 3 outlines the length of service of Group 2 participants. All participants in this group also had experience teaching in a mainstream school in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Table 3

Staff Length of Service at School 1 and/or 1a (or other democratic school)

Participant	Years at School 1a	Years at School 1	Years Teaching at another Democratic School	Total Years Teaching in a Democratic School
Xavier	2			2
Samuel	7	7		14
Bethany	7	3		10
Paul	15		8	15

Group 3: School 2 Alumni & Staff. The change in sample focus to alumni and staff rather than current students meant I was now able to include a school that had closed in 2001 (School 2). Again, a notice was placed on an alumni Facebook page seeking interested participants, this time posted by myself. I was contacted by 31 past students and staff. Interviews were conducted with 11. Eight of the interviews were conducted via Zoom. Three interviews were able to be conducted face to face; one lived in my local area, and the last two in an adjoining region during an ease in travel restrictions. Three of the participants later sent a follow

up email adding more detail to their interview comments. Group 3 interviews took place between 25th September 2020 and 9th October 2020.

Of the 11 participants, nine had attended School 2 as a student and two worked there as teachers. One of the nine alumni had gone on to also teach at School 2 after graduating from university, one was teaching at a mainstream secondary school at the time of the interview, and one was working in education administration. Five of the nine alumni interviewed had later attended university. Table 4 shows the approximate years alumni in Group 3 attended School 2, and Table 5 show other schools alumni attended. Table 6 shows the years of service of Group 3 staff (note there is some overlap). All Group 3 staff also had experience teaching in mainstream schools.

Table 4

Alumni Attendance Dates at School 2

Participant	Years Attended	Standard Grade Levels*	Number of Years
Joanna	1996-1998	Form 5 - 7**	3
Sally		Form 3	1
Maree	1988-1991	Form 3 - 6	4
Pete	1977-1979	Form 4 - 6	3
George	1977-1980	Form 3 - 6	4
Stuart	Started in 1977		
Catherine	1984-1987	3 rd - 6 th Form	4
Belinda	1984-1984	4 th Form	1
Jordana	1981-1983	5 th to 7 th Form	3

Notes: * Dates and grade levels are approximate due to time passed and/or participant did not provide info. ** 3rd Form equates to Aotearoa New Zealand current Year 9 and so on.

Table 5*Other Schools Attended by School 2 Alumni*

Participant	Democratic Primary	Other Democratic Secondary	Home school	Mainstream Primary	Mainstream Secondary	University
Joanna				√	√	√
Sally				√		
Amanda				√		√
Pete		√		√		√
George				√		
Stuart		√		√		
Catherine	√					√
Belinda				√	√	
Jordana				√	√	√

Table 6*Group 3 Staff Length of Service at School 2*

Participant	Years at School 2	
Leo	7	1978 – 1984
Maree	7	1988 – 1994
Jordana		Finished in 2001

Note: * Also, a student at School 2

Interviews. After introduction and whanaungatanga, all interviews started with the same open-ended broad question: tell me about your school. From there I either drew on key ideas of interest raised by the interviewee or chose questions appropriate to the direction of the conversation from a previously made list of possible questions. These questions were guided by concepts related to democracy and democratic schooling identified in the initial literature review

and were reviewed and updated after each interview. In keeping within the grounded theory methodology, the list of questions was used to guide discussion only, in that I did not ensure all questions on the list were asked in each interview and often asked questions that were not on the list. The final lists of questions for students and staff are shown in Appendices D and E.

Interviews were underpinned by both the key research question and the underlying research question of any grounded theory study (outlined in the section titled Research Question earlier in this chapter) and these were constantly in the back of my mind while interviewing. Through the process of theoretical sampling, questions became increasingly complex as I investigated clues and surprises that arose during interviews (Birks & Mills, 2015). Key concepts and codes identified in the initial coding of earlier interviews were teased out in subsequent interviews, or previous interviewees re-questioned. Memos were taken during interviews.

All Zoom and face-to-face interviews were audio recorded. Following the interviews, I transcribed the recordings either personally or using the Otter.ai application. After a total of 21 interviews, alongside the 2 participants who communicated with me via email, I realised that I had reached data saturation. At that point I decided not to pursue any more interviews.

Site Visit / Observation. Prior to the onset of COVID-19 I had arranged with School 1a to visit, observe, and interview students and staff. While strict COVID-19 restrictions in 2020 meant I needed to change my research strategies, a period of looser restrictions in 2021 gave me opportunity to visit School 1a. This visit was solely observational and involved me watching the goings on of the school from various places within the building and writing memos when relevant. No video or audio recording was involved and the only interaction with people on site was with key staff members to introduce myself on arrival.

Data Analysis

Data analysis and collection was conducted concurrently, as per Strauss and Glaser's constant, comparative analysis approach (Waring, 2012). The analysis framework was guided by both grounded theory methodology and a materialist critical perspective influenced by child standpoint theory and theories of social justice. This was informed by prior understandings of democracy and democratic education outlined in the literature review. The constructivist grounded theory methodology includes not only prior reading and a concurrent literature review, but also a re-review of literature (or delayed literature review) before concluding the process. This allows opportunity to follow potential new pathways and directions, or address issues that may arise during analysis (Charmaz, 2014; Thornberg, 2012a).

Coding. Data collected was sorted, separated, and blended through qualitative coding. In keeping with a constructivist grounded theory methodology, I worked through three non-linear stages of coding (initial coding, focused coding and categorising) and moved flexibly between them during the data collection process (Charmaz, 2014). Pre-existing concepts derived from the initial literature review did not influence the coding process, other than through the development of initial interview questions as discussed previously. As much as possible I took care to keep an open mind throughout the processes involving constant comparison and systematic coding of the data. The computer application NVivo, Excel and pen-and-paper were all used as tools in the coding process.

Memoing. One way to help stay grounded in the data is by memo writing (memoing) (Birks & Mills, 2015; Thornberg, 2012b). I used memos as a way to record my thinking and theorising throughout the research process. These memos guided my decisions moving through

the data collection process including creating question foci to generate data and were constantly referred back to and reconsidered during constant comparative analysis (Birks et al., 2019).

Memos provide a link between data collection and written analysis, helping to engage further in the data, refocus when needed, and reflect on ideas and concepts that arise (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019; Charmaz, 2014).

Theoretical Sensitivity. Theoretical sensitivity was built by being fully immersed in the data. This included conducting and transcribing all the interviews myself, being completely engaged in the coding processes and consistently writing memos throughout. Theoretical sensitivity allowed me to better identify data segments of particular importance to be investigated through constant comparative analysis and provide a concentration point for focused and theoretical coding (Chun Tie et al., 2019).

Generating Grounded Theory. The inductive and overlapping processes of breaking down the data through initial coding, developing emerging concepts during focused coding, memoing and constant comparative analysis culminated in the theoretical coding phase. A storyline strategy, aiming to develop theory through conceptualising the core category in the data, was applied to complement the theoretical coding process. Through the storyline strategy I weaved keys concepts, relationships and patterns emerging in the data into a narrative illustrating core categories.

Summary

This chapter has outlined the theoretical background, methodology and strategies used in the research. In the first section, I described the qualitative grounded theory research methodology and critical social justice driven ontology. Ethical consideration of the research and

issues around validity and trustworthiness were explored in the next two sections. In the section titled Research Strategies, I explained the chosen research strategies, and described how the data was collected and analysed. The underlying question in grounded theory of: what is going on here? sits alongside my main research question of: how do democratic processes in school impact on adolescent students? The study involved collecting data through a total of 23 semi-structured interviews of alumni and staff from 2 separate secondary schools from May 2020 to October 2020. The data was analysed following grounded theory methodology and strategies of inquiry, influenced by a materialist critical perspective, and theories of social justice, child standpoint theory and critical pedagogy. Table 7 provides simple overview of the data collection phase.

Table 7

Overview of the Data Collection Phase

Epistemological Perspective	Materialist Critical	
Theoretical Perspective	Social Justice Theory / Critical Pedagogy / Standpoint Theory	
Methodology	Constructivist Grounded Theory	
Method	Semi-structured interviews	
Participants	23 alumni, present teachers, past teachers	
	School 1/1a	School 2
Setting	Primary to Secondary School	Secondary School (Closed 2001)
Period of Time for Interviews	May-Sept 2020	Sept-Oct 2020

In the next chapter I give brief descriptions of the two key democratic schools participants in this study attended at secondary level or worked at as staff to contextualise the findings.

Chapter Four Participating Schools

The structure of democratic schools varies according to the needs to the community each serves. In this chapter, I outline the basic structures of the two key democratic secondary schools that participants worked at and/or attended as students. The outlines are based on participant descriptions and my site visit to School 1a.

School 1a

School 1a is a designated character state school currently open for Years 1 to 13. Classes are scheduled in 5-week blocks, allowing flexibility for those wanting to try a range of subjects, or continuity for those who want to complete the year. The timetable therefore can be flexible, changing every 5 weeks, or more consistent for those who choose. Subject classes are curriculum level based, so student participation of subject classes is based on interest and progression, rather than age. All classes therefore have a range of ages. Students can also choose not to attend timetabled subject classes if this sits outside their individual learning goals. For example, students may choose to spend weeks working on one particular subject-based project, or study independently if this suits their learning goals. Student and whānau-led workshops are also encouraged, and time scheduled for these to occur.

Alongside subject-based classes and teachers, students have a homebase learning advisor (LA). The role of the LA is to support student decision-making, progress and well-being. Together with their LA, students create and regularly review an individual education plan (IEP). Every student in the school has an IEP. Students can choose their own LA at the start of each school year. Students meet individually with their LA weekly, and together with their LA and whānau once a term.

The school is in the city centre, in an area that allows students easier access to the local resources, such as the city library, art gallery, external education facilities, parks and reserves, etc. Secondary level students are able to leave the grounds at their choosing (once they have completed the relevant safety course). The school has built strong partnerships with local tertiary institutions, other education providers, and local businesses; building opportunities for students to experience a wide range of learning opportunities, beyond the standard national qualifications. The school also recognises learning from outside providers that the students have sought themselves, such as dance classes, sports clubs, music lessons, environmental programmes, academic tutorials, etc, and includes these in a students' overall education plan.

I visited the school in the morning as students arrived, and I stayed for approximately 2 hours. I then returned later in the day to attend a pre-enrolment presentation and student-led tour of the school for prospective students and whānau.

During my site visit, I encountered a pleasant and positive learning environment. The school is located in a purpose-built multi-level building with a lot of open plan space. Staff and students sat alone or in small groups on couches or at tables in the open learning spaces. Students came and went from the premises at different times, signing in and out at the front desk, chatting to administration staff as they did so. Specialist staff such as Gateway Coordinators (who support students accessing career pathways), guidance counsellors and other administration roles were centrally located and seemed easy to access. Each floor level had kitchen facilities for students to make hot drinks, or heat food. There was also a school café, staffed by students, where school staff and students could purchase food and drinks.

The noise level was something that struck me. When I mentioned this to one of the teachers, they replied by telling me that staff were currently brainstorming strategies to reduce the noise. However, this is not what I meant! The school was much quieter than any I had worked in before, and being open plan made this much more surprising. The low noise levels remained consistent throughout my time there.

Throughout my time there I saw a wide range of learning activity going on. Some students sat alone or together in small groups chatting or working on projects in the open plan area, while others were in subject based classes, or were meeting with their LA. Others were in specialist technical rooms such as hard materials, mechanics, music, dance, art etc., working on independent projects, or attending scheduled lessons. Student involvement and student-staff partnerships were visually obvious, and at the end of the day, both students and staff spoke at the presentation and led groups for the tour. A staff member told me that a student had suggested that the elevator floor level announcements be in te reo Māori. Staff had supported the student to contact the elevator company to make that happen. This had then resulted in the company inviting the student to be the voice of the announcements, not only for School 1a, but for other clients as well.

Learning stories told during my visit were inspiring. I learned that the school had a group of dance students who studied part-time at the school and part-time at their dance school. Some of whom took classes via zoom with a dance school in New York, USA. A staff member told me about a Year 9 student who expressed an interest in barbering. The school arranged work experience for the student. When the interest continued, the student was enrolled in a barbering

course with an external provider. Partnerships within the school were also formed to support the student. The hard materials teacher supported the student to design and build a portable barbering station with chair, mirror, and room for equipment. The business studies teacher supported the student to develop a business plan. Scholarships were sought and fundraising initiatives taken to provide the equipment needed. The student was about to embark on a trial run of his business within the school for koha, with the aim of developing a full business model afterwards.

School 2

Having closed in 2001, I was unable to visit School 2. This portrayal, therefore, is based on participant descriptions.

School 2 also chose to locate themselves within the central city area, allowing students access to the resources this location provided. Subject classes were timetabled as per a regular school, in that they ran the whole year, were year level based and worked towards the national qualifications for each year level. However, often students took classes across different year levels, depending on interest and need. As well as subject-based classes, students and teachers arranged workshops and extra-curricular opportunities. Students were also allocated a homeroom class and teacher. Homeroom classes were mixed age. School attendance was self-monitored.

The central democratic focus for School 2 was the school meeting. School meetings were scheduled weekly, to discuss a variety of issues including (but not limited to) creating and reviewing school rules, deciding on timetabling issues, developing extracurricular activities such as sports events and school trips, student enrolments, and hiring staff. School meetings were also able to be called in the moment by either student or teacher if they thought the need arose. These

unscheduled meetings would mainly be to address disputes or disciplinary issues. Participants remembered school meetings fondly.

Summary

This chapter has provided brief descriptions of the two key secondary schools discussed in the research. I began with a description of School 1a (formally School 1) including observations made during a site visit in 2021. Following that, I gave a brief description of School 2, which closed in 2001. The two democratic secondary schools participants attended were situated in different areas of Aotearoa New Zealand. Both ran formal subject classes that students could choose to enrol in or not. Key differences between the two schools include systems of pastoral care and the organisation/structure of school meetings.

In Chapter Five, I present the initial findings from School 1/1a, setting the scene of the storyline, beginning with what first came to mind for participants when asked about their school. The chapter includes discussion of what aspect of democratic school participants thought had the biggest impact on their schooling and what students and staff found to be the most valuable feature of democratic schooling.

Chapter Five Initial Findings

In the preceding chapter I provided a brief overview of the two key schools considered in the research. In this chapter the initial findings from participants from School 1/1a are presented. The first section illustrates answers to the opening interview inquiry: tell me about your school. Participant views on what was democratic about their schools are discussed in the next section. This is followed by exploration of participants' thoughts on the biggest impact of democratic schooling on them. In the final two sections I present key themes resulting from the most valuable aspects of democratic schooling for students and staff, respectively. Some interviews or correspondence occurred within very close time frames, and as such, were analysed simultaneously.

Participant's Initial Reflections on Their School

Initial conversations with participants started with a focus on clarifying how the schools ran and seeking explanation on how the students practised democracy within their schools. Participants #1, #2 and #3 (Jason, Hannah, and Hugo) were the initial respondents. Jason and Hugo conversed with me via email, and Hannah was able to be interviewed face-to-face, as we both lived within the same COVID-19 lockdown boundaries. These conversations all happened over the same short period of time, so initial coding and analysis was done for all three relatively simultaneously.

The youngest participant in this research, Hugo attended a democratic school for his secondary education, graduating in 2015. We communicated via email. Hugo started our conversation with a description of how the school ran. This helped for clarity of context and also

provided some insight into the positive impacts of democratic schooling. He gave a succinct but clear explanation of School 1/1a:

In general, it ran as a sort of supported university but of course at a high school level curriculum. The teachers are called LAs (Learning Advisors) which sums up their primary role. The teachers and students were all on a first name basis. Each LA would have 5-10 students who they met with on a regular basis and helped with anything they needed regarding school. The LA would help the student then pick courses, similar to how one picks uni [university] courses and be able to offer advice or support for the student's goals—passing NCEA etc. or whatever it may be. The school generally had open plan learning spaces, attendance was not compulsory, which meant that the learning environment was very positive, as if you were there, you were there to learn.

The emphasis placed on support in the above transcript is important. The phrases “supported university”, “help the students”, “offer advice and support”, “help with anything needed”, and “able to offer support and advice” all indicate a learning environment where students felt supported in their learning pathways, but not controlled. A lack of coercion is both implied and made explicit through several words and phrases in the above quote. For example, the use of the word offer, in “offer help and support”, implies a lack of coercion. Adding to this, the phrases “support for the student's goals”, “helped with anything”, and the term learning advisors (rather than teachers) all indicate a student driven learning environment without coercion or specific expectation.

Hugo recalls the learning environment being “very positive” as lesson attendance was a choice not a compulsion. He continues to explain the impact that the open, mixed-age learning environment had on his own learning pathway:

There were no restrictions on courses you could take, for example if you were in Year 10 but wanted to take a Year 13 class, you could. In my case this meant that I had finished my NCEA requirements at the beginning of Year 12 and that gave me a year and a half to focus on anything I wanted. In my last year, the school ended up flying me to Wellington for an internship at a studio there and to help work on a film score recording. I also was enrolled at Uni and took three papers. (This was through government funding they applied on my behalf for). The school excelled in rising up very driven young people who had specific interests, due to the essentially custom-made schooling on an individual level. You could change subject/class every term if you wanted to.

The data in the above section is intricate. Questions raised in my head at this stage and investigated further on, included: What about students who were less driven, or who may not have had a specific interest to follow? How was learning and progress monitored? For now, I think it important to highlight a couple of key ideas. Hugo’s words “no restrictions on courses” creates a sense of freedom and student choice, as well as portraying positive motivation towards learning. This is underscored when Hugo explains he was able to finish his NCEA earlier than usual leaving him opportunity to pursue areas of personal interest. Individualised learning programmes and opportunity to try different things was valued by all the research participants.

It is also interesting to note the focus on structured, valuable learning outside of the standard NCEA qualifications. The school enrolled Hugo in university papers and flew him to

another city for an internship. Later, when asked what part of his schooling had the biggest impact on his life, Hugo highlighted these opportunities, telling me “It really set me up to transition to university and then to adult life in a hectic creative industry. A transition which was almost seamless I think due to the style of schooling”. Hugo adds to this later in our conversation, stating “this gave me genuine experience and contacts in quite a closed off industry (film soundtrack recording and composition)”, enrolling at university “gave me a massive head start and prepared me for when I would go full time”. The idea of a seamless transition into adult life is another one that was echoed by other participants in successive interviews.

Returning to Hugo’s initial paragraph, particularly the sentence “the LA would ... be able to offer advice or support for the student’s goals; passing NCEA etc or whatever it may be”, I note particularly the words “or whatever it may be”, which are much more significant than it initially seemed. Hugo indicates this by finishing NCEA early, allowing time for him to pursue interests and investigate university and work placement options in his final two years. He wrote “my last two years of school were spent purely doing music and media with the occasional class I thought would be interesting like legal studies and game development.” This opportunity to pursue passions certainly paid off for Hugo, who at a young age, has achieved highly in his chosen field.

Students were able to follow not only their own learning journey but also their own timeline rather than one prescribed by external norms and standards. Most of the participants I interviewed did not follow the usual NCEA pathway, yet all have achieved positive career goals. Hannah (participant #2) extended the usual completion time, completing NCEA Level 2 at the end of Year 13, while also complementing her NCEA studies with STAR Courses and university

papers. While not completing NCEA Level 3, Hannah has recently completed a master's degree in science, won an opportunity to research overseas, and at the time of interview was working at a university.

Alumni Descriptions of What was Democratic About Their School

In his opening paragraph, Hugo highlighted that teachers and students were on a first name basis. Seemingly a minor point, however all alumni, from both schools brought attention to this. Alumni obviously appreciated the lack of formal titles between students and staff, and many aligned this to both the democratic nature of the school, as well as notions of equity and respect. Hannah recalled “it helped a lot for me to respect [the staff] more”.

Concepts of equity, empowerment, and responsibility emerged from Hugo's explanation of the democratic nature of the school. When asked: what was ‘democratic’ about the school?, Hugo replied, “students were given complete freedom to choose and decide how their schooling plays out, with the support of the Learning Advisors”. One can see in this that students were trusted to make their own decisions about how their learning played out. Alumni descriptions equated this to feeling empowered and respected. Again, the concept of support interplays here, with the role of staff being to support student decision-making, learning and development. Hugo's statement above implies the importance of a sense of freedom and choice.

Jason was able to differentiate between his experiences at both a democratic primary and secondary school and he talked about both in his interview. He highlighted school meetings as the key tool for practising democracy at his democratic primary school:

[We] held regular (weekly from memory) whole school meetings to discuss anything important happening at the school. Had a chairperson, and one person speaking at a time.

Regular votes on issues via show of hands following discussion. I struggle to remember specific examples at the moment, but know they happened. Student conflict was also managed in 'meetings'. Normally a group/student on each side of the issue with a teacher supporting them. Meetings could be between student and student, student and group, student and teacher, or some other variation of the above. Discussion, empathy, and compromise were encouraged.

From a first reflection of this quote, I noted the focus on discussion. This and similar concepts (i.e., speaking, student voice, dialogue, listening) were also prominent in Jason's responses to other questions, with him noting at one point that democratic school "instilled a strong expectation that my voice would be heard in most settings". The emphasis on discussion over voting is relevant. When voting is mentioned, Jason talks about meetings to discuss anything important happening in the school, noting that issues were voted on *following* discussion. He reiterated discussion in this and the last sentence, reinforcing its importance to democracy.

Other concepts arising from this initial read through include empathy and compromise, explicitly highlighted in the last sentence. The use of the words managed and issues when discussing student conflict indicate an objective approach to conflict resolution. On an additional read through I noted further key reflections. Equality, while not specifically mentioned in this quote, or by Jason at all can be seen in the sentence "meetings could be between student and student, student and group, student and teacher, or some other variation of the above". The phrase "with a teacher supporting them" recognises that the child's voice is important, however they

may need support in learning to express themselves. The structured environment for discussion indicated within this quote (i.e., “chairperson”, “one person speaking at a time”) is also noted.

Jason also discussed what was democratic about School 1. He found this harder to define: Harder to say. When I started there were approximately 200 students and it doubled to 400ish by the time I left. The general idea being the school was split over stories of the building, and each level would decide particulars on how it was managed and tried to encourage a cohesive group for the year. I don't know if it was me getting older and more cynical, but I feel like the individuality of each level was lost as the school grew bigger. Each level had smaller groups/ homebases that met to take roll and discuss things. We were expected to be able to select and schedule our own classes/subjects and deal with any clashes that might occur. Any time not in classes was expected to be working on an individual interest. There was a bigger focus here on self-directed learning than a democratic process, although the two are fairly intertwined.

Themes of shared decision-making, and discussion arise again. Jason talks of cohesive groups, yet also mentions that he felt that the individuality of each group was lost as the school grew. The concept of ‘cohesive group’ is also an important one to highlight. Of particular interest is the inherent link between individuality and community implied in his words, along with a sense of belonging. Jason also considers democratic processes and self-directed learning as being intertwined.

School meetings were mentioned in this first interview and were also considered important by subsequent participants. Later in this early conversation I questioned Jason as to the value of these meetings and the necessity of teacher skills in managing them. His answer

recognised the scaffolded learning students were able to take from participating in meetings with and without teacher involvement. In his email Jason writes, “Teacher skills were important in some of the more difficult arguments, but I remember a few where students largely sorted it out themselves, once they were in the structured environment”. Here Jason illustrates that students were able to learn problem solving and conflict resolution through real life situations, scaffolded with teacher support when required. Jason also highlighted the skills learned from these meetings that he still draws on and values today, repeating the concepts empathy, compromise and listening. He wrote, “I certainly think I still pull on those skills. Empathy, compromise, listening. Things I value highly in myself”.

Hannah was excited to talk about School 1, making comments such as “I love talking about [School 1]. [School 1] was the best thing ever”, and “it was the best thing for me”. Hannah’s response to the question of what was democratic about the school was multifaceted, yet primarily revolved around choice, dialogue, and equality:

You got to choose who your learning advisor was, you got to choose your classes, (...) I think it was once a term, you had (...) a meeting with the LA, your parent and you, and that’s where you were meant to discuss where you were going and stuff. And I always got the opinion (...) I was part of the team. (...) That sort of thing helped, and it gave you a say, which was really important. Like, even if they ended up going ‘no, you’re wrong, you do need to do this’, it was ‘well, I at least had my point (...) you’re at least talking to me like I’m an equal member of the team’. And then you kind of had weekly meetings with your learning advisor again, where they checked in, talked to you about different things, and that was just, you know, you just, you didn’t feel forgotten and stuff. (...)

Like it was, ‘you’re in the driving seat, you’ve had this idea, let’s do it’, and then it was ‘okay, well how are you gonna achieve that?’ And there was no kind of hierarchy; ‘you’re a good student, you’re a bad student’, you know (...), ‘you’re academically bright you can go to university’, it was ‘you’re interested in that topic, we don’t teach it here, go to university’ (...) I think most kids knew it, like if they were interested in something it could happen if they spoke up.

Choice is the first concept arising from Hannah’s answer; the choice of LA and choice of which classes to take. Students could choose to stop attending a class they enrolled in if they decided the subject or teacher was not a good fit for them or choose no scheduled classes if that made sense for their learning pathway. Classes were scheduled in 5- to 6-week blocks, meaning students could choose to try a variety of subjects, or choose the same subjects throughout the year. Students described valuing these choices, and also described valuing the discussions around those choices.

Omitted from Hannah’s quote above are further examples of the types of discussion she would have with her LA, illustrating the weighing up of options and justification of decisions. Examples she gave included:

What do you wanna do? Okay well if that’s what you wanna do, now defend it: why do you wanna do that? (...) You say you wanna be a doctor (...) you need calculus, so why aren’t you doing it? You need to make a good point for why you’re not doing this, for me to back you.

An example included in Hannah’s quote above is “how are you gonna achieve that?”

Phrases such as “I always got my opinion” and “it gave you a say” highlight that Hannah

considered her voice was heard. Together these indicate a shared meaningful dialogue, which Hannah describes as being “really important”. This also links to the concept of support discussed earlier. Even when her opinions were disagreed with Hannah appreciated the opportunity of being listened to and being an equal part of the conversation. Being heard was more important to Hannah than being right.

Twice in her quote above, Hannah uses the word team, including the phrase “I’m an equal member of the team”. She also refers to a lack of hierarchy, illustrated with comments specific to the non-ranking of students. Access to opportunities was for anyone who was interested, without restrictions on academic ability or classroom status. The theme of support, highlighted earlier, comes across in this quote when Hannah talks about weekly meetings with the LAs. I also note the concept of empowerment coming across in Hannah’s words. She expresses being reminded that she was in the “driving seat” of her education and given support on how she could make her ideas come to fruition. Hannah considered the weekly meetings between student and LA as an opportunity for the LA to “check in” with the student, and to help the student access or create opportunities of interest. Hannah noted that due to these catch ups she “didn’t feel forgotten”.

Hannah believed the democratic structure and systems of School 1 created a positive social and academic environment, helping her re-build both her love of learning and reduce her anxiety. Throughout her interview, Hannah highlighted several concepts and principles that worked together to create a safe and positive learning environment. These are presented in Figure 12, below.

Figure 12

Democratic principles creating a safe learning environment illustrated in Hannah's interview (supported by quotes from the initial interview)



Hannah also talked a lot about equality between students and staff in terms of distribution of power. While she used the word equality, equity may better illustrate her meaning. Comments which illustrate this include, “I think the hierarchy was there, but it wasn’t put in your face”, “[staff] obviously have this position; they obviously still have the same responsibilities as in a

‘normal’ school, but it’s not shoved in your face as this big scary thing”, “I’m a person first, yes I have this role, but I’m gonna meet you where you are and work with you, I’m not gonna, you know, sit on top of you and control you.” Hannah’s comments indicate that the roles of staff and students were evident, but apparently in an operational manner rather than one of power. Notions such as roles rather than status apply here, where staff and students had different roles within the school. Teachers were respected however, that respect was mutual and did not come with power imbalance.

For Hannah, building relationships of trust and equity, allowed for better communication and healthier social and emotional outcomes. She notes that children often say what they think adults want to hear rather than what they truly think or feel, which can limit student progress and well-being. Hannah believes that at School 1 adults put the time in to really understand the student’s individual concerns or wants, and to support them in learning to communicate those better, leading to better overall outcomes:

I think that at the end of the day it’s about growing up a human and getting to be a functional member of society. And kids suck at communicating, like, they want to make their parents happy, they want to make the teachers happy. So, unless the parents and teachers are engaged, the kid’s going to, you know, say what they think wants to be said. And they’re not going to be happy and they’re not going to achieve well. So, if everybody’s engaged and everybody’s communicating and everybody’s happy and they’re constantly communicating the truth will come out and the kid will be able to get to where they want to go in life.

Communication is the key focus of this quote. It is interesting that in Hannah's first sentence she talks about being human and a functioning member of society and then instantly links this to communication, when she begins the second sentence with "and kids suck at communicating".

Pivotal to Hannah's experiences as a teenager was moving from a mainstream state school, where she was a quiet, well-behaved, high achieving but deeply unhappy student, to democratic school where her NCEA output slowed, but she learned how to be a "healthy human" Hannah appreciated being offered the chance to not only communicate her needs, but to have them listened to and acknowledged. As illustrated in her quote above, it is about more than having opportunity to voice your concerns. She implies that not only do children need opportunity to learn effective communication, but also that teachers need to take the time to listen and engage in meaningful dialogue with students, without power imbalances. Hannah believes that the focus on communication, one where teachers are actively engaged in truly understanding what the student is trying to say, in the end creates healthier and more productive outcomes.

Table 8 sets out the key themes arising from alumni descriptions of democratic schooling (in no particular order).

Table 8***Key Themes Emerging from School 1/1a Alumni Descriptions of Democratic Schooling***

Key Themes emerging from the data.
Meta-learning / learning how to learn through doing
Empowerment starting with trust, respect, equity & self-worth
Student freedom to choose how their schooling played out, with support of LAs
A safe, supportive environment in which to take risks, without judgement
Dialogue & communication, learning how to listen to others, expecting one's voice would be heard and acknowledged, space to debate & negotiate, being heard in a really constructive, collaborative way
Building relationships through meaningful dialogue and communication, empathy, and compromise
Inherent link between community and individuality
Space to work out who you were and freedom to be that person, being accepted as you were, as an individual.
No judgement, no picking one student over another, opportunity & leadership open to all, no student ranking
Focus on the discovery of learning rather than the end product
Individual and emergent education pathways built around child needs and interests
Interest and ability grouping rather than age levels
Being an equal part of the conversation, an equal member of the team, roles not status of staff
Shared meaningful dialogue, really understanding what student needs, wants and concerns truly are

Alumni Views of the Biggest Impact of Democratic Schooling

The key focus of this research was to find out what the impacts of democratic education were. I asked alumni directly what the biggest impact of democratic schooling was for them. For Hugo, the seamless transition from school to university was important, including the industry experience, contacts, and university head-start he got in his final two years of schooling. Hugo

wrote “it really set me up to transition to university and then to adult life in a hectic creative industry. A transition which was almost seamless, I think due to the style of schooling”.

The life is a journey idea that came across strongly in Hannah’s interview, also rang through in her answer to this question on impacts, alongside the notion that learning is more important than academic grades. She felt that the school taught her that life did not always need to be perfect, that the key is to keep learning and enjoy the experience of learning. Being there for the journey, learning and enjoying that journey is more important than endpoints or final grades. Hannah told me:

I think it gave me the confidence to know that life doesn’t have to be perfect all the time. That, you know, the only thing that’s important is that I’m part of the journey. And if it, you know, takes 10 jobs and 5 careers and, you know, 3 failed marriages or whatever, it doesn’t matter. And, you know, just keep learning, you know, there’s always something interesting to learn and as long as you’re interested then that’s what’s good. Cause I think that’s what it taught me, is, you know, it doesn’t matter if you get an A+ in the subject, what matters is that you’re learning something and it’s cool that you find that fascinating, and that you wanna learn about it.

The premise that students felt comfortable taking risks and trying new things, raised earlier, can also be seen here, where Hannah expresses “life doesn’t have to be perfect” and “it doesn’t matter”. Underlying this quote is an idea that failing is okay; what’s more important is being there for the experiences. For Hannah, who was recovering from traumatic experiences earlier in her life (with her family, Hannah came to Aotearoa New Zealand to escape violent discontent, which she personally witnessed, in her native country) and anxiety resulting from

incidents at her previous school, these are extremely important takeaways. This quote also builds on the theme that the school developed the idea that learning is about more than simply NCEA achievement, rather learning is a lifelong journey to develop interests and passions.

Like Hannah, Brooke started her answer regarding the biggest impact of democratic schooling with a reference to confidence. Brooke appreciated gaining the confidence to be able to speak up and ask for what she needed, something she believes many people often find hard to do. Again, we see the concept of voice emerging, highlighting learning to communicate her needs as a key impact. Brooke also considers creative problem-solving skills and being able to take risks as key skills she has been able to pull on throughout her life, which she accredits to her democratic schooling experience:

I think confidence to ask for what you want was / is a big thing, generally. I found that I didn't realise that it was a skill that a lot of people found quite hard until I entered into the real world, so to speak. And I think the creative problem solving and just taking risks are all things that I attribute to that, and also what I believe are some of the best skills I have and why I've been able to, you know, get exactly the job that I want and do all that stuff, that's a thing that I think that's from democratic schooling. Yeah, expecting people to listen to me. [laughs] and, what I have to say [laughs].

Following high school, Brooke joined a dance company dancing full time for 2 years. After major disruptions from a natural disaster, she travelled and lived overseas for a few years. In her mid-20s she came back to Aotearoa New Zealand and attended university. She now works as a teacher. It is interesting that although she followed a completely different path to Hugo, both

at secondary school and post-school, Brooke also attributes her experiences at School 1 and the skills she gained there to enabling her to get “just the job that I want”.

Jackson believed that learning to learn and meta-cognition were the biggest impacts of democratic schooling for him. This included knowing how to learn, and critical analysis skills. Jackson appreciated his ability to question, research and learn new tasks quickly and independently as he navigated his way through his career:

The biggest impact for me was, I think I’ve carried the learning how to learn, the knowing how to learn something right through, and the, you know, that critical thought thing, being able to look at a situation or a task that I have to complete, doing my own research or asking questions that I thought would provide me the best answers, or observing my colleagues who had been doing it for a longer time than me. You know, that kind of thing. Understanding all the different ways in which I can learn, and being able to then apply that myself, you know. I don’t need to be spoon-fed information. I don’t need my hand held to learn how to do something.

Jackson’s quote indicates that he practises both initiative and a variety of learning tools including observation, questioning and research to develop his understanding and to apply that learning.

Anahera’s biggest impact complemented and, in some ways, built on that of Hugo, Hannah and Brooke. Like Hugo, Anahera talked about how her schooling impacted positively on her university experiences. Like Jackson, she talks about critical analysis skills, and like Hannah and Brooke, ideas underlying her answer included confidence in communicating and a love of learning:

I think, when I went to university I got really involved in, not necessarily student politics, but student decision-making avenues. So, I held some leadership positions for, like, the Māori law student's society, which meant that I got to participate in our law faculty discussions. I started a society for like women and law, and I just generally got involved with university decision-making. But I think, when I think about [democratic primary and School 1], in general the biggest impact it had on my life was partly the critical analysis skills that it developed and partly the love for learning. And I guess those are intertwined with the democracy aspects.

Anahera directly relates her involvement in student decision-making avenues at university to her experiences at democratic school. The concept of leadership can be seen in this quote. She not only got involved but also took leadership positions and started new societies within university. Anahera raises the concept of democracy here. Participation plays an important role in a functioning democracy. Anahera shows understanding of this in her quote when she talks about being involved in student decision-making and faculty discussions. She also intertwines participation and democracy with critical analysis and a love for learning – skills she believes she gained from attending School 1 and highly values in herself.

Caitlin's interview was emotional. She loved her school but was also deeply affected by a natural disaster that had occurred during her time there and the resulting upheaval. School 1 was forced into temporary accommodation, moving more than once before the current building was completed. Anahera was at university during the disasters and noted that while it was difficult for everyone in the city some were more affected than others, particularly those who had been at School 1 at the time. She stated, "I think it was much worse for the people who were still at

[School 1]. They had a traumatic experience, coming out of that building.” Caitlin was not willing to talk about the disaster in any detail, describing the situation as “absolutely horrendous”.

The biggest impact of democratic schooling for Caitlin was community, and developing a sense of self, an identity. While her answer differed from the others for this particular question, all participants alluded to the same concepts at some stage during our conversations:

I think, this is—kind of sounds a little bit mushy, but I think one of the biggest things was that sense of community—is that I will always have a home that's like very dear. That's quite sincere actually. But this sense that (...) I'll always have that space (...) It's almost, it's part of my identity, if that makes sense. And I think it's a really important thing, being able to have that sense of identity, you know, like, people get very lost, you know, in life and I think this is that having that grounding from such a developed young age. Like it's not just like when you're a kid and you had a home, it's, it's that you had a space that you sculpted with others around you, and then that's part of who you are. Yeah, I think that would probably be one of the biggest things [laughs]. You know like it's serious, I'm serious. You know, it's not just like having a family home where you have dinner and things, because I have that. You know, it's more about at that time, when you're, you know, 15-16, it's a very coming of age, those are coming of age years and they're very defining for the rest of your life. And I think being able to have that space that you became yourself. It's sacred to have that identity space, you know. And people trawl through high school, and they just get their qualification and get out and they hate it. I

never hated going to school. I wanted to go to school every day [laughs]. Yeah, and I think that's really important. It was a really big part of it (...) that's a huge deal.

One of the youngest participants, Caitlin, articulates concepts central to the research findings. Throughout all the data for both School 1/1a and School 2, a sense of community seems to be essential. For Caitlin, the notion of home rang through in her words. She came back to this concept of home throughout her interview, pointing out that despite the repeated change of venue, sometimes to very unsuitable sites, and the fact that she herself came from a caring, happy home, when she thought of School 1/1a, she thought of home, and the community that created that sense of home.

Caitlin talked about the school being part of her identity, giving her a grounding at a young age, which she describes as coming of age years, that define the rest of your life. Particularly significant in Caitlin's answer is that it was not that the school offered a culture she felt she could identify with or be grounded in. Rather the democratic, participative nature of the school allowed her to be a part of building that school culture, alongside the rest of the school community. Her use of the words "a space that you sculpted with others around you" are significant. For Caitlin, being involved in creating the school environment and atmosphere meant that it became part of who she was and became a space that was, for her, sacred. She observed that unlike her peers at other schools, she wanted to go to school, every day.

Alumni Views on the Most Valuable Things About Democratic Schooling

Although similar to the previous question, I also asked alumni what they thought was most valuable about their democratic schooling. I thought the subtle difference between biggest impact and most value was worth exploring. Caitlin again referred to the feeling of home and the

value felt from being part of a community. Other participants differentiated between the two. Hannah's biggest impact centred around not feeling like she had to always be perfect and being able to enjoy the journey of learning. These impacts subsequently helped her to become what she called a "healthy human". She felt that becoming a healthy human and being able to try different things without the need for constant success were the most valuable outcomes of her experiences at democratic school. Hannah believes the absence of bullying at School 1, the acceptance of individuals for who they were, and the open, equal two-way communication that meant she felt heard, strengthened her mental and emotional well-being.

Hugo's answer was also two-fold. Hugo felt that the most valuable part of his schooling, which he described as the opportunity to gain significant university skills and work experience during those teenage years, led to the biggest impact, being the positive influence these opportunities had on his post-school life. As well as this, Hugo identified the social aspect of democratic schooling as being particularly valuable:

I would also say it was the social aspect; from seeing what my siblings go through at a traditional school I was very surprised to hear of typical cliquy groups you see on TV etc. [School 1a] was very mature in that aspect, everyone was treated equally, there was no uniform, no exclusive groups of people generally, just normal friend circles you see in adult life. I don't think I heard of any bullying or abuse of that kind while I was at the school.

Hugo was surprised that his siblings talked of "cliquy groups" existing in their mainstream school and he noted an absence of exclusive or cliquy groups at School 1a. Interestingly, Hugo linked maturity, equal treatment, and lack of uniform to the absence of "any

bullying or abuse of that kind”. Both Hannah and Hugo had noted an absence of bullying at their school. With teenage bullying being a concern in Aotearoa New Zealand for many years now (Mhuru, 2021), I decided to investigate this further and added it as a question to further interviews. This is discussed in the section discussing Inclusivity, Partnership, and Individual Learning Pathways in Chapter Seven.

Ryan identified two things as being the most valuable part of his schooling: meta-learning and (both causal and formal) communication skills. Like previous alumni, he believes these two skills helped him transition better to university than most of his peers from mainstream state schools, and he also finds these two skills to be extremely valuable in the workplace.

Brooke offered a different angle for what was most valuable for her in democratic schooling. She focused on the learning she gained from practice in decision-making. While offering this new theme, her answer also aligned with concepts raised already, including students having a safe space to fail:

Ah, most valuable, I think ah, having more of an introspective look on what decisions I’m making and whether they’re really what I want or whether it’s kind of just—I’m just doing it because there’s not much else to do. You know like, when you get all this freedom to make decisions, I think you do just make decisions because you can and so like slowly over the 5 years of being there, we learnt how to make decisions that actually benefit what we really want. What’s gonna benefit in the long run rather than just like, oh, I would like to, I don’t know, go on a hike because it will get me out of school for 3 days [laughs]. Even though our school was great!

Decision-making was a key concept throughout Brooke's interview. Of interest here is Brooke talking about how, over time, she learned to reflect on the outcome of her decisions and her reasons for decisions made. Again, this links to having a safe learning environment. Brooke had the time to learn how to make decisions for the long-term gain of her education pathway, rather than short term enjoyment, in a safe, supportive learning environment.

Brooke linked decision-making to democracy, having also discussed opportunities for meaningful decision-making when asked what was democratic about School 1. There she highlighted examples for both individual and shared decision-making, including choosing their own LA, developing their own learning pathway, making shared decisions on what classes and extracurricular opportunities should be run, and what learning should look like. Brooke appreciated the participation and empowerment gained through these and similar decision-making opportunities, noting "there was a lot of decision-making, which was really nice".

I was curious as to whether staff thoughts on the most valuable takeaway for students aligned with alumni reflections. Staff responses to this question are discussed in the next section.

Staff Views on What was Valuable for Students

I interviewed four staff members who were currently teaching at School 1a. Three had taught at either School 1 or a democratic primary school prior to the merging of the two schools, one had taught at School 1a for just over two years, having no prior democratic schooling experience beforehand. When reflecting on the data, I needed to keep in mind that while alumni were discussing events from the past, staff would be including current experiences in their reflections. The school had undergone many changes including a natural disaster, the aftermath of this and the resulting repeated change of site, the merge of the primary and secondary schools,

the new custom-built site, and more recently the impact of COVID-19 and related school and community lockdowns. Beyond this, staff were reflecting on current experiences and perspectives of current students. Alumni were reflecting on not only their experiences at the time but also the ongoing impact and value of these long-term. The three staff members who had taught the longest (of the four interviewed) were often referred to, with great respect and regard, in alumni interviews.

At the time of the interview, Bethany had recently celebrated her ten-year anniversary at School 1/1a. She told me it was the first time she had stayed in a job that long and she felt very lucky to work there. When asked what she thought most valuable for students attending democratic school, Bethany talked about freedom. For Bethany, the focus was on learning gained from the choices the students have:

Choice, choice, that they have choices (...) And I think that that's the most, that's the big thing here, it's the freedom to have, to be able to make your own choices in life, even if they're bad choices, and you realize you need to go back and change a lot of those choices. They at least get to do that in a safe environment. They, yeah, I think that that's the big thing, choice!

Bethany's quote relates closely to Brooke's appreciation of having an introspective look at the decisions she was making. Bethany noted students at School 1a can go back and change their choices. She also talked specifically about the supportive and safe environment discussed by Brooke and other alumni. Bethany confirmed the importance of students being able to learn how to make their own decisions, through trial and error, without fear of serious repercussions from making wrong choices.

Xavier also referred to freedom, noting that freedom was something that he would have benefited from himself as a student:

Well, I mean, as a student, I would have really liked going to a school like this because I found freedom, as far as education is concerned, as far as learning is concerned, I find freedom stimulating. Being told what to do, when to do, where to do, is restricting. So I was, I personally was someone that struggled at high school, but thrived at university. Because precisely at university, nobody cared what I did or where I was.

The reflection in Xavier's quote, that as far as education and learning is concerned, he finds freedom stimulating, is an interesting one. He believes that he did better at university than high school because of the increased freedom at tertiary level. It is an interesting observation that being told what to do and where to do it is restricting to one's learning. The implication of Xavier's answers, supports the arguments of alumni made previously, that being given greater responsibility and decision-making around your own learning allows greater focus on and enjoyment of the learning itself, rather than having to worry about arbitrary restrictions that distract from that learning.

I found the last sentence in Xavier's quote, "because precisely at university, nobody cared what I did or where I was", particularly interesting. Alumni have expressed strongly that they felt cared for, safe and supported. They expressed that feeling heard and having their views considered during secondary school meant that it was something they then expected to happen within other aspects of their life, including university and the workforce. Care is also a strong concept coming through in Samuel's answer below. Notions of external versus internal control,

and self- versus external motivation, are starting to emerge here. This is discussed further in *Adjusting to Democratic Schooling*, in Chapter Seven.

Samuel's answer to what was the most valuable part of democratic school for the students, referred initially, to relationships of trust between students and staff, yet the answer was, again, multifaceted:

Wow. Um. It probably varies student to student, but I actually think probably, underpinning it all, I would say is the kind of, the relational strength in the school, that they have with their teachers. Because of the way we're set up, they become really connected to, and they build a really trusting relationship, you know, with the staff here and they need to, because they need to be brave enough to share with us what their dreams are and what they, you know, that takes a bit of courage sometimes. So, for them, like when I interview leavers, they talk about the value of that person who knew them and connected with them and cared for them. And, so I think, you know, and then there's the massive freedom and flexibility they have to create learning that meets their needs. As opposed to being, kind of, shoehorned into a system.

Samuel instantly recognises that individual students have individual takeaways from their schooling when he says, "it probably varies from student to student". This underlies both the designated character of the school: that the student is central to directing their own learning; and concepts related to individual learning pathways discussed by alumni. Samuel goes on to discuss the relational strength between students and teachers in the school. This theme is one made obvious by alumni in their interviews. Alumni appreciated the equitable relationships of trust they had with staff, that made the school a safe, empowering environment for them. Samuel

recognises this in his quote when he points out that for students to share their “dreams” with school staff takes courage. For him a relationship of trust is vital for this to happen. Samuel notes that the school is set up to foster these connections.

Like Xavier and Bethany, Samuel also raises the concept of freedom in his answer. Again, he links this to the designated character of the school when he notes that students have freedom and flexibility to “create learning that meets their needs”. This latter part of the sentence is important as it shows that the freedom discussed by both staff and students is focused on learning. Again, in Samuel’s answer we see themes highlighting the importance of individual learning plans, with individual outcomes for individual students.

Freedom and choice were also the first things that came to mind for Paul. However, he approached these concepts from a different angle, reflecting that freedom and choice are likely what the students would say is most valuable for them. This is interesting as all three of the other staff interviewed also mentioned those concepts directly, yet alumni answers, while still essentially related to freedom and choice, were more complex. Perhaps this was because the alumni interviewed were adults, having graduated some time before, and were reflecting on their experiences as adults. Alumni definitely expressed that they valued the freedom and choice they got, but also, they recognised these concepts came with difficulties, as Paul points out. Paul instead believed that inclusivity was of most value:

I think if you talk to them, they'd say it's freedom and choice, would be their things. I think from the adult point of view, it's probably a little bit different, because they can have some real negatives as well for the kids. So, I think for us, it's that idea of um, the thing I think's best is the inclusivity of it. Without ever, ever trying to be a school that

encompasses, you know, inclusivity, that's exactly what we've got just as a result of our culture. You can come here dressed as a superhero when you're 20 and no one would care. You can be—to the point where we've got so many transgender kids, that I couldn't tell you how many there are because they are just part of our school. It doesn't matter I guess what you are, who you are, what you bring; you're just you and that's what matters.

Paul's answer links many of the concepts already discussed. His use of the term inclusivity illustrates many of the ideas discussed so far. It's such an interesting description that runs counter to many of the traditional arguments against individuality in schools – such as those in support of uniform and standardised learning paths. Interestingly, Paul notes that inclusivity was not a specific goal for the school, however it was a direct and obviously valued result of the culture of the school. Paul's argument here echoes those of alumni, who appreciated the opportunity to be who they were. Paul talks about coming to school “dressed as a superhero when you are 20 and no one would care”. This is similar to comments made by alumni, that some students came dressed in unusual clothing or portrayed unusual behaviours and that no one judged. This enables students to experiment within a safe context. Hannah talked about being accepted as you were, and no one judged others because they understood each was on their own journey. Hugo mentioned an absence of bullying and cliquey groups, and Caitlin discussed the opportunity to find a sense of self, and build her own identity, while also being part of a special community.

For myself, as researcher, I found Paul's words both beautiful and confusing. His allusion to inclusivity is vital in a multicultural society like Aotearoa New Zealand, with a widening gap between rich and poor, and one of the world's highest youth suicide rates (NZ Govt, 2018). His

sentence “it doesn't matter I guess what you are, who you are, what you bring; you're just you and that's what matters” is meaningful and strongly reinforces the arguments of alumni that the school supported you for who you were and did not try to change you. I needed to investigate this further. How was it that a highly individualised school had managed to create a strong and meaningful community-based atmosphere of inclusivity and acceptance? I take a deeper look into this in Chapter Seven.

Table 9 summarises the key themes arising from alumni and staff discussions on key impacts and most valuable takeaways from democratic schooling.

Table 9

Key Themes from School 1/1a Data on Biggest Impacts & Most Valuable Takeaways of Democratic Schooling

Key Themes emerging from the data
Learning and practicing effective, meaningful, two-way communication
Inclusivity: It doesn't matter what you are, who you are, what you bring; you're just you and that's what matters
Relationships built on trust, that empowers students to take risks and show initiative
Equal opportunity for contribution, participation, and leadership
Maintaining the value, worth and diversity of each person
Learning the self-discipline needed for agency, in a safe, supportive environment
Absence of bullying and judgement of others
Seamless transition to university and workforce
Meta-learning, critical analysis and creative problem solving
Freedom and choice with a focus on learning
Student driven, individual learning pathways, that meets the needs of individual students, with individual outcomes
Introspective look at decision-making
Space to be yourself and to develop a sense of self, an identity
Enjoying the learning journey rather than focusing on a pre-determined outcome
Life is a journey, that doesn't have to be perfect
Being involved in creating the atmosphere and culture of the school community

Summary

In this chapter I explored themes which developed in the initial stages of data collection and comparative analysis. In the first section I investigated key discussion points early in the interviews, focusing on what first came to participants minds when asked about their school; community, support and learning were key concepts raised in this section. Concepts including equity, empowerment, responsibility, and communication emerged in the next section, in which I examined participant responses considering what was democratic about their school. After that, I discussed and analysed participant reflections on the biggest impact of democratic schooling. Participants tended to focus on their experiences after graduating, identifying positive impacts such as transitioning to university, gaining confidence both in themselves and in taking risks and meta-learning skills. Finally, alumni and staff opinions on the most valuable aspect of democratic schooling for students were considered. Alumni responses revolved around being able to enjoy learning, the positive social environment, reflective decision-making, and the concepts of meta-learning and communication skills were again raised. Staff talked about freedom and agency in a safe, supportive environment, relationships based around trust, and inclusivity.

In the next chapter I extend the discussion to include responses from participants representing School 2 as well as those from School 1/1a. Consideration is given to reasons for attending democratic school, and participant experiences transitioning between mainstream school and democratic school. Unhappy experiences at democratic school are discussed. The chapter ends with a focus on experiences of alumni who thrived as students at School 2.

Chapter Six Triangulating the Initial Findings

The previous chapter introduced data from School 1/1a. In this chapter, I look deeper into the data across School 1/1a and introduce relevant data from School 2. I start with a look at why students choose to attend democratic school, then move on to discuss participants experiences transitioning between conventional and democratic schools. After that, unhappy experiences at democratic school are presented. Finally, I explore concepts and themes arising from experiences of students thriving at School 2. Key differences in school structure and external environment between School 1a and School 2 are discussed in Generation and Collection of Data in Chapter Three, and also in Chapter Four.

The Choice to Attend Democratic School

There were many reasons why participants chose to attend democratic school. Some were encouraged by parents who supported the pedagogical philosophy, or who wanted greater involvement in their child's education than was offered by mainstream schooling. Other students wanted greater choice in their academic pathway and/or greater opportunity to contribute to their own learning, the school itself, or the wider community. Many participants described feeling ostracised and disaffected by mainstream schooling, be it academically, culturally, socially, or emotionally and were looking for an alternative option.

Anahera was encouraged by her parents to move to a democratic primary school after three years of primary schooling in a mainstream environment. Anahera's parents were concerned about her well-being, wanted greater involvement in her education and were looking for something that would value their culture. Concepts of well-being, parental involvement and cultural understanding are evident in Anahera's response:

It was ultimately my decision, but it was driven by them, my parents, 'cause I've asked them about it before, they said they felt like the light that was within me had sort of gone out a bit when I'd gone to mainstream schooling, and also my Year 3 teacher was very racist. So, my parents were looking for somewhere where they could have more of a say in my education and be like somewhere that would actually value Tikanga Māori and Māori education.

Anahera's recollections of her experiences at mainstream school were concerning and this quote is no exception. The statement "they felt like the light that was within me had sort of gone out" does not indicate an environment in which a child is thriving, but instead the opposite. This is then followed up with the statement "and also my Year 3 teacher was very racist". I note that Anahera used the conjunction and also, as opposed to because, indicating it was not only the racism that caused her light to dim at mainstream school. It's also interesting that while Anahera notes her parents' concerns and wants for her education, the quote starts with "ultimately it was my decision". This shows that her parents, while having very clear objectives themselves, were also keen to listen to her needs and wants, linking to the concepts of empowerment, respect, and equity. Her parents' choices seemed to be largely driven by Anahera's well-being and her needs and wants.

Hannah chose to transition to democratic school due to being bullied at her previous school. She also felt unsupported and unnecessarily disparaged by staff. She told me, her time at School 1 allowed her to rebuild her well-being and learn how to take control of her own learning. She learned how to learn. Hannah described a situation where sheer desperate need to improve

her socio-emotional well-being caused her to transition from her mainstream school to a democratic secondary school:

To be honest I was being bullied at the school I was at (...) I just hated it. Like, I was doing okay academically, but it was only because I was bright enough to get by, I didn't know how to study, I wasn't into the school (...) I had severe mental health problems at that point, like, I had anxiety, but it wasn't diagnosed, and by the time I [left mainstream school] I was self-harming (...) Halfway through Year 11 (...) I told [my parents] I'm dropping out or I'm going to [School 1] (...) and it was the best thing for me.

The contrast of harm felt within the mainstream environment, to that of belonging and community in a democratic community is significant and is discussed further in the next section.

Transitioning Between Democratic and Mainstream School

After completing Year 8 in a democratic school, Anahera decided to return to the mainstream environment for her secondary schooling. For the very few students who moved from a democratic environment to mainstream schooling, reasons included moving to an area without a democratic school, or like Anahera, being unsure about democratic schooling, and the wider societal pressures of being “normal”. Anahera told me:

At the end of primary school (...) [School 1] had only really recently opened up, so I didn't, you know, not that I didn't have faith in it, I didn't know a lot of people going there or what it would be like (...) and I kind of just wanted to try out 'normal' for a bit, see what normal was like. I think I'd watched too many movies about, like, American high schools and stuff.

This concept of normal raised by Anahera is an interesting one. There seemed to be a lot

of pressure on the democratic schools to prove themselves, and despite Anahera's improvement in well-being after moving from mainstream to democratic school once before, the pressure of "normal" still affected her. Anahera's transition to mainstream secondary only lasted 2 years before returning to a democratic environment. Her reasons for not enjoying mainstream secondary schooling again related to concepts of cultural appreciation and being heard, alongside a focus on learning; she felt that her cultural and academic needs were not being adequately addressed, and her voice was not being heard. Anahera explains how concerns she raised about her learning were not addressed by the mainstream school she attended:

I'd come from an environment where you were encouraged to be a really active participant in your own learning, to challenge yourself (...) at [mainstream school] (...) I had enrolled in both history and Māori as my elective subjects, and they only had one Māori class and they scheduled it for the same time as the top tier history class (...) So, I had a huge problem with it because, I'd been like top of my social studies class the year before, I was like 'I should be able to be in this class'. And also, because my friends were in that class, I was comparing the work they were doing with the work I was doing, and I knew I was getting about 10% of the content and learning. So, I made an appointment with my Dean and I went in with my mum and was like 'I'm not feeling challenged in my classes and I'm not feeling like I'm getting the best education that the school has to offer, like, what kind of solutions can we look at, can those teachers give me extra work, can I change form classes?', and the Dean just basically said no, like sort of dismissed my concerns and said I should just wait and see if things got better. And at that point, I'd already been considering [School 1] so I was like 'right, I'm going to [School 1]'. It was

a good move. I mean, I moved to [School 1], and they didn't have a Māori class at all, but other things were good [laughs].

The situation Anahera describes here highlights her expectations to both be extended in her learning as far as possible and to have the opportunity to discuss her concerns with staff. Even though she took the initiative to discuss these issues, to find solutions moving forward, and showed she was happy to negotiate a compromise, the Dean was not willing to engage in open dialogue. She explains that this incident helped her confirm that moving back to democratic school would be to her advantage. This discussion highlights concepts around challenge, a focus on learning, open dialogue, and being an active participant in your own education. Her description of this discouraging situation also highlights issues with streamed classes and rigid year-long timetabling often found in mainstream schools. The quote links to the concepts of compromise and negotiation. Anahera demonstrated here her ability to seek solutions and not be a passive recipient of her schooling, both skills participants in the research attributed to their learning at democratic school. She also shows she was willing to compromise, by offering to do extra work, and because democratic school did not have te reo Māori classes at all. Regardless, Anahera felt the move was a good one and, as she later told me, one she did not regret.

When Anahera advised her mainstream school that she had decided to move to democratic school their response was negative and harmful. When I asked Anahera what the hardest thing about democratic schooling was for her, she told me it was “having faith she was in the right place”. She went on to explain that unjust stereotypes and public criticism, along with a demeaning response when she advised her mainstream that she was moving schools impacted negatively on her belief that she had made the right decision:

Having faith that I was in the right place. Because a lot of my friends went to mainstream schools, and there was a lot of public criticism of [School 1] and a lot of stereotypes that were untrue (...) when I notified the school that I was leaving, at [mainstream school] I remember my Dean, she called me up to the class, right in front of everybody, and was like ‘I just wanted you to know that you will fail at [School 1] and when you do you won’t be allowed back in here’.

Comparisons to societal expectations of schooling were made by many of the alumni who participated in the research. Jackson noted that as a student he sometimes reflected that he may have been missing out on the schooling he saw on TV and in movies. Ultimately, after moving to Australia, he spent his final year of secondary at a mainstream school. This was an experience he did not enjoy. Reasons for not enjoying mainstream school link to concepts of power imbalances and lack of equitable dialogue (like Anahera) and what he considered arbitrary rules around uniform and use of time. He told me, “the only thing that I really missed out on at [School 1] and [democratic primary school] was the experience of mainstream schooling, which, having then had it, you know, I probably could have done without”. Jackson’s move was made because his family moved to an area where no democratic school was available. He describes the culture shock he felt during this transition:

It was a massive contrast. It was unbelievable [laughs]. [It] made me upset that other people didn’t have access to [democratic schooling]. And just, I mean, I think the biggest part for me in terms of the culture shock was (...) the stuff like seeing a student being reamed out by a teacher for having the wrong socks! And going well he’s probably got the wrong socks because, I don’t know [makes face] maybe their parents can’t afford to

buy him the correct socks (...) that was the biggest shock, that there was a real lack of, I guess, respect for students (...) and sort of this presumption of authority which teachers held.

Jackson felt that teachers at his mainstream school engaged in discipline without dialogue about causes and effects. His discussion linked strongly to the concept of social justice. The concluding statement in this quote shows his shock at the lack of respect for students and the presumption of authority from teachers. Both Anahera's and Hannah's discussion also raised similar concepts. Comparatively, students at the democratic schools in this study felt respected and equal. Rules, staff members and other students were appreciated without a need for authority, achieved through dialogue rather than discipline.

It was not just alumni who struggled with a lack of social justice in schools, played out through the lack of respect for students and the presumption of authority from teachers. Paul, School 1a senior staff member, talked about his experiences going back to a mainstream school after teaching at a democratic primary school for seven years. He believed there was a focus on unnecessary discipline in mainstream schools, which limited learning opportunities. He told me:

The things that I found troubling about going back into state school, were mostly just tied to being asked to police things, you know, uniform, time, stuff that actually doesn't matter, you know. And very little, actually surprisingly little, focus on teaching and learning was the thing I found challenging.

This is an interesting observation that leans towards concepts of social control versus learning and transformation. Samuel had similar concerns with the focus on discipline over learning at mainstream schools. I asked him why he chose to work at a democratic school. He

told me that after teaching in mainstream schools for some years, he felt disenfranchised by the system and decided to leave teaching. His answer reflects concepts around respecting students and building positive relationships for learning:

I decided to leave teaching because I was just a cog in this machine. And I couldn't actually—there was a gap for me between what teaching, what I believed education could be and what I was having to deliver. You know, like if a student walked in with the wrong shoes on, the first thing I had to do in my job was put them on detention. So, I'm starting every class with pissing off half the class. Which just got me down, so I'd decided to leave.

Paul's observation of less focus on teaching and learning in mainstream schools and Samuel's on the difference in establishing relationships for learning is fascinating, particularly with respect to Anahera's experience at her secondary mainstream school, and the observations of other alumni and staff that wider society assumed the opposite about schools where students were given freedom to manage their own learning. Alumni from School 1/1a talked about the types of assumptions they encountered from people who didn't understand democratic schooling. I asked Brooke what people tend to ask her when they find out she went to democratic primary and secondary schools:

How much weed we smoked [laughs] (...) but I think when you kind of explain it, most people are like 'wow that's excellent'. Especially now, I think most people just ask how it even worked and why did I bother going to any classes and, I'm like, well I didn't for a while and then that got boring [laughs].

Brooke's answer illustrates a lack of general understanding of both the general maturity of young people towards their own learning and the democratic schooling environment. All alumni who I asked this responded with similar sentiments. However, Brooke's sentence starting with "especially now", indicates a changing attitude among the wider community towards this type of pedagogy. Her comment that people questioned why she attended classes is fascinating and raises questions about why people assume students might want to miss classes. This appears to support the theme supported in Paul's and Samuel's comments of a focus on learning rather than policing "stuff that actually doesn't matter" in democratic schools. Hannah and Anahera both felt let down in their learning by staff at their mainstream school and so choose to attend democratic school to improve their learning. Brooke described that when she did choose not to attend classes at democratic school it got boring, indicating that she both enjoyed learning and learned from her choices.

Hugo's answer to the question of what people tend to ask him about democratic schooling seems to support the concept raised by Brooke, that over time and with greater understanding, democratic schooling will become less stigmatised. It also supports Anahera's comments highlighting misunderstandings of democratic education. He commented "I think there is still a general stigma with [this type of] schooling, this will change with time when people realise truly what it is. As with all things people tend to rebuke things unknown or different to what they experienced." Most alumni and staff interviewed told me they were keen to participate, to help get the information about the positive qualities of democratic schooling more widely known and to help overcome much of the stigma and misunderstandings out there.

It was particularly striking to me that when experiences at mainstream state schools were discussed it was with respect to harm caused. Conversely, this was not the case with respect to their democratic schools. At democratic school the biggest challenge for the students was also one of highest value for them to learn; being learning how to manage the freedom of agency. It is notable that for Anahera the hardest thing for her in attending democratic school was having faith she was in the right place. That is understandable when attitudes such as those discussed above were prevalent. Many alumni noted having to deal with misperceptions about the school leading to an erroneous reputation. However, alumni enjoyed their schooling experience and attributed the experiences and learning gained at democratic school to successful social, emotional and career outcomes. I asked the alumni if they ever had any regrets attending democratic school. The verdict was unanimously NO. Caitlin's answer was typical of all School 1/1a alumni. She stated “**Absolutely not. 100% No! Lock it in with bold!** [laughs]”.

The key themes discussed above are summarised in Table 10, below.

Table 10

Key Themes from Discussion on why Students Choose to Attend Democratic School

Themes emerging from the data
<i>Reasons for choosing and staying in democratic school</i>
Seeking dialogue to discuss learning options and find solutions to learning issues
Focus on learning rather than discipline and rules
Students felt respected and equal
Deliberative dialogue to achieve understanding and respect of rules, staff and peers
Being supported to speak for yourself rather than having adults speak for you
<i>Reasons for leaving mainstream school</i>
Upset by power imbalances, inequitable dialogue, arbitrary and unnecessary rules at mainstream schools.
Feelings of harm caused at mainstream schools
People tend to judge democratic schooling through a traditional school lens without experiencing it

Unhappy Experiences at Democratic School

The theme of support coming through strongly in the School 1/1a data in Chapter Five, was less dominant in the School 2 data. Nonetheless, all but one participant from both schools valued their democratic schooling experiences (I note the focus of the research on positive outcomes would have influenced this; see Limitations of the Study, Chapter Nine). Sally, from School 2, highlighted a lack of support as being the key cause for not enjoying her time at democratic school.

My interview with Sally allowed me to view democratic schooling from the perspective of someone who did not have a positive experience. Sally attended School 2 in 1980, for only one year, being 3rd Form (Year 9): her first year of high school. She came from a home where she felt neglected by her mother, and her father worked a lot, telling me, “I had a father that was a workaholic, a mother that was mental, absolutely mental”. Compounding an already stressful childhood, Sally had been sexually abused by a family friend since the age of 8, was eventually raped and became pregnant at the age of 12. This was the same age she started at School 2. Sally is unsure why she started at School 2. She remembers only that the move to School 2 was pushed by her mother, was unsupported by her father, and that she attended for only one year (Form 3 / Year 9, her only high school education), after a very difficult final year at intermediate.

The theme of harm caused at mainstream school also came through strongly in Sally’s interview. She had not had a good experience at her previous school. She felt bullied by her Form 2 teacher and unheard by both the school and her mother. “I had been really bullied by a teacher in Form 2, severely bullied. And I don’t know, I don’t remember my mother ever – I mean she just turned a blind eye to most everything that happened to me.”

Sally talked to me about her experiences at both mainstream education and democratic school. She said the lack of support she needed was experienced across both environments. She noted “it wasn’t just [School 2], it’s the schools on the whole, that too many people are falling through the cracks.” Sally recounted to me a particularly harrowing event that occurred during her last year in mainstream school, where she considered her teacher had misused his authority and punished her unfairly and unnecessarily. After that event she felt so humiliated and was so angry that she sat down and wrote a letter to her teacher, explaining everything that she had been

experiencing at home. Unfortunately, her teacher's response to this letter was dismissive and unsupportive. Sally explained:

[The teacher] said right, you're gonna stay behind and do [the work], and I was just so angry (...). This was the last humiliation. So, I thought right, so I wrote everything that was going on at home and with my mother, everything. Went up, I stood there, he read it, screwed it up, started laughing at it, threw it in the bin and said don't ever pass notes in the class again. And that was it. I don't know how I got through. I'd had sexual abuse; I'd had all sorts of stuff happen to me up to that point. But I think that was just for me, 'oh my god, I've just told something that you should be doing something about, and you've just screwed it up and laughed at me'. And it was like, my counsellor thinks that I completely shut down as far as learning went after that, because I just didn't learn, because I didn't have, I had no confidence.

Sally felt unheard and unsupported. Although Sally recalled her mother as being largely neglectful, she did recall her mother talking to the school about the possibility of Sally moving to a new class. This was declined by the school.

Shy and withdrawn, suffering severe and ongoing trauma, Sally started high school at School 2, a school some distance from her home and where she knew no one. Previous experiences at her mainstream school meant she was already disengaged. She told me she was unable to adjust to the freedoms and self-responsibility needed to navigate the agency at School 2. She continued to feel unsupported and choose to withdraw further by not attending classes at all. She told me she would generally only attend for half an hour a day:

I wasn't one of these kids that was gonna say, hey, look, I'm struggling here can someone help me? I was really shy, and I think I was probably feeling a lot of shame because I knew what was going on in my outside world. So, I probably kept away from people to avoid having to, you know, have that discussed.

As Sally did not have the family support needed and did not feel confident talking to anyone about what was going on for her, formal support avenues were vital. Unfortunately, nobody approached her about what was going on and her absences went unaddressed until raised at a parent-student-teacher meeting towards the end of the school year. After this she was removed from all schooling completely and taken to Australia by her father where she had her baby at the age of 13.

The Need for Relational Support

Sally believes that what is needed to help students like herself, at both her mainstream school and School 2, was a system that ensured children and students were both heard and supported. She talked about needing a team approach, and communication between students, staff, and parents, that included the students being heard. She also talked about the need for strong relationships to establish open, trusting communication. While Sally's comments below are not specific to School 2, they highlight things that Sally felt was missing throughout her schooling. What struck me particularly about Sally's experiences and words were that what she was seeking, was in fact the things that alumni from School 1/1a felt were prominent in their schooling: support, respectful dialogue and communication, equitable and respectful relationships between staff, parents and student, and students being genuinely listened to. She told me:

I think that teachers need to work more with students. And students need to work more with parents, with the teachers and vice versa, to get the communication going, so they can hear between the lines, and stop leaving these, the kids that are scared or going through something, stop leaving them at the bottom. give them some responsibility and include them because that's what I needed. I needed to be included (...) why didn't they come to you and say to you, what is it that you need and what, you know, how can we help you? You might, you might not have known but you would have thought, 'oh yeah, food for thought, what do I need?' And that's the same thing. They spoke for me, dragged me into counsellors, and she said would you like to talk without your parents here? Huh? I'm not talking. I'm not talking. I'm not, I don't even know you. I'm not gonna sit here and start opening up to somebody like you.

Sally also made brief mention of the behaviours of some of the other students at School 2. She talked of “kids growing up too fast (...) we were all smoking.” Joanna, who started at School 2 in 6th Form (Year 12) described her first day there, after being asked to leave her mainstream school. “My first day of school at School 2, I got bundled up in a car with about nine other kids and they took me up to Mount Eden and got me stoned off my tree.” While Joanna still values her time at [School 2] despite the not so positive start, she seems to be one of many who attended because they were disenfranchised from mainstream environment.

Participants felt that the overwhelming number of students who came to School 2 already struggling, alongside a reluctance to make any major structural changes over time, impacted on the eventual closure of the school. Ex-staff member, Maree explains, “it did need to change, it needed to review its philosophies because it was still very much held in that 70s thinking, and the

rest of the world was changing. The kids were changing.” Maree also talked about the declining involvement of parents in the school. “So, at the beginning, I remember when I was there, there were a lot of really involved parents who were really supportive. And then we didn't see so many parents turning up.” Many alumni and staff felt that while the school was good for disenfranchised students, the increasing number of them tipped the balance, meaning the support systems there were unable to cope with the demand. School 2 alumna, Catherine, told me:

Schools at the time had, they had to, if they excluded or expelled someone, they had to find another school for them to go to (...) And so, a lot of those students ended up at [School 2] because [School 2] didn't really have an enrolment policy. And so, you got quite a few students who had really struggled in other schooling systems, coming into a system where there was actually a lot of self-responsibility, and it didn't always work for them. And so they, you know, in some ways, I think they probably thought it was great, you know, hang out, smoke and hang out at the park and not go to classes if they didn't want to, and all of those things.

Staff member, Leo supported Sally's view that there wasn't enough support at the school. While overwhelmingly he supported the ethos of the school and wished more schools were democratic, he did have a ready answer when I asked him if there was anything he would have changed about School 2:

I think we probably weren't as strong as we could have been in pastoral care (...) Because some kids never engaged. And we had kids who wouldn't come to school. And, you know, those were kids who probably had big needs, that we, I mean, we tried to engage them, but we probably could have done more.

Leo's reflective answer links directly to Sally's story. She never engaged, didn't attend school, and had big needs that needed adult support. Leo suggested that the school could have built stronger systems to engage and build relationships with students:

I was kind of disappointed when I realised that, you know, some of my colleagues were actually just swinging the lead. It was an environment where if you—where you could coast along and just get along on your individual charisma or whatever. Whereas, you know, really what you needed to be doing was thinking really hard all the time, about how you engage with this kid, how you find something that they're, that, that the really difficult ones are going to latch on to. And it might be that you go outside, you know, the simple method might be, as I said, you go outside, and you sit out in the sun on the benches outside and smoke cigarettes and talk shit with, or you play 4-Square or whatever.

His suggestions align directly with the expectations of homeroom teachers at School 1/1a, where time was formally timetabled for teachers to ensure they made informal contact with students one-on-one. Alumni at School 1 appreciated this time, as it helped build respectful relationships, opened communication, and helped them feel, in the words of Hannah, “not forgotten”. This also links to Sally's comments earlier about not trusting the counsellors she was taken too. She recalled thinking “I'm not talking. I'm not, I don't even know you.” She needed to talk with someone she trusted, someone who had taken the time to get to know her, listen to her and build a respectful relationship to open communication. This is what Leo is talking about in his quote, and what is described by alumni and staff at School 1 as being important to their positive experiences.

I asked Maree if students at School 2 had a specific teacher who looked out for them, such as a homeroom or whānau teacher. She told me students and staff were assigned to homerooms, but attendance was not compulsory:

We had a homeroom situation. So, I think we would have a meeting every day with a little cohort of students, but again, you know, [it would] be touch and go about how many would turn up, and the value they might see in it. (...) So, we'd have our little groups, and that'd be across ages. You know, so we're trying to encourage sort of the older students to look after the younger ones. So that was a sort of a nice horizontal way of sort of creating community as well. And it was an expectation that a lot of those older students would have those roles, you know, modelling behaviours.

Two things in this answer strike me as particularly interesting. Her words “the value they might see in it” are pertinent. The data shows that a strong sense of community was felt within both schools, created through avenues such as the school meetings and the need for collaboration to get projects and ideas up and running (which also helped link students with shared interests). Interest and curriculum level-based classes, rather than age-based, also helped build mixed aged relationships among students (particularly noticeable in School 1 data). Maree seems to have recognised that some students may not have seen the value of needing homeroom classes to further strengthen relationships with peers. Homeroom classes could have been seen as a tokenistic gesture, not needed in an environment already encouraging of meaningful mixed-age collaboration.

Maree's discussion on homeroom classes indicated a focus on building community (something already established as happening anyway), over the focus on individual support. Her

words “so we’re trying to encourage sort of the older students to look after the younger ones” indicate a focus on student-student relationships with these classes rather than staff-student. As Leo and Sally suggest more individual support from staff could have been a positive addition for School 2 students. A difference is noticeable here between School 1 and School 2. At School 1 homebase teachers were chosen by students (helping to ensure a trusting relationship) and a primary role of homebase teachers was to provide *individual* support through getting to know their students and building trusting relationships, with timetabled teacher hours dedicated to this.

Adjusting to Democratic Schooling

Belinda, who like Sally arrived at School 2 after feeling disenfranchised from mainstream school and coming from difficult home circumstances, had a very different experience. More confident than Sally and with stronger external relationships, she thrived on the independence:

I loved it there (...) I went to school and learned what I needed to learn. And I actually had a job as well. But I loved the way I could go to school and learn what I wanted to learn. And then get out of school and do what I needed to do.

Early in her secondary schooling, following the death of her father, Belinda was taken from her mother’s care and put in a group home. It was during this time that she attended School 2. Like Sally she was only there for one year, after which she was involuntarily returned to mainstream schooling. Belinda said she thrived during that year, learned communication skills, engaged in discussions about society, built strong relationships, and participated in both extra-curricular and academic learning:

But I would have stayed at [School 2] (...) 'cause it was so, alternative on learning (...)
It's just how I learned. And I think that's a big thing about [School 2] (...) I think there

were some that were naughty, you know. But, hey, if they were also encouraged by pottery, we did pottery, I loved that, you know, Art, music, loved that. We had great conversations in the common room. That was where we'd sit down, and we'd all talk about stuff (...) it was free speech, freedom of speech and freedom of how we felt about society, how we felt things were going.

School 1a staff member Paul, noted that while some students fall into the culture of democratic schooling straightaway, others can take a while to adjust to the freedoms, and the need for self-management and building strong relationships. Paul recognises that different students come with different needs and as such different levels of support to help them adjust are needed. He told me, “for some kids, they get it straightaway, it's inside two weeks, they've made friends and they get the school, and for others, it can take two, three years of kind of deschooling before they've sort of got it.”

Samuel's discussion also linked to this concept of deschooling raised by Paul. Samuel talked about a tension that some students and families have, as they struggle to let go of traditional expectations of schooling:

They have, I guess, trouble letting go of their models of education (...) And that's that tension that some families have, or students have around, tying back to traditionalism, I guess. And that's where, that's where most of the tension happens inside our system (...) I do hold a belief, though, that if you're patient, and you invest in that relationship, and you get to know the kid that over time, you can shift them and we do, we do shift most of them. It just takes, you know, three, four years to get them there.

Xavier's quote in the previous chapter (see the section titled Staff Views on What was Valuable for Students) expressed notions of external versus internal control, and self- versus external motivation. Interestingly, Xavier was the newest staff member interviewed, having taught at School 1a for just under 2 years, with no other democratic school experience. While obviously seeing benefits in democratic schooling, Xavier was the only participant interviewed from School 1 who raised concerns about how the school did on national qualification measures. Other staff (and students) considered success along different measures, including a clear pathway into the workforce or higher education, as being more important than achieving NCEA. Possibly this relates to this same process of deschooling. Samuel and Paul both noted that not only students but also staff and whānau often needed time to adjust mindsets around loci of control and successful outcomes in democratic schooling.

Both Samuel and Paul noted it was easier for students who started at democratic school at a young age to learn the interpersonal, relationship, self-responsibility and communication skills needed to navigate a democratic system, but with time nearly all students were able to learn these. Bethany told me that, at School 1/1a, due to the strong relationships between staff and students, which fostered open communication, staff were aware of students who were having difficulties, be it either within the school or outside of the school and were able to address their needs directly.

I asked Samuel how staff at School 1a addressed students who were disengaged from learning. His answer again links to Leo's suggestion (above) about what was needed at School 2, that staff need to take responsibility to notice disengaged students and build connections with those students to help support them appropriately:

I would say inside our leadership group, we're really aware of that kind of stuff. And we hold that belief that it takes time. Like a lot of adults can't do, effectively, the stuff we're asking kids to do. And who knows what's going on in their world beyond school. We try to be patient with a 'keep trying to make that connection, find out that spark and start', you just slowly nudge them towards it. And I think they, as they engage with it, as that old adage 'experience a little bit of success, that builds a little bit more engagement'. You know? There's not many who graduate, finish at the end of year 13, who we haven't managed to find a way through that.

Again, there is a very strong ethic of care and support in Samuel's words. Staff at School 1/1a appear to view their roles from a student-centred standpoint. They understand that each student comes with a unique background which may not always be shared, and that it takes connections and interest to engage in learning.

Despite Joanna's not so positive beginning (discussed in the previous section), she valued her time at School 2, particularly noting the learning she gained from participating in the school meetings, and in building communication and interpersonal skills. Sally also had some positive memories of School 2, including an appreciation of the environment, saying, "I loved, I loved that it was an old house. Yeah. I loved it. I loved that. Not having that school, you know, classroom sort of feeling I loved that". She built a strong friendship with another student and valued some of the staff there. She remembered enjoying going on a school camp and was particularly positive about the school meetings. "I remember we had like school meetings and that, and I really enjoyed that. And I think, had I been motivated, that was an awesome, awesome thing about the school.". Again, the concepts of communication and community apply here.

It was important for Sally that I make it clear that she did not want to make School 2 look bad. She only wanted her story to be heard and learned from. Sally also noted that the relaxing nature of the school, the structure and the school meetings were things she would like to see other schools adopting. She told me: “it’s not to make them look bad (...) the meetings, how they got together, and I really loved that. And I think that that should, that could work well in schools”.

Sally was the only one of 23 participants who was unhappy at democratic school (although it is noted that her discontent started prior to enrolling in democratic school). All other participants spoke very fondly about democratic schooling, with most expressing a feeling of privilege at having the opportunity. The obvious bias of the research focus on positive outcomes is noted (see Limitations of the Study, Chapter Nine), nonetheless, it is also noted that I had an overwhelming initial response to my requests for research participants, particularly for School 2 (see Generation and Collection of Data, Chapter Three). In the end I interviewed only 43% of the total respondents to my initial posts (55% of initial respondents from School 1/1a and 35% of initial respondents from School 2). The next section discusses the experiences of participants who thrived at School 2.

Thriving at School 2

Like alumni from School 1, those from School 2 (other than Sally) really valued their experiences at democratic school. When I asked Catherine to tell me about School 2, her words resonated with those of Caitlin from School 1. Like Caitlin, Catherine loved attending secondary school and wanted to go to school every day:

It was an amazing place for me (...) I loved school, I would go every day, even if I was sick, you know, it would be like, I'd have to be bedridden to not go. And we lived [far away] so it was a big trip in and out each day (...) it was quite an effort to get there, but I never missed a day of school. Fantastic relationship with the staff, you know, just really felt like you knew them, and they knew you (...) just everyone who was involved with the school were really neat people. And really interesting group of other students, you know, in terms of really diverse (...) I guess the thing with [School 2] that, you know, really sticks in my mind was that sense of it was a kind of a shared experience (...) we felt as students that we were on an equal kind of power base with staff. And we had, you know, these school meetings where all these decisions were made, in school meetings, and things like timetable was done each term and whoever wanted to be part of the timetabling process could be part of it, so I used to help with doing the timetable and (...) if we wanted to learn something we could say (...) then we'd timetable that into the timetable.

Catherine's description of her experiences and feelings about School 2 resonate with that of most of the other alumni interviewed. It was interesting that despite the different time periods, regions, and structures of the schools, one can see very similar concepts and themes running through the data from both schools. Again, we can see the concept of relationships coming through. Catherine highlights this term directly, describing relationships as a two-way thing, noting it "really felt like you knew them, and they knew you". This indicates some vulnerability on the side of staff. Again, this was something discussed by School 1 alumni, who felt being able to understand teachers as people was important in establishing trust. It also links to the concept of roles not status

discussed previously, as while teachers built relationships with students and showed their human side, they still maintained the professionalism of their role as a responsible and supportive adult. The idea of roles not status, and its link to the concept of equity raised previously is raised again by Catherine. In Catherine's words, "we felt as students, that we were on an equal kind of power base with staff", we can see recognition that while the different roles came with different power the notion of equality was felt. Themes of equity and social justice are strongly implied here.

Other key concepts arising in Catherine's quote include diversity, shared experience, and decision-making. Diversity is something that has been valued by all participants. It links to allowing students to be who they are and valuing individuality. While valuing diversity and individuality, Catherine also appreciated the feeling of shared experience the democratic school offered. Again, this inherent link between individuality and community arises, as well as the theme of decision-making. Catherine appreciated being able to be involved in meaningful decision-making that directly impacted on her own learning as well as contributed to the school environment.

Pete's memories of School 2 resonated with Catherine's. Perhaps less extroverted than Catherine, Pete spent more of his unscheduled time outside of class reading or learning through exploring the city around him. Notably, a key factor for establishing School 1/1a in the city centre was to allow students easier access to the learning resources the centre offered:

I really thrived on, you know, going into town (...) typically, I'd go there, love to read (...) we had a small clique of friends who were probably very similar (...) freedom was the key thing. We, my brother and myself, are both academic. So as such, our focus, and certainly my focus was always on, at school, 'I'm gonna get my School Certificate, I'm

gonna get my UE' (...) you would determine what you wanted to go to. So, you'd set up your timetable. I'd go along to my classes, and then the rest of the time, I'd be quite happily enjoying [the city]; going to the museum, you know, going to the zoo, things like that. And really just sort of finding how to make my way around town; sort of learn.

For Pete the freedom of democratic schooling was fundamental. Again, the concepts raised by Pete here reiterate those arising in the School 1 interviews; decision-making and opportunity to learn from your own mistakes in a safe, supportive environment:

Fundamentally, I think the key thing was that freedom to make your own decisions, to learn from your own mistakes, but in a relatively safe environment, where you actually had teachers who are looking out for you, to help you to shape that direction.

At the end of the interview, I asked Pete if there was anything else he thought people should know about democratic schools. Again, his answer endorsed that of other alumni from both schools. He wanted people to know that democratic schools not only work, they also do a lot of good for a diverse range of students:

Simply the fact that it can work. I mean, I see myself, I'm a head of department at [a university in the top 10 globally], and a product of that environment. It definitely can work. I stay in touch with that core group of people I knew back then. I see a lot of well-balanced individuals. And I think there's a lot that can be offered through that. And I think certainly schools like that can take kids who would have had no future otherwise. And, you know, it gives them a chance in life. And, you know, unfortunately, there was just one [School 2] in [that city]. And there was a huge number of kids who would have benefited from it. So, I think it's a sort of thing that, you know, there's definitely a place

for schools like that. And they can definitely do a lot of good. And as I say, I think, I certainly thrived on the environment and I look back incredibly fondly at my time at [School 2], and certainly relate to it very strongly over the years.

Pete's words here are reflective of the majority of participants from School 2. They remembered the school fondly, build strong ongoing relationships with staff and peers, appreciated the diversity of the student community, and wished more students had the opportunity to enjoy school like they did.

Key themes emerging from the previous two sections, additional those already highlighted in Chapter 4, are summarised in Table 11 below.

Table 11

Key Themes Emerging from School 2 data, Additional to Previous Themes Discussed

Themes emerging from the data
Students found huge benefits from rich community conversations and freedom of expressing feeling and opinion
Shared experience through equity, open dialogue, deliberation, and shared decision-making
Vulnerability on the side of staff allows students to understand staff as real people
Freedom to make your own decisions, learn from your mistakes in a safe environment, with teachers who look out for you and help you shape direction
Need reflective adaptive systems as society and community needs change
Need for a formalised system of ongoing informal and formal support for individual students with trusted adults
Need support and communication with parents and wider community

Summary

This chapter started with examining participant reflections on their reasons for attending democratic school and their experiences transitioning between mainstream and democratic school. It was obvious that alumni participating in this research overwhelmingly appreciated their schooling experiences and attributed a great many positive outcomes directly to the democratic pedagogy, structures, systems, environment, and community. Conversely Alumni who also attended mainstream schools recalled experiences of harm during their time in mainstream systems. The clear difference between social and emotional well-being being maintained (and in many cases being improved) at democratic school versus harm caused at mainstream school came through strongly in the data. However, unhappy experiences at democratic school did occur and participant recollections of such are discussed in the second section. This led to discussion on the need for relational support in school, which is explored in the following section, leading to the determination that student support and adaptive systems are vital to the ongoing success of a democratic school. Time needed to adjust to democratic school mindsets was then examined. The final section considered the experiences of participating alumni who thrived at School 2, which resonated with those of School 1/1a, with the addition of learning gained from democratic whole school meetings.

Following the constant comparative analysis methodology, in the next chapter I present more rigorous analysis of the data, looking particularly at relationships between the emerging concepts and themes. I first look at themes around inclusivity, partnership, and individual learning pathways, before considering the emerging themes of managing freedom, choice, and agency. After that, I look at concepts around collaboration, and individual and collective well-

being. I end the chapter with consideration of the actualisation of school values in everyday praxis.

Chapter Seven Digging Deeper into the Findings

Initial analysis of the data provided the primary themes arising from the valuable positive impacts a democratic school structure has on teenagers. It also raised more questions as I sought detail on the why and how of what was going on. In this chapter I look more closely into the themes emerging in the previous two chapters, particularly those for which questions were starting to emerge. In the first section, I analyse the themes of inclusivity and partnership, including consideration of links between these concepts and the opportunities for individual learning pathways available in the participating schools. Next, I explore the themes and concepts emerging from alumni experiences in managing freedom, choice, and agency. Learning how to navigate the agency democratic schooling offers students, having to think for yourself, and define your own educational pathway, were viewed both positively and as challenges. I then investigate the everyday praxis of school values. This is followed by exploration of links between collaboration, and individual and collective well-being. In the final section, I discuss the important interrelationship between and among the democratic structures and positive outcomes, and provide a summary of the findings.

Inclusivity, Partnership, and Individual Learning Pathways

I resume discussion from Chapter 5 (Staff Views on What was Valuable for Students) around the concept of inclusivity. School 1a staff member Paul talked of inclusivity as a direct and valued result of the school culture. He told me, “it doesn't matter, I guess, what you are, who you are, what you bring; you're just you and that's what matters”. Inclusivity was one of the characteristics of democratic secondary schools that the research participants particularly appreciated. The types of inclusiveness discussed previously include gender, sexuality, choice of

dress, personal expression, and age. The multicultural nature of Aotearoa New Zealand means that cultural inclusivity is an important issue. Partnership between Māori people as tangata whenua and other cultural groups must also be considered (Bishop & Glynn, 2000; Durie, 2011; Ministry of Education, 2013; Penetito, 2010; Walker, 2004).

An obviously vital aspect of any research on education in Aotearoa New Zealand is consideration of obligations to *te Tiriti o Waitangi*. Paul talked about staff working to embrace tikanga and te reo Māori and uphold *te Tiriti o Waitangi* obligations. Alongside this, Paul also talked about efforts to raise the profile of Pasifika students in the school. He told me “I don’t think we do it as well as we would like”. Alumna Anahera, talked about cultural acceptance from her perspective as a Māori student. She told me that rather than address her cultural needs per se, School 1 “aligned with some of my culture’s perspective”. Anahera noted that while at times she felt tokenised, she appreciated the opportunity to be able to both speak up and have her concerns addressed when she felt uncomfortable, something that had not happened at the mainstream institutions she attended:

It was still a very white institution, you know, (my mum was constantly being asked to be their cultural advisor), so, you know, it didn’t necessarily address my cultural needs but (...) it definitely gave me a little bit more room to be like ‘I’m uncomfortable with this, I wanna do something different’ and people were like ‘that’s okay’.

Both Paul’s comment, reflecting that more needed to be done, and Anahera’s discussing feeling able to speak up when she felt uncomfortable indicate an ethic of care within the school for meeting diverse needs, as well as *te Tiriti o Waitangi* obligations. Having the space to critically evaluate the process of the school, and express discomfort with something, is an

important step towards equity and, as Anahera indicated earlier (see *Transitioning Between Democratic and Mainstream School*, Chapter Six), a step up from what she was encountering at mainstream school. Paul indicated that the school recognised it needed to do more, and by creating partnerships with students and whānau is working towards meeting these cultural needs. Paul is showing that he understands that addressing the needs of minority or diverse groups requires communicating with those groups to ask them what they need and working closely with them to achieve those goals, rather than assuming for them. This approach is reflective of a critical pedagogy towards equity and social justice.

Hannah explained that the systems and support at School 1 helped her to improve her academic outcomes, despite her dyslexia. Alumnus from School 2, Stuart, also felt that the more inclusive and supportive environment at democratic school helped him achieve more. He talked about how the mishandling of his way of learning at his mainstream primary school caused him to completely shut down in the mainstream schooling environment. He told me that after completely disengaging in mainstream school because of learning difficulties, he felt democratic school saved his life:

It saved my life. It absolutely saved my life. God only knows where I would have ended up, like I say, if I'd gone to [mainstream secondary school] (...) And especially with the fact that my education shut down in primary school. Obviously, the purpose of being at school is to learn and if I'm there, when you're not learning, especially in a standard issue classroom, if, like you get kids that are just too smart and it's boring, or you get kids who like me, we just, whatever my situation was, so they'd be the troublemakers. So, yeah,

and then, I guess you start acting out and everything. But yeah, yeah, saved my life, absolutely saved my life.

Stuart also referred to inclusivity when reflecting on the most valuable thing about attending democratic school, telling me: “just being shown that I didn’t have to fit in. There was that flexibility that, as much as not having to fit in, that fact that no one else did. And so, it wasn’t an issue.”

I was also curious about socio-economic differences and directly asked some of the participants about this. Alumni talked about peers coming from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, and parents with a diverse range of jobs (something the school tried to include in learning programmes for students by inviting parents into the school or visiting their workplaces). Staff member, Bethany told me she appreciated the differences within the school:

That's what I really love about it, is that, you know, we've got the child of a billionaire at the school, and we've got people that we have to help with bus cards each week. There is that variety, and yet you would never know it, and the students, you know, wouldn't really understand that vast difference. There's just enough room for everyone to have their own backgrounds and their own personalities here. And it's a safe place. It's a safe place for quite a few students (...) This is their safe place.

Bethany links inclusivity to safety, reinforcing the notion that students do not have to hide their backgrounds or personalities to fit in. Everyone can just be who they are. This indicates another building block towards equity and social justice. Bethany reflects that socio-economic differences within the school, while vast, are not highly noticeable. I again note that both secondary schools were non-fee paying, designated character or state-integrated schools.

This allowed students from any socio-economic background to attend, and alumni interviewed were proud to not be a private school as they considered this would be neither inclusive, nor democratic.

While listening to the interviews I wondered if there was a link between inclusivity, individual learning journeys and the noted absence of bullying at School 1. I addressed this directly with some of the participants. In general, those I asked felt there may be some truth to this theory. Staff member, Samuel told me:

I think there's probably a degree of truth in that. Like (...) I've got this Year 13 [student] in a curriculum level 4 class I'm running, in which most of the students in it are Year 7 and 8. The Year 13 student is comfortable being in there and other kids, like there's no kind of 'what are you doing in here, you loser'. It's like, that's just that person's journey right now. That's just the culture of the school. They're doing their thing. I'm doing my thing. Let's get on with it.

Samuel's quote here reinforces the notion that everyone is on their own learning journey, and that students understand that learning can be done in different ways and at different times. We do not all learn the same. His words "that's just that person's journey right now" are powerful and indicative of the emergent pathways and equitable culture of School 1. His quote reinforces a lack of judgement of others between students.

Bethany wrote to me after the interview, following time to reflect on our discussion. Her words encapsulated many of the concepts raised in the interviews of alumni and staff alike, including individuality, support, relationships, safety, and respect. She wrote:

A Community Leader at school recently overheard some students discussing our school. One mentioned academic results and another replied with something like 'yeah but at least they actually care about us here.' For me that is our school in a nutshell. We know our students, many of their caregivers, and they know us. We come together. Our school is a safe place to be ourselves, a safe place to learn and play, a safe place to aim high and a safe place to fail. We don't wear a uniform, but a number of people wear school hoodies because they want to. Another wore antlers and rainbow ribbons and flowing robes for Pride Day. We are equal and unique. Respect is our go to. We are one of the three places/communities that we all need in life and, for many, a happier place than home is.

While students at School 1/1a achieved well academically this was not always reflected in the nationwide national secondary school qualification (NCEA) results, as not all students at the school chose to sit these in entirety (or at all), bringing the overall school results down. Nonetheless, as most participants pointed out poor school-wide NCEA results do not reflect academic failure. Some students follow the standardised pathway through NCEA and on to higher education, some students progress straight into apprenticeships or paid work from secondary school, and others attain university or other tertiary education entrance without following the standard NCEA pathways. Samuel pointed out that individual learning paths make it very hard for staff to compare student successes, as success is defined individually rather than through comparisons with other students or achieving standardised qualifications. He told me:

We struggle with things like picking the Dux at our school, because there's not a metric that we find very easy to compare against. Success isn't managed by me being better at maths than the kid in the seat next to me, it's by me achieving the goals I've set for

myself. I think that has a huge impact on the overall community and culture of the school (...). And so, at our graduation, we farewell all of our leavers by standing up and talking about their journey and where they're going next. It's such a super inspiring night because you have (...) really personal learning stories. And it's really cool. And everyone's off and doing something (...) I think going back to that acceptance of stuff, when you see what they're leaving with, everyone's journey has been absolutely relevant and meaningful to them. So, they're not, I don't think they feel like they're missing out or competing against their peers. They're just doing their best for them.

Again, reinforced here is the focus on individual learning journeys, a redefinition of success to achieving individually based goals, and a non-competitive, accepting school culture resulting from this approach. Samuel notes “everyone’s journey has been absolutely relevant and meaningful to them”; this, in itself, represents how inclusivity is managed within democratic schools.

Table 12 below summarised key themes emerging from the discussion on links between individual learning pathways and inclusiveness.

Table 12

Summary the links between individual learning pathways and inclusivity

Themes emerging from the discussion
Inclusivity is a direct and valued result of the school culture
Students appreciated the opportunity to be able to both speak up and have their concerns addressed if they felt uncomfortable
The culture of the school reinforced that each person had a different learning journey
The focus on dialogue and discussion was a key factor in inclusivity
Individual and diverse learning paths made it very hard for staff and students staff compare students
Success is defined individually rather than through comparisons with other students or achievement on standardised qualifications
Success is managed by students achieving the goals they've set for themselves. That has an impact on the overall community and culture of the school
Everyone's journey has been absolutely relevant and meaningful to them. So, they're not missing out or competing against their peers. They're just doing their best for them

Managing Freedom, Choice, and Agency

Despite freedom of choice and student agency being defining features of this type of school, it was not actually a primary talking point for School 1 students at initial stages of the interviews, rather something I had to question them about. While staff expected that freedom was what students most valued, alumni appeared to view it as an important tool that led to the positive outcomes and experiences, they most appreciated, such as community. Alumni were also very aware of the difficulties associated with freedom, choice, and agency. Caitlin had quite a nuanced view towards freedom:

I don't wanna say freedom, 'cause it's not freedom. Freedom is a very loaded term. I think it's more like, mmmmm, oh, I just gotta think of another word 'cause I want it to

really mean what I want it to mean [sighs]. It's like having that space to be able to be a teenager, but also to be able to make your own decisions.

This is such an interesting quote from one of the youngest participants. Alumni talked a lot about having opportunity to develop critical thinking skills. This quote, exemplifying Caitlin's deliberation of the term freedom is indicative of the type of deep thinking most of the participating alumni partook in. Caitlin's consideration of the concept of freedom in relation to her schooling is thought-provoking. Rather than freedom, Caitlin believes the school/s offered space; space to be a teenager and space to make your own decisions. I was curious how important this space was in student learning journeys.

Space to be a Teenager

I felt it worthy to further investigate Caitlin's idea of "space to be able to be a teenager". Something struck me about this concept and the way Caitlin expressed it that seemed important and profound. I reflected on the data already collected. Brooke had talked about students choosing to play e-games rather than attend classes, and I had asked her if she knew whether teachers addressed that or left the students to themselves. She answered:

I feel like there was always really good support at the school. And there was always someone that could connect with students, for sure. So, yeah, I think giving time and space would have been part of the process for some students.

Brooke's answer reinforced the importance of relationships in the success of the school and reiterated the notion of support permeating throughout the findings and ethic of care discussed in the previous section. Her reference to freedom of time and space being part of the process for some students seemed to fit with what Caitlin was saying. I was still intrigued. I was

curious about the idea of downtime in school being of benefit to students' mental health and well-being. I decided to write to the participants I had already interviewed to ask them about their views on this directly.

Downtime is not Wasted Time

Both Hannah and Jackson replied to my email. I found their answers enlightening. Having answered via email I can assume both participants had more time to think carefully about their answer than in an interview situation. Furthermore, they had had time to reflect on our previous interview. Both Jackson and Hannah agreed that downtime in the safe environment of the school was important to their positive mental and emotional well-being. Hannah talked about having time to chill, as well as time to engage in other interests. She wrote:

I think the flexibility to have chill/down time def helped my mental health! The downtime also allowed for more creative and individual thought/projects, which I think was really important. It's what allowed me to do science fair and explore that interest as well as take singing lessons which was def just for enjoyment. I really appreciated the glide time we had, where we had to do 6 hours at school, but we could then choose to work from 10-4 or even 5 if we wished or start at 8am and finish at 2pm. I really appreciated this; as a teenager I was not a morning person at all! A lot of kids turned up early and stayed late, maybe for the free internet, but I think as well as a safe place to just hang out.

Here Hannah links downtime to being able to pursue creative projects, as well have time for individual and creative thought. Again, Hannah reiterates that she considered the school a safe place to be.

Jackson started by comparing the downtime he got at democratic school to his experiences at mainstream school. He wrote:

Speaking from the experience of having spent my last year of schooling at a mainstream school in Australia with decidedly less freedom (...) having downtime is incredibly important. Although I did not realise it until later, being able to have down time without having to justify to every teacher you encounter that you're "on spares" (etc) went a really long way to making you feel like you were safe in your environment. It's the feeling of being presumed as bad, untrustworthy, incompetent, and having to prove otherwise to somebody with no evidence to support their assumption.

What strikes me as particularly interesting here is Jackson's association of not having to justify himself with the feeling of being safe in the school environment. It perhaps seems somewhat counterintuitive when considered within a mainstream framework. From the data it is evident that the safe space alumni talk about is one where they are trusted, respected, and supported to manage themselves, as opposed to one where your time, place and even clothing is prescribed and monitored. Hannah talked about a safe space alongside her discussion on glide time. Jackson linked safe space to trust and not having to justify his location.

Trust and understanding are key elements of Jackson's comparison of feeling "presumed as being bad, untrustworthy [and] incompetent" when having to justify his downtime versus it being "expected, understood and encouraged" at democratic school. He appears to link being given freedom and agency to feeling trusted and competent. At democratic school he was trusted to be making wise decisions around his use of time. Important in this practice of trust is the

notion previously mentioned that the sampled schools had a focus on learning, rather than being in class. Jackson continued:

In a school where downtime is expected, understood, and encouraged, your presence is not a nuisance, it's valid and supported. Not only this, but because each individual homebase learning advisor had significant involvement in their students, if a student has excessive downtime without learning outcomes, that is noticed and addressed in a constructive and supportive way. As a result, downtime for downtime's sake is accepted and supported when the student is still reaching their own learning goals. Excessive downtime, which I imagine many might worry about in dem schools, is addressed in a way which empowers the student to better reach their own goals. It's a pretty great indicator of somebody's engagement, where if they're being shuttled from class to class on a mandatory schedule, you cannot identify and deal with lack of engagement.

Ultimately, it comes right back to the notion of respecting the student as a fully formed human, and acknowledging their thoughts, feelings, and aspirations as valid, and working to facilitate positive outcomes.

There is a lot to unpack here. Concepts discussed previously, including relationships, equity, respect, dialogue, empowerment, and support, all link to Jackson's answer. New concepts also emerge in this quote. The first sentence, "in a school where downtime is expected, understood and encouraged, your presence is not a nuisance, it's valid and supported" is worthy of being restated. Concepts emerging from this are dignity, belonging and a feeling of significance. Rather than being questioned and constantly needing to justify themselves, the trust given to students that they are making the correct decisions for their own individual needs,

alongside an understanding that non-scheduled time can be a positive thing (i.e., “downtime is expected, understood and encouraged”) helps students feel “valid and supported”. Jackson’s answer is reflective of the ‘trust first, support if needed’ model alumni and staff explained initially and the importance of respectful relationships in managing that. He notes that the relationships built between the homebase teacher and the student, allow room for staff to identify students who need help managing excessive downtime.

The concept of equity is again at play here, in a way that seems to be a reverse of processes in mainstream schools. *All* students are trusted to manage their own time. Learning advisors are charged with noticing students not meeting their learning goals and addressing this in what Jackson assumes will be “a constructive and supportive way”. Jackson suggests a misuse of downtime indicates students who may need support and empowerment. Conversely, in Jackson’s mainstream school students felt they were constantly expected to justify themselves. Jackson also wonders how teachers can identify students needing extra support when students are “being shuttled from class to class on a mandatory schedule”. Essentially, Jackson’s quote appears to indicate that the sameness in mainstream schools does not create an equitable environment. He also highlights that downtime is important in building relationships with students and identifying if support is needed.

Samuel also explained that the school gives all students a large degree of trust and then builds supports around students who struggle to manage themselves within that trust. This appears to be the opposite approach to how participants described their mainstream school environments. In mainstream, the more common experiences participants described appeared to be control as a first step. In democratic schools’ students experienced trust as a first, with extra

support, managed through dialogue, if you struggled with the trust. This is an essential difference. Samuel told me:

We start with, from a position of trust and—go and explore your learning—and if you are demonstrating that you're struggling to manage that, then part of our job is to support you to get better at it.

Obviously, what Samuel describes here is what students experienced. This matching of rhetoric and experience was, in itself, something that particularly struck me. This is discussed further in *Walking the Talk, Living the Values*, later in this chapter.

I used the word downtime to define unscheduled time however after speaking to participants and reflecting on their response's, downtime seemed the wrong word and my initial use of it was perhaps indicative of my own mainstream school biases of any time not in scheduled class or extra-curricular activity being for breaks and/or being unproductive. While not in classes, students still used this unscheduled time productively. This was indicated by the expectation of positive outcomes coming from this freedom of space and time, implied in both Hannah's and Jackson's answers above. Caitlin talked about using unscheduled time to ask follow-up questions or seek help with topics she wasn't understanding:

But that's why those breaks were really good because they're teaching and then they're just kind of like, sitting at the tables with you. And you're getting your stuff done. And then they can see that people aren't actually writing so they're like, can I help you. Does that make sense? Like, it's so, I don't want to say the word casual. It's like, more like informal. It's just keeping that conversation and dialogue going between the student and teacher.

It's important to make clear here that when Caitlin says “and then they’re just (...) sitting at the tables with you” she does not mean a situation one might expect in a single subject teaching classroom where the teacher is monitoring students doing project work for a particular assignment. Rather, these were breaks between formally scheduled classes where students were able to choose how and where to manage their time and often mixed with students and teachers across the school. Again, we see a focus on learning. Caitlin enjoyed the informal unscheduled time as it gave her opportunity to continue conversation and dialogue around her learning.

Finding Time to Support Students on Individual Learning Pathways

Being a teacher myself, I was struggling with the idea of how teachers managed their time to teach regular classes, monitor students on downtime and have weekly one-on-one meetings with homebase students, that were long enough to be effective. I asked alumni how teachers found time, but other than express to me that their teachers were wonderful, hardworking people, they could not enlighten me further. One of the first things I asked staff was how they found the time to achieve all this, on top of a teaching load. Samuel told me that the one-on-one time was part of their scheduled teaching hours, and because of this supportive approach students were more ready to learn in class. He explained:

As part of your 20 hours of contact, that's factored in. So, I know when I taught at my last school, my senior class, I'd have five hours a week with them. So here we have three hours a week with them and the additional hours we put into the one-to-one meetings, and more of that personalised side of what we do. So, that's the trade-off, less time in class, but more mentoring time. And then, because we've got that personal, that mentoring, so we don't have the same behaviour issues in class. I always felt I do as

much, cover as much content in three hours as I could in five hours. Because they're actually better set up to be in the class with me from the outset. I'm not trying to sell them where they need to be, because they've chosen to be there, what they're doing fits and whether they enjoy the subject or not, if it fits inside the goal they're trying to achieve, you've already won a lot of that battle. (...) And that other stuff is just part of our contact. We prioritise that so that the kids have someone who's available for them.

Samuel explains here that less teaching hours are needed for subject based teaching as the students in the class are wanting to learn and are ready to be in that class. Students having the choice of not being in class means less disruption than teachers would expect at mainstream school during formal subject teaching time. This aligns with alumni reflections that, as attending subject classes was optional, those who were in class were there to learn. The positive mental well-being alumni talked about would also lead to less disruptive classes and faster learning. Samuel also mentions “mentoring time”. It is interesting here that he refers to the LA time as mentoring, as this develops that role a little more. He explains that the trade-off for more one-on-one time over subject teaching time means personal matters that may have disrupted subject learning can be managed in the supportive one-on-one mentoring environment.

Paul also talked about the trust given to students: “We hand over some of that small stuff to the kids to manage, or their parents to manage, that normally schools are putting a huge focus on.” The concept of trust not only links to learning but also the policing of student time and of building meaningful relationships. Paul notes that many teachers initially find it difficult to align freedom and unstructured time with the concept of teaching or schooling:

I think there's another fear too, that they have to be seen to be doing real teaching, with teachers too. And so, as a leader, it's really hard to just say, 'hey, we're giving four hours a week to you to just run one-to-one meetings and no structure, no, don't expect to see anything out of that, just make sure those meetings take place'.

It's fascinating that Paul says, "we don't expect to see anything out of that". This may indicate an understanding of the worth of informal relationship building in the development of trust and understanding. It also links to the understanding of trust first, support if needed, and the notion that informal time is still valuable time. Some students talked of having coffee with their LA or taking a walk through the park during these meetings.

Choice Fatigue

I'd like to return to the theme emerging around Brooke's comment recognising the opportunity to have an introspective look at her own decision-making, discussed in Chapter Five (Alumni Views on the Most Valuable Things About Democratic Schooling). She expressed her appreciation for having the opportunity to practice and learn how to make meaningful decisions in a safe environment at a young age and highlighted the learning that took place over her time there as she moved from making decisions just because she could, or just for the fun of it, to making decisions based on meaningful outcomes that would benefit her longer term. Brooke also highlighted that having the freedom to make your own decisions at a young age can be a double-edged sword. Brooke was not the only alumnus to highlight that freedom, agency and choice were both valuable and challenging.

Hannah, Hugo, Brooke, Jackson, and Ryan all highlighted the self-discipline, and motivation needed to manage freedom, agency, and choice, as the hardest things about

democratic school, what Ryan described as “choice fatigue”. Nonetheless all of them also noted that having the opportunity to learn those skills in a safe, supportive environment was valuable and that they were glad they learned these things in their teens rather than once they started university or joined the workforce. Jackson talked about learning to deal with the consequences of poor self-discipline, or learning from them, telling me:

The hardest thing was self-discipline (...) And there were, there were a lot of times that I was very poorly self-disciplined, and that I didn't put in the work that I should have. But also, I was 14! You know? And I, you know dealt with whatever consequences there were for that. That was the reality of the situation. I learned from it. I grew from it.

Jackson was my 6th participant. By then I was becoming accustomed to hearing about both the benefits of learning how to manage freedom, agency, and choice at a young age, as well as managing this being among the hardest things of navigating your way through democratic school. I asked him directly whether he thought it better that he learned this self-discipline at secondary school:

Me: A lot of people have said the self-discipline has been the hardest thing, and I think perhaps it's probably a good place to learn that, because it's a safe environment, and if you learn that after you've finish school then you're really in trouble aren't you, wasting—

Jackson: Oh, hell yeah!

Me: Yeah?

Jackson: Hell yeah! Yeah, well that, I mean that's it isn't it? Like, much better to be learning what kinds of self-discipline do and do not work when you're at a publicly

funded, you know, state school, in an environment where you're supported by your peers, you know, educators and administration, than when you're paying, you know, 15 hundred dollars a paper, at a university and it's gonna go on your permanent educational record and be a GPA for the rest of your life.

The differentiation Jackson makes in the quote above, with regards to “what kinds of self-discipline do and do not work” indicates a mature and nuanced perspective on self-discipline, and the management of agency, freedom, and choice.

Alumni were pragmatic about taking responsibility for choices they made that perhaps were not in their best interest long-term. Ryan talks about long term impacts of avoiding mathematics and science classes. He concludes that his poor math and science knowledge reinforces the need to think through decisions thoroughly:

Like I am, my science is trash, my mathematics is trash. And although like, obviously it doesn't come up a heap, but it is like, still a factor (...) And so, I mean, I have no one to blame but myself. People did tell me like you should do like some of everything [laughs]. And I did not. But I mean, again, I guess ultimately, it just reinforces that, like, it's important to think through the decisions you make.

While Ryan understood that his mathematics and science skills could be improved, he was pragmatic about how this played out. His quote reinforces his appreciation of the social learning he gained from this lack of academic learning. Later in the interview Ryan was also pragmatic about his ability to learn these skills if and when he really needed them. Like other alumni he had faith in his ability to manage his own learning. Furthermore, Ryan pointed out that feeling like you missed out on learning may not be limited to those who only attended alternative schools, saying

“talking to people who went through conventional schooling, I don't think anyone feels like they did everything. And I suspect you probably can't do everything.”

Overall alumni agreed that while some of the more traditional knowledge they may have learned at mainstream school might have been missed, in the end this did not actually matter as not only had they learned how to learn, so could easily catch up on anything needed. They also learned other valuable skills and knowledge, which they believed to be more beneficial overall. I asked alumni if they felt they had missed out on anything by choosing democratic over mainstream school. Anahera and Brooke both answered no. Hannah felt she not only has not missed out on anything, but rather she did better at School 1. “I think I did way better. I think, I feel I missed out by not starting [democratic school] in Year 9.”

Other students were more nuanced. Jackson didn't feel like he personally missed out on anything, however noted that for other students there may have been gaps in knowledge that mainstream schools might have filled, noting “I guess in some cases there might have been gaps in knowledge in terms of, you know, the having a standard curriculum for schools.” Ryan had already noted that he felt gaps in his mathematics and science knowledge. Nonetheless, alumni also agreed that in the bigger scheme of things anything they may have missed out on did not matter. They still had opportunity to learn these things and they felt the things they gained were vaster and more important. Anahera noted “I didn't lose out on any opportunities really and the flip side was that the things that I did focus on set me up to do well at uni.”

The findings show that helping students learn to manage freedom, agency and choice was achieved through meaningful experiences in a safe environment, relationship building and one-on-one time between students and staff. Importantly, alongside these tools was a culture of

equity, empowerment, and trust that supported meaningful dialogue and relationships of mutual respect.

Table 13 shows the keys themes emerging from the discussion above.

Table 13

Themes Emerging from the Challenge and Value of Managing Freedom, Choice, and Agency

The challenge and value of managing freedom, choice, and agency
Space to be a teenager, to make your own decisions and learn from this process was important for well-being
A safe space is one where you are trusted, respected, and supported to manage yourself and make your own decisions. There is a link between freedom of movement, trust, and a feeling of safety
Being trusted is associated with feelings of dignity, belonging, and significance
Unstructured student-teacher one-on-one time for informal relationship building in the development of trust and understanding
Start from a position of trust and build support around those struggling
Non-scheduled time in a safe school environment is an important part of the process. It benefits students in multiple ways including time for individual and creative thought. opportunities for students to pursue interests, and dialogue with peers and staff
The challenge of agency, choice and meaningful decision-making is important and valuable learning. Students learn self-discipline, reflection, and consequence through practising meaningful decision-making in a safe environment
Learning decision-making, self-discipline and meta-learning skills is sometimes more important than content learning
Individual learning pathways, and choice to attend class means a focus on learning and less disruption in scheduled classes
Agency of time and movement and personalised learning pathways give meaning to teacher-student dialogue
Matching of rhetoric with experience

Walking the Talk, Living the Values

As I listened to the participants talk about the skills and values they gained from attending democratic school, a question formed in the back of my mind that I struggled to put

into words. The values and skills they described as gaining, including ideas such as well-being, equity, critical and creative thinking, collaboration, teamwork, contribution, and communication skills are concepts familiar within Aotearoa New Zealand schools. As a teacher, these concepts were nothing new. However, the expression and conceptualisation of them from the perspectives of the research participants made them sound fresh and exciting. What I was seeing in the data was a contrast between the mainstream and democratic schools that participants attended; where these values and skills were actualised at democratic school, but not at mainstream school.

I tried to address this with the participants. First, I asked about how these values and skills were taught; were they explicitly taught (i.e., as a lesson) or simply part of the system? Jackson talked about a progression of explicit teaching of values and soft skills at democratic primary school and then opportunity to put these into meaningful practice at secondary level. This is an interesting observation, one that is raised again further in this section. Taking critical thinking as an example, Anahera described class projects designed around critical thinking, giving examples such as “deconstructing sexist advertising”, “exploring media around mental health”, and “how does Romeo and Juliet represent the failures of the adults”.

Both Anahera and Jackson, as well as other participants noted that at democratic school students not only had options to practise critical thinking in subject-based projects, but also in meaningful critique of their schooling experiences through open dialogue with staff. Anahera noted that allowing students to actually practise critical thinking in relation to the school, might be problematic for teachers. “You’re teaching kids to question everything around you and that can be very challenging as a teacher”. She recalled leaving a class because she couldn’t see its

worth. At the time she announced to the teacher “I don’t think this is adding anything to my learning, I’m leaving”, noting, in reflection, “and the teacher just had to be like ‘alright’.”

I asked Caitlin what she thought it was that made the rhetoric of values and soft skills become praxis at democratic school, rather than simply ideals a school aims for. For her, the equity in the relationships, what she called a “levelling triangle”, enacted through constant and ongoing formal and informal communication between teachers, parents, and students, made the difference. She told me:

It’s all about that level. Like, I feel like at (...) other schools that I have interacted with (...) teachers, they’re almost dehumanised (...) I think this is the whole point. It’s like we all went into it as people, with backgrounds and intersections of who we were. And I think that, it’s very hard to explain, to get that balance (...) yeah, it’s hard to gauge the difference. I think, even the way they communicated with us, you know. They’re not your friend, but they’re treating us like people.

The idea Caitlin is expressing in the quote above, is one most alumni alluded to one way or another. Caitlin’s concept of a levelling triangle involves a recognition of power imbalances between student, teacher (and other school staff) and whānau, and the implementation of measures to create more equitable relationships. This removes the teacher versus student, adult versus teenager mentality and leaves students feeling respected and valued as equal partners in the teacher-student relationship. This feeling of dignity allowed students to feel comfortable as the person they are in the moment, rather than focusing on who they might eventually become. Anahera described it as being a relief: “it was actually just a relief to be able to be myself (...) it was really nice to be myself and feel like it was valued”.

Part of this levelling triangle is open communication. This involves not only providing opportunity for students to use their voice, but also ensuring that their individual and collective voice is heard and acknowledged. Brooke talked about the importance of being heard:

Being heard was really important, especially in those shitty teenage years, where you feel like no one's listening to you, people don't understand. Being heard and being heard in a really constructive way and giving you kind of control over what you're saying, and then having people listen to it. I think it's really important.

This quote from Brooke reflects the perspective of the large majority of participants. Students appreciated being heard and staff understood the importance of listening. Bethany, staff member from School 1, talked about listening and ongoing conversation as the key that holds it all together:

I think listening to them and challenging them along the way as well. (...) I think those one-on-one meetings that we have, and the IEM meetings (the Individual Education Meetings) with the parents, and so on, they're just the key, they're the key to holding everything together.

If we return to Jackson's idea of progression from primary to secondary school (discussed earlier in this section), we see a progression of values and soft skills where students are allowed to practise what they have learned in a supportive trusting environment based around student voice. Communication is a powerful skill. And it is one that is learned. Students at democratic school are empowered to practise that skill daily in genuine and meaningful situations. Teachers prioritise listening to student voice, and they understand that often students need support to express their needs. Teachers enact the values they expect of the students.

Caitlin uses the concept of levelling, which could be a synonym for equity, not only as the tool for ensuring effective communication, but also for embracing community and inclusivity. Again, through a levelling of power structures, concepts such as empathy, community and collaboration become realistic praxis, or as Paul notes in the quote on Page 198, “part of ourselves”. Caitlin relates levelling to democracy and community. The latter, she believes is one of her biggest takeaways from her democratic school experience. Caitlin told me:

First thing that came to mind, it’s definitely community. I know that sounds vague, but seriously, it’s something you could never really gain from elsewhere (...) it wasn’t in clusters. And there wasn’t those cliques (...) everyone was all jumped in. And I think that’s where you’re kind of talking about this kind of democracy. Not just students having agency but the fact that there was just this absolute levelling of everyone. It didn’t matter where your background was from, you just, we’re all in. I think that’s probably one of the biggest takeaways from that, was the community. Because if everybody’s levelled like that, you’re interacting with everyone else, and you just have a better sense of empathy for everyone around you. And the teachers really—we didn’t even call them teachers—our learning advisors, they were such, kind of like advocates for that as well. Because they were levelled as well. Because we were all supposed to be people.

The offsetting of power structures (or levelling) also played out in terms of feelings of responsibility towards the success of the school. Anahera explained that students were aware of their role in ensuring the success of the collective:

Our actions as students impacted on others (...) a lot of us felt this sort of pressure of responsibility that this was like a magic special place (...) and there was a sort of sense like kids need this place, like some of us really need this place.

Anahera indicates here that students intuitively felt a responsibility to uphold school values. Maree, a staff member at School 2, talked about an expectation of older students modelling values and soft skills (see quote in *The Need for Relational Support*, Chapter Six). A (very slight) contrast in the data between the two democratic secondary schools can be noted in the theme of modelling. Discussion on the modelling of soft skills and values by staff members came through a lot more strongly in the School 1 data, than it did in the School 2 data. Samuel reinforced Anahera's words above. He also highlighted the modelling of trust by staff members:

I guess it's the wider philosophy of the school, it's not 'my pathway is personal to me', but 'I also have a responsibility to be a good citizen'. It's not about achieving my stuff at the expense of everyone else. It's, you know, 'I'll lift myself up and I lift others up'. And like, I guess, I don't know what causes what, but I think because the kids are happy and engaged and are in a place where trusting is modelled to them by the teachers and what we've set up, they, that most of them pick up on that modelling and behave that way.

Samuel's quote illustrates the mindset that considers both individual goals alongside collective well-being, noting that it's not one or the other but both working alongside each other. He highlighted the modelling of trust by staff as a key element. There seems to be another progression here, one of key values and soft skills being proposed as goals or ideals for mainstream school (anecdotal only), the expectation of senior students modelling such, students intuitively feeling a responsibility to practise these, staff modelling and students picking up on

that behaviour, and finally, as shown in Paul's quote below, the proposed values and soft skills becoming everyday praxis as part of the school culture. Paul told me:

Having a focus on the child meant that we've kind of done stuff that other schools are now calling well-being, which we just call part of ourselves. And so, we don't need to implement systems around those sorts of things, because it's just embedded in our school culture.

Paul also pointed out the importance of continual reflection on school structures, and that democratic participation allows that to happen. He told me:

I'd hate it to come back in 10 years' time and it to be in the same place as it is, because that means it's not doing its job. It's not meeting the needs of the students that are in front of it today.

Table 14 summarises the key themes emerging from discussion around the everyday praxis of school values.

Table 14*Summary of the Discussion Around Everyday Praxis of School Values*

Themes emerging from the discussion
A noticeable progression from the explicit teaching of values and soft skills at democratic primary school to opportunity to put these into meaningful practice at secondary level
Students not only had opportunity to practise critical thinking in subject based projects, but also in meaningful critique of their schooling experiences
Equity in relationships, enacted through constant and ongoing formal and informal communication between teachers, parents and students
Staff communicated with students as equals. Staff and students all went into it as people, with backgrounds and intersections of who they are
Removal of the power imbalance between student and teacher causes students to feel respected and valued as equal partners in the teacher-student relationship. This feeling of dignity allowed students to feel comfortable as the person they are in the moment, rather than focusing on who they might be eventually
Students appreciated and respected being heard and staff understood the importance of listening. Listening and ongoing conversation as the key that holds it all together
Teachers prioritise listening to student voice, and they understand that often students need support to express their needs competently
Teachers enact the values and soft skills they expect of the students. The modelling of trust by staff as a key element. Students intuitively feeling a responsibility to practice these
Equity is not only as the tool for ensuring effective communication, but also for embracing community and inclusivity
Through a levelling of power structures when communicating, concepts such as empathy, community and collaboration become realistic praxis everyday praxis as part of the school culture

Participant Understandings of Democracy

Although participant understandings of democracy permeated throughout the findings, I still felt it important to clarify directly, with the question: what does democracy mean to you? None of the participants responded with allusions to voting or majority rules. Rather, concepts around agency, equity, participation, shared decision-making and contribution towards the collective

were raised. Leo's explanation illustrates the difference between straightforward understandings of democracy and the understandings presented by the research participants. He told me:

Well, I mean, the standard notion of democracy is that, you know, whoever has the numbers wins. But it's not that simple. And that's the thing that the kids learn very quickly, is that just winning a vote isn't going to settle anything, because the issues are [still] going to be there. And so, democracy is about getting along with people. It's about making everyone – it's about valuing everyone. I mean it's a corny phrase, but it's true. Because if you have people who are unhappy, who feel aggrieved, who are kicking over the traces, you're going to have to deal with that.

This understanding of democracy was evidently shared by other participants. Joanna answered: "I guess everyone needs a say". Ryan's answer expanded on this notion of voice. He told me: "everyone having a voice, whether it be the final decision or not is kind of irrelevant, just the ability to have an opinion that is worth something". Here I can see links to the need for acknowledgement of voice; having your say and having it acknowledged has been an important theme running through the data. Amanda noted the privilege of having a voice, and the need to help those who don't have a voice. She answered:

Where everyone has a say, where you have a voice, and that's like, a privilege actually, if you look at the rest of the world. And I'm like, I want to use my voice, you know, for people that don't have one.

Anahera differentiated between the formal process of governance and a broader conceptualisation of democracy. She told me:

On the one hand, I think of it as like a very formal process of government. On the other hand, I think of it as more of a concept of shared decision-making. So, I guess when I think back to [School 1] it's probably more on that shared decision-making side of things. Jackson made a similar distinction between formal systems and being involved. His answer, which differentiated between participation and representation in democracy, illustrated the value participants gave to being empowered and having a voice, which they considered more important than student representation on student councils or the Board of Trustees. He answered:

We had our fair share of, like trying to put together student councils. I think I was on three different iterations of student councils throughout my time there. And we had a student member on the Board of Trustees at [School 1]. But I think that that kind of stuff doesn't matter so much necessarily as the learning advisors or the faculty and the administration empowering students to wield democratic power (...) cause realistically democracy doesn't have to be—like casting a vote isn't the only way of having democracy (...) you know representative democracy is not the only form of democracy. And the fact that I could go to my learning advisor or to the director [and] knock on the door and say 'hey can we make an appointment, can I chat with you about something quickly (...) this is the issue I'm having' (...) I think that's really important.

Caitlin also referred to the "ability to have your own say" in her answer to what democracy meant to her. She also extended it by considering individual agency alongside collective well-being, telling me: "just having that kind of individual agency that works towards a collective group". She also noted the importance of the school not being a private institution in her answer, saying, with respect to [School 1/1a] and democracy: "that it's a public school (...)

and also, the fact that, like I said before, that everybody's from everywhere (...) more like egalitarian, that kind of thing."

Collaboration and Individual and Collective Well-being

I was curious as to whether a democratic environment, which focused on individual pathways, created a more individual or a more collective environment, and decided to ask participants about this directly. The majority of participants from both schools argued that a collective was needed for the success of both the whole school community and the individual's goals within that. Jackson condensed what other participants talked of, saying "our understanding of a community was not one of individualism, but was one of individual contribution". Caitlin believed that the health of the collective was dependent on the health of the individuals within it, noting "[each] person is connected to the web of the wider community. And then that collective community is healthy because each person's desires and wants and needs are satisfied".

Brooke talked about the need to connect with others in order to achieve your learning goals, raising the concept of collaboration:

Um, yeah, I think, I disagree that it's too individualised (...) everyone is an individual for sure, but we also have connections in so many facets, you have to connect with other people (...) I mean that was the glorious part about trying to make things happen or, you know, get a new class or get an event going. You would have to have another 5 people at least on your side to make it worthwhile. So, you learned how to work with all these people.

Brooke's quote above discusses making connections with others through different interests or learning styles. She talked about connecting to people through their strengths and interests, even though these might differ. She gave the example "they hated dance and drama, but they loved music so like, oh sweet, let's connect in that way". Brooke is referring to making connections to achieve your own personal goals or by pulling on your own particular strengths to contribute to group goals. It is this which appears to make the collaboration and learning meaningful. Her comments indicate that she learned through experience that to get things done you need to collaborate. For example, she told me: "you couldn't just do things by yourself". This learning was replicated across all alumni. She laughingly added "unless you were a full-on introvert; we did have those kids, but then they would connect together as introverts".

When responding to this question Anahera linked the concept of collective to her culture as tangata whenua. She talked about how, although she considered them to be "very white institutions", both her democratic primary school and School 1 allowed her a greater connection to tikanga Māori through their encouraging genuine parental involvement. Anahera told me:

I think in terms of the collective (...) [democratic primary school] and [School 1] were the closest we could get to something that resembled a Kaupapa Māori approach. And like not to get it wrong cause like they were definitely very white institutions and, in some ways, more white than [my mainstream school] for example, in terms of student make up and stuff, but they were the only schools that would allow you know my parents to have a strong role in helping to provide the education (...) This was the only place that would like, like genuinely had a concept of whānau being part of education.

School 2 data also supported the notion of individual contribution to collective well-being. Alongside discussion of being out in the community, as well as school camps, sports teams, interest groups and other collaborative activities, participants from School 2 predominantly referred to the school meeting when talking about collective learning and well-being. George talked about how school rules were created and reviewed in school meetings, using the example of students (and staff) smoking on school property (which was legal in Aotearoa New Zealand at the time). He said:

So those weekly meetings we established rules, like a good example is I used to smoke cigarettes. I was rebellious (...) and then it got brought up at one of the meetings, hey, listen, people don't like this, all right, we'll pass the rule if one person objects to you smoking in the classroom, you can't. That went, within a short time, I think within six months, to us actually, the school banning smoking on the school grounds (...) you were involved in all those decision-making, and I think that had a major effect (...) I think I can't overemphasize how important those democratic meetings were.

Leo, a former staff member at School 2, also noted how the learning from the school meeting contributed to a greater sense of collective understanding, as through deliberation individuals learned how to learn and act collectively:

I've thought about this a lot over the years, but I don't have a potted answer, not now anyway. The thing about [School 2], is everything was based around the school meeting. And the school meeting meant that it was a collective, it was people learning to be people, people learning to live with each other, people learning to do things collectively. Now, part of the ethos though, was that there was an absence of compulsion (...) No one

was ever punished for anything. They just learned by the power of persuasion to change their behaviour, to listen to other people. So, there's that dichotomy, I guess, between the collective and the individual's freedom. And those two things were fundamental.

This quote highlights two key themes predominant in the School 2 data. The theme of learning collective understanding and responsibility through the school meeting resonated strongly for the research participants. The second theme relates to learning accepted behaviours through peer persuasion and deliberation.

Concepts previously discussed link strongly here. Learning to listen is highlighted in Leo's quote above. Jordana talked about "individualism within community discussion" through "communication" and "being heard". She highlighted the learning that happened in the school meetings, giving examples of discussions around smoking, the Springbok Tour and nuclear disarmament. She told me, "learning how to debate, learning how to argue a point, learning how to see another side, discuss something to come up with a solution." Belinda appreciated learning how to communicate through the school meeting, noting "it's cool because you're taught to speak. You're taught to have an opinion and you're taught to speak. And you actually learn a lot through that."

Like George, Leo, Jordana, and Belinda above, Catherine also felt the democratic school meetings were fundamental to learning both contextual and social learning. She said:

The school meeting thing was really important, you know. And everyone having a voice, and really learning to listen to different points of view was a huge thing. And learning how to resolve conflict as a group, as well, you know. There was some pretty tense moments at different points. You know, we had rules, and we'd kind of all agreed to rules

and when someone broke a rule they had to come before the school meeting and explain themselves. So, it was pretty intense.

Like previous alumni discussed above, Catherine highlights the importance of being heard and of learning to listen. She discusses listening within the context of being exposed to “different points of view” which links to the concepts of understanding difference and inclusion. She also talks about conflict resolution through the collective group, and through listening. Along with the quotes from Leo and George above, Catherine’s words build on a theme of ownership. For example, she talks about the collective having agreed to the rules, and individuals having to explain themselves to the collective if rules were broken.

Catherine expands further, discussing how the collective discussion of the school meetings worked towards greater inclusion and understanding of individual difference:

I think that there is a fostering of individuality and a recognizing of difference, which is a really positive thing, without judgment on that. But that, through the process of hearing different points of view, and accepting other people as they are, you get a real sense of belonging and responsibility. And you directly see, if you're voting on something, you're directly seeing how your vote affects the outcome. And that that is going to have an impact on the other people in the group, you know. So you directly see that your choices and, and your kind of way of wanting things to be, isn't just about you, it's about that working for everybody. And that compromise is huge, you know, you realize that sometimes, actually, you need to compromise for the greater good. You can't just have everything the way you want.

Here Catherine raises concepts and themes already discussed, including valuing individual difference without judgement, listening to other's opinions, "accepting other people as they are" which she links to belonging and responsibility. Catherine further talks about how through democratic deliberation you learn compromise, as you see directly how your actions and opinions affect others. I believe there are two very important underlying themes highlighted within this quote. The first is that all the concepts are linked, they come as a package. The second is that they also all connect to the deliberative democratic process.

Indeed, these two themes appear to underlie much of the discussion across all the interviews. Students understood inherently that democracy was not just about voting and accepting majority opinion. Through deliberative discussion they created, and reviewed, rules that were about collective well-being rather than power. They appeared to fundamentally understand the importance of deliberation and participation in creating a community of belonging that not only accepted, but also valued individual difference.

Table 15 illustrates key themes emerging from discussion on the link between individual and collective well-being.

Table 15*Key themes emerging from the dualism of collective and individual well-being*

Themes emerging from the discussion
Community is understood as individual contribution to collective well-being
A healthy collective is needed for the success of both the whole school community and individual achievement. Collective well-being is dependent on the health of individuals within it
Genuine and meaningful participation for students and whānau. Greater connection to home culture through genuine parental involvement
Meaningful collaboration through shared interests, and as a means to achieve shared goals
Open school meetings assisted community learning and well-being. Rules were created, discussed, and reviewed at school meetings
Deliberative discussion and meetings fundamental to balance collective well-being and individual freedom
Individuals learned to act collectively through the deliberative democratic meetings
Learning collective responsibility and understanding resulted from being involved in decision-making through democratic meetings and deliberative debate. Cannot underestimate the importance of being involved in decision-making processes
Individualism within community discussion through communication and being heard
Learning how to debate, how to argue a point, how to see another side, work together to find a solution
Democratic meetings fundamental to both contextual and social learning
You're directly seeing how your vote affects the outcome and how it impacts on other people
Everyone had a voice, really learned to listen to different points of view and learned to resolve conflict in the school meeting. Both being heard and learning to listen to others through the meaningful and genuine contexts of the school meeting was important learning
A feeling of ownership over rules created through collective discussion
Collective discussion of the school meeting worked towards greater inclusion and understanding of individual difference
A fostering of individuality and recognition of difference, without judgement
Through the process of hearing different points of view, one gains a sense of belonging and responsibility, and accepting people as they are
Through democratic deliberation you learn compromise as you directly see how your actions and opinions affect other people
Students learned to inherently understand that <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Democracy is not just about voting and accepting majority opinion - Rules were about collective well-being rather than power - Deliberation and participation are important in creating a community of belonging, that values individual difference

A number of key themes and concepts have emerged from the data. Those that are most recurring include dialogue, equity, support, agency, being heard, listening to others and trust, which lead to inclusivity, empowerment, collaboration, active participation, and empathy. Of primary importance is that all the concepts are linked and as such should not be separated. All these concepts are reflective of those encompassed in deliberative democratic processes. The following section summarises the concepts and themes emerging from the data and illustrates the developing theory.

It Operates as a Web

Looking for a single core category was more difficult than anticipated, and eventually, guided by the words of one of the research participants, School 1/1a alumna Caitlin, I decided to abandon the search. Caitlin twice described the systems and structures of secondary democratic schooling as “a web”:

I think it, I think it would be better to say that it's built from the middle. As in, it's more like a web, you know. Like, everybody is an integral part of making that work. And that's again that democracy that you're looking for. It's not top or bottom. It's not, it's not linear in that way. Everybody is linked to each other, and each person is supporting everybody. It's more like a web.

What Caitlin describes essentially is the link between democracy and the schooling she experienced at School 1/1a. Her comment “everybody is an integral part of making that work” reinforces the notion that everybody is equally important in the functioning of the school, as well as illustrating the sense of belonging and responsibility that Caitlin felt as a student towards the functioning and positive culture of the school. She takes away any linear notion of structure or

power, reinforcing the equity of position and relationships within the school. Caitlin talks about everybody, not just teachers or students or parents, but everybody, being linked to one another and supporting one another.

Caitlin expanded on this concept later in her interview:

I think that's where academic discourse falls short, 'cause we desperately want to categorise and to put terms on things, and I just, it's just too difficult to be able to put that chaotic space in a block. It's not like that (...) I think because it's spanning from the individuals wants and needs, so for example you are dealing with a student, their teacher, their parents, this is this person, and this person is connected to the web of the wider community. And then that collective community is healthy because each person's desires and wants and needs are satisfied.

Through the concept of a web Caitlin also illustrates the important link between collective and individual well-being. The data indicates that through healthy individuals grows a healthy collective, and a healthy collective allows space for individuals to achieve their individual goals. Caitlin notes that democratic secondary school is a chaotic space that is difficult to define. Through this description of chaos, Caitlin in no way means to denigrate democratic schooling. From the data it can be seen that through this chaotic and amazing space students achieve a great deal of positive outcomes and deeply value their experiences within it.

Figure 13, below, illustrates key themes and concepts emerging from the data within the concept of a web, where the strength of the web is dependent on all the strands within it working together.

Summary of the Findings (Emerging Theory)

The following key themes are fundamental to building positive social, emotional, and academic student well-being realised through democratic structures in a secondary school.

Genuine opportunity for student voice and meaningful deliberative dialogue:

- Meaningful deliberative dialogue from equitable positions is fundamental to inclusiveness, collective well-being and managing individual agency.
- Meaningful deliberative dialogue involves freedom to express one's opinion without risk of rebuke, participating and contributing to building a shared culture, involvement in establishing and reviewing school rules and processes, involvement in solution finding, and conflict resolution.
- For deliberative dialogue to be meaningful adults and students must enter into it from positions of equity with a focus on learning from each other. Contexts must be genuine and applicable to student experiences, and outcomes visible.
- Ability to practise meaningful student-led deliberative dialogue from positions of equity teaches students important relationship and meta-communication skills, including active listening, acknowledging others, empathy, negotiation, compromise and how to voice their own concerns.
- Teachers prioritising student voice, recognising that students often need support to express their needs competently and providing that support, results in equitable communication outcomes and teaches students valuable communication skills.

Individual and emergent bespoke learning pathways:

- Individual and emergent learning pathways built around student needs and interests, where success is defined as meeting one's individual goals (rather than standardised age-based goals), means student learning is relevant and meaningful. It allows students to focus on the discovery of learning, reduces disruptions in classes, comparisons to others and bullying, and increases acceptance of difference.
- Individual learning pathways combined with opportunity for voice and dialogue, managed through ongoing individual one-on-one support, results in equitable outcomes.
- Meaningful collaboration results naturally through shared interests, and as a means to achieve shared goals.

Student agency of time, place, and ways of being:

- Student agency of time, space, place, ways of being, and learning pathways gives meaning, substance, and legitimacy to student-adult dialogue.
- The challenge and reward of meaningful student agency in a safe environment leads to a number of important skills including meta-learning, reflective decision-making, inter-personal communication, collaboration, self-discipline, understanding consequence and creative and critical thinking.

Safe learning environments:

- A safe learning environment is one where students are trusted to manage their own ways of being, space, place, time, and movement, supported through ongoing deliberative dialogue from positions of equity.

- Non-scheduled time in a safe learning environment benefits students in multiple ways including time for individual and creative thought, to initiate learning around interests, collaborate with peers, and to liaise with staff members.
- Space to be yourself, to make your own decisions and to learn from the process in a safe learning environment is important for the well-being of teenage students. Being trusted results in feelings of dignity, significance and belonging.

Acknowledgement of inequitable power imbalances:

- Empowerment through respect and trust, and equity resulting in a perceived levelling of power, leads to feelings of dignity, belonging, self-worth. This results in student praxis of values including respect, trust, inclusiveness, and contribution to community well-being.
- When staff communicate with students as equals, students understand staff as people with backgrounds outside of their position and start to see intersections on which to build shared understanding.
- Equity of positions and relationships between students, parents and adults enacted through ongoing formal and informal communication ensures effective communication, aiding collectivity, and inclusiveness.
- Open participation of students and whānau creates a greater connection to home culture.
- Through a levelling of power structures, values such as empathy, community and collaboration become realistic everyday praxis as a natural part of the school culture.

Individual Contribution, Community Well-being and Shared Experiences:

- Community is understood as individual contribution to collective well-being. A healthy collective is vital for the success of both the whole school community and individual achievement. Collective well-being is dependent on the well-being of individuals within it. Open deliberative discussion is fundamental to balancing individual freedoms and community well-being.
- Being involved in collective decision-making through democratic deliberation of meaningful contexts with genuine outcomes teaches students collective responsibility and understanding. School meetings (open to staff, students and whānau) assist community well-being by teaching students to act collectively, resulting in a sense of belonging and the valuing of individual difference.
- The creation, review, and discussion of rules in open access collective discussion creates a feeling of ownership over said rules. Through democratic deliberation students learn compromise as they directly see the outcomes of their opinions and actions, including how others are affected by them.
- Being heard and hearing others' perspectives in school meetings fosters greater inclusion, recognition and understanding of individual difference. Through open student voice in collective meetings students learn to listen to different points of view, and to resolve conflict through dialogue.
- Through ongoing participation in democratic deliberation students start to inherently understand that democracy is more than just voting and accepting majority opinion, and that rules should be about collective well-being rather than power.

- Democratic deliberation aids both contextual and social learning. Students learn how to argue a point, listen to conflicting perspectives and work together to negotiate solutions.

Everyday praxis of values as a natural part of the school culture:

- Having opportunity to meaningfully critique their schooling experiences with genuine ability to influence outcomes gives students a sense of belonging and a feeling of responsibility to contribute towards a positive school culture.
- The modelling school values, including trust, active listening, and ongoing open communication by staff, is a key element of a positive school culture.
- Students appreciate the progression from explicit teaching of values and social skills at primary school to being trusted to initiate putting these into action (without coercion) at secondary level. Support and ongoing dialogue from equitable positions, rather than the use of authority and discipline, assists students to learn from their mistakes.

Equity, deliberation, and open communication are fundamental. Alongside a redefinition of success, a redefinition of the role of adult from the culturally accepted role of authoritarian and decision maker to one of supporting through dialogue, and a sharing of relevant knowledge and experience when appropriate.

Recognition of a number of positive dualisms need also be acknowledged:

- Positive gains result from both the challenge and reward of learning to navigate agency

- Individuality and collectiveness work side-by-side and are equally valued by students and staff
- Freedom around individual expression and participation leads to a cohesive community
- Allowing students to use their voice teaches them to listen to others
- Allowing students to critically question their schooling teaches them respect and understanding, and moves towards greater levels of social justice and equity.

Key quotes that support the emerging theory are presented in Figure 14, below:

Figure 14

Theory Synopsis in the Words of Participants



Summary

In this chapter, I looked more critically into key themes and concepts for which questions started to emerge. This included consideration of the links and relationships between key themes and concepts. Links between inclusivity, partnership and individual learning pathways were investigated in the first section. Next, I analysed themes arising from student management of freedom, choice, and agency. Following that, I explored ideas around the everyday praxis of school values, before moving on to discuss links between collective and individual well-being. Finally, a web of concepts was presented, and the findings summarised.

While the search for a single core category underlying the data was unattainable, it was established that the key themes work together as a web to build a safe learning environment where individuals are given space to manage their individual learning pathways and work together to contribute to a healthy collective, supported through dialogue and equity of relationships. Through a democratic learning environment participating alumni learnt important values including empathy, consensus reaching, reflection and appreciation of difference, as well as soft skills such as effective communication, reciprocity, respect, critical and creative thinking, and self-motivation. Participants in the research overwhelmingly valued their experiences at democratic school (in stark contrast to experiences described in mainstream school environments).

Chapter Eight, next, presents discussion of the key themes with links to relevant literature.

Chapter Eight Discussion

It was an amazing place for me (...) I loved school, I would go every day, even if I was sick, (...) I'd have to be bedridden to not go. And we lived [far away] so it was a big trip in and out each day (...) it was quite an effort to get there, but I never missed a day of school. (Catherine, School 2)

I start with this quote from Catherine, as it is both indicative of the general feeling of the participants in my research and counter to the prevailing discourse of secondary school one usually hears. A wide range of positive outcomes, including empathy, consensus reaching, appreciation of difference, effective communication, self-confidence, respect, critical and creative thinking, and self-motivation were identified by participants as resulting from democratic structures in their secondary schools. Through systematic analysis of the data, a web of democratic systems, interactions, and resulting positive outcomes emerged. In keeping with the grounded theory methodology, analysis was driven by the data rather than the research question. In this way the original research question was extended to include not only the impacts of democratic schooling, but also the interrelationship of the democratic structures at play and the learning environment these created.

In this chapter I discuss the key findings and emerging theory with respect to the extant literature outlined in the literature review. Emphasis is given to the democratic structures that provide the framework for the positive outcomes highlighted. First, I offer a brief review of the web of positive outcomes emerging. Next, I explore the interplay of democracy and schooling within the participating schools. Following that, I examine some of the key building blocks of democratic schooling identified in the research and their resulting positive outcomes alongside

the relevant literature. I then look at the everyday praxis of democratic values as a natural part of the school culture. The final section discusses the need for a change from traditional epistemologies around schooling for better student outcomes and improved well-being.

The Positive Impacts of Democratic Structures in Schools

Participants in this research loved their schools. Caitlin “wanted to go to school every day” (see Alumni Views of the Biggest Impact of Democratic Schooling, Chapter Five), Belinda “loved it there” (Adjusting to Democratic Schooling, Chapter Six) and Catherine “never missed a day of school” (Thriving at School 2, Chapter Six). Even Sally told me she loved aspects of her democratic school (the school meetings and the physical environment). These responses were indicative of the general feeling from participants from both democratic schools sampled. In Chapter Two (Changing Mindsets), a description of well-being from the standpoint of the child was presented (Fattore et al., 2016). The findings support and build on the research of Fattore et al. (2016). Both studies find social connections, a feeling of belonging, inclusivity, equitable relationships, dialogue and negotiation, trust, and opportunity to exercise agency as being fundamental to feelings of well-being for children and young people. Further, in this study I extend the work of Fattore et al. by relating these notions of well-being from the standpoint of the student to the concept of democracy, and provide evidence that through democratic systems, structures, and ways of being schools can create more equitable environments, with the potential to vastly improve the well-being of their students.

The web of interactions between democratic school structures and positive outcomes for students (Figure 13, Chapter Seven) illustrates the positive outcomes participants highlighted as being key for them, as well as the interactions and links between these positive outcomes and the

democratic structures of the participating schools. In general the findings confirm the premises of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1968/2018; Shor, 1993), democratic educators (Dewey, 1916/2011, 1938/2015; hooks, 1994, 2003), and advocates of democratic schooling as a distinct typology (Greenberg, 1987; Hecht, 2010; Neill, 1995; Traxler, 2015; Rietmulder, 2019), all arguing that vital to the well-being and positive outcomes of students, especially those who are otherwise disenfranchised, is the active everyday praxis of democracy as a way of being, for both students and staff. Further, apparent in the findings are key themes including equitable dialogic relationships, support, learning from each other by listening to differing perspectives, and respect for the student as a whole person, which align with culturally sustainable pedagogical principles, such as those advocated by Bishop and Berryman (2009) and Penetito et al. (2011). Just as hooks (2003) and Shor (1993) argue that the critical teacher must also be a democratic teacher, this research suggests that democratic ways of being are also integral in effectively practising culturally responsive and other inclusive pedagogies.

The theme of students being considered a whole human within their respective democratic schools emerged in the findings. Interestingly, in Chapter Seven (Walking the Talk, Living the Values) Caitlin talks about teachers in mainstream schools being “dehumanised” through the imbalance of power and inequitable interactions. She explains that the levelling of staff, students, and parents in democratic school, through constant formal and informal dialogue; a coming together of “people with backgrounds and intersections of who we were”, humanises teachers and in turn humanises the context of education. While Caitlin is talking about teachers being dehumanised, this reflection directly relates to Freire’s (1968/2018) notions of the dehumanisation of students through authoritarian teacher control models of schooling (discussed

in the section titled Critical Pedagogy and Democracy, in Chapter Two). In the data we find a system of schooling which allows students (and teachers) to retain their humanity, empowers those who feel oppressed to challenge the structures imposing on them, and provides avenues for continual dialogue, reflection, and change.

Due to the interdependence of positive outcomes and democratic structures, further discussion of positive outcomes with respect to the literature is combined with the discussion of democratic building blocks, later in this chapter. First, participant understandings of democracy, learned through everyday praxis in their democratic school environments, are discussed with respect to the literature, below.

The Interplay of Democracy and Schooling

Key themes apparent in the research include a balance of individual and community needs, consensus reaching through shared meaningful dialogue, deliberation, and negotiation from equitable positions, and inclusion of a diverse range of perspectives. Together these themes represent a depiction of democracy that aligns with Isakhan's (2012) definition, introduced and discussed in Chapter Two (see also Figure 3) and the characteristics of democracy illustrated in Figure 4 (also Chapter Two). Without overtly setting a goal of teaching democracy, the two schools have developed alumni who practise democratic ways of being as a part of who they are. This is a significant finding. Not only did participants point to characteristics of the democratic systems and structures as having highly positive impacts on them socially, emotionally, and academically, but through the everyday praxis of democracy they came to appreciate and value the characteristics of democratic systems, and learnt to participate confidently as citizens of not only the school community, but wider society as well.

We can see from the data that through a participative schooling environment, based on open communication and dialogue, alumni learnt the skills and understandings needed for democratic participation in genuine, meaningful, collaborative interactions. Anahera talked about her ongoing involvement in democratic decision-making at university (see *Alumni Views of the Biggest Impact of Democratic Schooling*, Chapter Five). Brooke discussed the importance of collaboration, and participants from School 2 talked of the learning they gained from participation in the school meetings (see *Collaboration and Individual and Collective Well-being*, Chapter Seven). All alumni talked of an expectation their voice would be heard and showed appreciation of opportunities they had for learning to listen to a range of perspectives. The case for the importance of democratic education for the future of democracy is well established in the literature (Beane, 2017; Collins et al., 2019; Dewey, 1916/2011; hooks, 2003) (see discussion in *Democracy in Context*, Chapter Two). Further, it has been noted that democracy is a complex and fragile system, that requires diverse participation and understanding learned and practised from a young age to be maintained effectively (Bachelet, 2022; Dewey, 1916/2011; Gutmann, 1999; Thornberg, 2010a). Participants in this research have realistic understandings of the intricacies and working systems of democracy and the need for participation to maintain its long-term effectiveness, and they actively participated in society in a variety of ways (see *Participant Understandings of Democracy*, Chapter Seven). They showed both an appreciation of the effort individuals need to make to sustain democracy, as well as the value individuals and communities gain from effective democratic organisation. This learning can only be a positive for ongoing and wider reaching participative, inclusive community interactions, and for the future of democracy itself.

Inclusivity and appreciation of diversity resulting from democratic ways of being was a major theme running through the data. The reflections of Anahera are an example of this. While she confirmed that School 2 was a “very white institution”, she also noted the importance of knowing that if she felt uncomfortable about something she could raise her concerns *and* be listened to (see Chapter Seven; Inclusivity, Partnership, and Individual Learning Pathways and Collaboration and Individual and Collective Well-being). Also, permeating throughout the findings is discussion and reflection on accepting people for who they are. This supports the claims of Isakhan and Stockwell (2011b) discussed in Chapter Two (Democracy in Context) that democratic social structures embrace the cultures and values of a diverse range of peoples. While Isakhan and Stockwell are discussing the democracies of traditional, ancient, and indigenous nations, this research is focused on secondary schools. Through my research we can see that within modern secondary school environments, we can build on the wisdom of indigenous cultures (including that of tangata Māori) to develop intuitive understandings of participatory, deliberative democratic ways of being in future citizens, thereby both aiding the sustainability of the current democracy, and improving outcomes for diverse peoples.

The key theme of individual contribution to collective well-being, explored in Chapter Seven (Collaboration and Individual and Collective Well-being), highlights participant understandings of democracy as being greater than voting and representation, and including a community of individuals participating collaboratively towards a collective whole. The data indicated that alumni graduating from democratic schools hold a broad conception of democracy with a focus on community, collective understanding, and consensus reaching through deliberation. This strongly aligns with the descriptions of indigenous systems of governance and

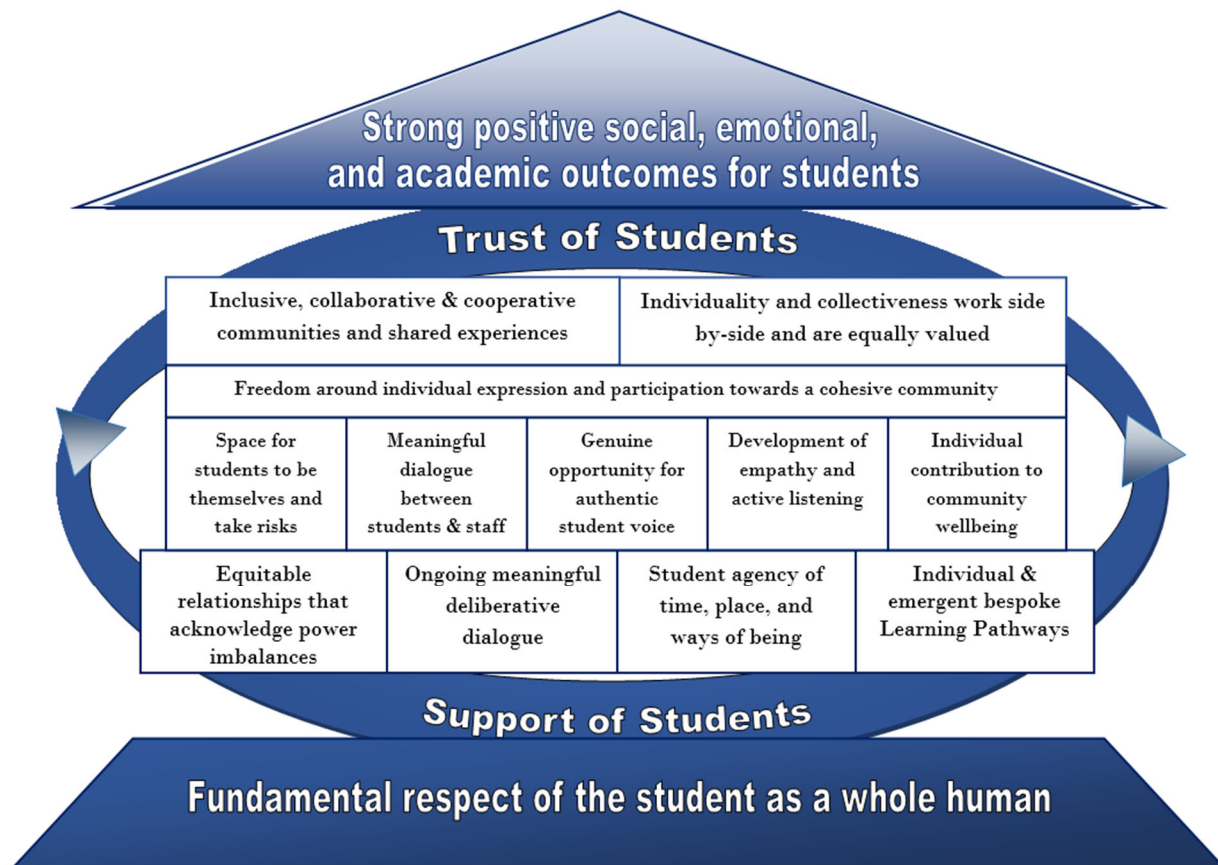
that of pre-colonial Māori (see Chapter Two; Democracy in Pre-colonial te ao Māori and Tino Rangatiratanga in Modern Education). This is a significant finding for two key reasons: concerns discussed within academic and more recently by mainstream media about threats to democracy; and, with respect to Aotearoa New Zealand's obligations under *te Tiriti o Waitangi*. Again, the findings suggest that through a modern secondary school context we are able to shape future (and current) citizens who both understand and appreciate democracy. The findings also suggest that participants hold a conceptualisation of democracy that supports *te Tiriti* partnerships through their willingness to listen, understand and act on the concerns of others in their collective.

The Building Blocks of Democratic Schooling

Key themes found in the data can be considered as democratic building blocks creating positive outcomes for students across social, emotional, and academic realms. These are illustrated as such in Figure 15, below. As explored in the previous chapter (see It Operates as a Web), it is vital to consider these themes together as a whole, rather than as individual elements. The interrelated elements mean that removing one impacts on the functionality of the others, just as removing single bricks from a building causes structural instability. At the foundation of the building blocks is fundamental respect of the student as a whole human with unique perspectives and backgrounds, able to make their own decisions. Respect for students for who they are now, rather than a focus on who they may become is also important. Encompassing the building blocks is a cycle of support and trust of students that infuses the culture of the school and the actions and reactions which take place within it.

Figure 15

The Building Blocks of Democratic Schooling



Equity, deliberation, and open communication are fundamental. Alongside a redefinition of success, a redefinition of the role of adult from the culturally accepted role of authoritarian and decision maker to one of supporting through dialogue, and a sharing of relevant knowledge and experience when appropriate, is evident.

The key themes emerging as being fundamental to building positive social, emotional, and academic student well-being realised through democratic structures in secondary schools are discussed below, with respect to the extant literature.

Opportunity for Authentic Student Voice and Ongoing Meaningful Deliberative Dialogue

The need for equitable positioning of staff, student, and whānau (what Caitlin described as a levelling triangle) to enable genuine and meaningful dialogue was a major theme represented in the findings. While the benefits of dialogue for individual and collective well-being are well established in both literature and practice (Bolstad, 2011a; Brown & Hamilton, 2016; Cook-Sather, 2014; Delpit, 1988; Freire, 1968/2018; Lundy, 2007; Ministry of Education, 2015; Mitra, 2018; Robertson, 2017; Shier, 2001), less prominent is research on the impact of power differentials within schools and authoritarian school structures on the candour of student voice. This research helps fill that gap. The current study extends that of Thornberg (2010a) and Thornberg and Elvstrand (2012) (see Chapter Two; *The Hidden Curriculum and Participation and Changing Mindsets*) through the democratic school structures of the participating schools creating more equitable positioning of students. The findings championed the suggestion of Thornberg (2008a, 2008b) that removal of traditional hierarchical and authoritarian school structures creates more meaningful, genuine dialogue as students feel more confident raising their voice.

A hidden curriculum of avoidable authority, needless rules, and power imbalances in mainstream school environments, that caused social, emotional, and sometimes academic harm was described by participants who transferred between mainstream and democratic schools. Anahera's reflections of trying to reach a shared solution to fill learning gaps at mainstream school (discussed in *Transitioning Between Democratic and Mainstream School*, Chapter Six), and Jackson's reflections that having to constantly justify yourself to staff in mainstream school (see *Downtime is not Wasted Time*, Chapter Seven) provide examples of students negatively

impacted by traditional authoritarian control-based school structures and the associated hidden curriculum described by Apple (2004), Apple and Beane (2007) and Hood (2015) (discussed in *The Hidden Curriculum and Participation*, Chapter Two). Conversely, the underlying philosophy of democracy in the participating schools, allowed genuine dialogue, and established trust and support through a foundation of respect for the student as a whole human, similar to that found by Davies and Kirkpatrick (2000) (outlined in *Bottom-up Participation for Greater Well-being*, Chapter Two). Through the building blocks of democratic schooling (illustrated in Figure 15, above) the current study offers a way forward in which state schools can remove unnecessary power imbalances and implement more genuine equitable dialogue between students and staff, empowering students to speak genuinely, build relationships, and validate self-worth.

A valuable theme permeating throughout the findings was the efforts teachers made to prioritise student voice. Recognising that students often need support to express their needs competently and providing that support, resulted not only in equitable communication outcomes and students learning valuable communication skills, but also increased student confidence in expressing their perspectives. For example, in Chapter Five (*Participant's Initial Reflections on Their School*) Jason talked about democratic school instilling in him “a strong expectation that [his] voice would be heard in most settings”. In this sense, the findings support Lundy's model of space, voice, audience and influence to implement Article 12 (and related articles) of the UNCRC (Lundy, 2007) (discussed in *Lundy's Model Conceptualising Article 12*, Chapter Two). A gap between theory and practice of the requirements of Article 12 (Bourke & O'Neill, 2022; Lansdown, 2001, 2011; Lundy, 2007, 2020) was explored in Chapter Two (*Participation of Children and Young People in Democracy*). The findings indicate that democratic school

structures can provide environments which support implementation of Article 12 in a manner that meets the recommendations of Lansdown (2011), Lundy (2007), Shier (2001) and Hart (1992), thereby filling that gap. Potentially, democratic schools offer an opportunity for researchers and school leaders to investigate active school structures that work to meet Article 12 requirements, and empower all students to use their voice and participate in decision-making that affects them. This potential implication is discussed further in Chapter 9.

Through democratic school structures participants in the current research not only felt heard; they also learned to listen. Through opportunity to practise meaningful student-led deliberative dialogue from positions of equity participants learnt important relationship and meta-communication skills, including active listening, acknowledging others, empathy, negotiation, compromise and how to voice their own concerns. This was evident in the findings, for example Catherine reflected on the skills she learnt through listening to others (see Collaboration and Individual and Collective Well-being, Chapter 7). Inclusion, empathy, and appreciation of diversity were strong themes coming through in the data, supporting the research by Fielding and Moss (2011) and Apple and Beane (2007). This also supports the aims of critical and democratic educators, including Shor (1993) and hooks (2003) of empowering diverse groups and creating more equitable outcomes by developing a critical conscientiousness and an awareness of power structures. Further, it supports research on culturally sustainable pedagogies that encourage listening to diverse voice to create more inclusive learning environments (Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Delpit, 1988; Ministry of Education, 2013; Paris, 2012; Penetito, 2010). Through the added element of allowing *all* students to express their concerns, and to decide when and how this was needed, my research provides extra context to the discussion of student

voice for increased inclusivity, and addresses concerns about diversity within groups highlighted by Harbott (2017).

Through open honest exchange of perspectives, empathy and understanding of diverse epistemologies was developed and a more inclusive environment created. This, the basic premise of the pedagogical theories of both Freire (1968/2018) and Dewey (1916/2011), permeated throughout the current findings, as alumni described feeling empowered to participate in equitable exchanges of ideas, resulting in an inclusive school environment (described by Paul in *Staff Views on What was Valuable for Students*, Chapter Five, and discussed again in *Inclusivity, Partnership, and Individual Learning Pathways*, Chapter Seven). The findings, therefore, support research highlighting the importance of pedagogical practices promoting equitable dialogue and critical reflection on empowering diverse peoples such as that promoted by hooks (2003), Shor (1993) and Giroux (2011). Interesting in the findings, and adding further to the extant literature discussed, is the positive influence that individual learning pathways and student agency of time, place and ways of being had on both the inclusive environment participants appreciated, and on the authenticity of student-adult dialogue.

Student Agency of Time, Place, and Ways of Being

Permeating throughout the findings was the assertion that for dialogue to be meaningful, contexts must be authentic, genuine, applicable to student experiences, and linked to decision-making with discernible outcomes. For example, Hannah describes dialogue that had genuine and discernible impact on her individual learning plan (see *Participant's Initial Reflections on Their School*, Chapter Five), Brooke talked of the measurable impacts of decision-making (*Alumni Views on the Most Valuable Things About Democratic Schooling*, Chapter Five) and

participants from School 2 reflected on genuine contexts and measurable outcomes from discussions in school meetings (see Collaboration and Individual and Collective Well-being, Chapter Seven). This finding helps address gaps between theory and practice identified by Elwood and Lundy (2010), with respect to proper implementation of Article 12 of the UNCRC, and Mitra (2018) and Bolstad (2011a) on student voice and student-adult partnerships, by providing examples of student voice, participation and student-adult partnerships in schooling contexts in which *all* students are engaged in student-adult partnerships and meaningful dialogical relationships in everyday praxis, across all aspects of their schooling.

This notion that student agency of time, space, place, ways of being, and learning pathways gives meaning, substance, and legitimacy to student-adult dialogue is an important finding. In a democratic school, where students have agency over their time, space, and ways of being, as well as the responsibility to decide on their own unique learning pathway, conversations regarding behaviour and academic choices hold substance and student decisions have legitimate outcomes and repercussions. Conversely, in mainstream schools, opportunity for student voice is constrained by fixed timetables, pre-determined academic outcomes which students are expected to meet, and an ethos of behaviour management as opposed to trust. This finding confirms calls for changes to conventional school structures to improve opportunities for genuine and meaningful student voice and student-adult partnerships (Bolstad, 2011b; Fielding, 2004; Fielding & Moss, 2011; Mitra, 2018), and opens the discussion by providing examples of school structures in which legitimate shared dialogue and partnership occur. In that way the findings add significantly to existing discussions on student voice and student-adult partnerships.

An interesting discovery was that student agency practised in a safe environment provided both challenge and reward. Participants also appreciated the important skills including meta-learning, reflective decision-making, inter-personal communication, collaboration, self-discipline, understanding consequence and creative and critical thinking that they learnt through managing agency. This supports and reinforces the existing research and discussion on democratic schooling, outlined in Chapter Two (Democratic Schools as a Distinct Typology), and adds to it by providing new settings to this growing body of research. Further, this study adds a new element to the existing body of research, in terms of alumni understandings of democracy (see the discussion in *The Interplay of Democracy and Schooling*, in this chapter).

The concept of space extended beyond free time to develop academic learning to include space to be yourself, to make your own decisions (and learn from that process), to express yourself as a teenager, to use your voice and be heard, and space to just chill alone or with like minds in a safe learning environment was apparent in the data. Participants' reflections on the importance of free time within the school environment support research (discussed in *Student-led Learning, Free-time & Learning Through Play*, Chapter Two) that suggests that play or free time is a tool for youth to make sense of the world around them, reduce anxiety and stress, improve confidence and resiliency, develop collaboration, negotiation, conflict resolution, self-advocacy, problem solving and leadership skills, and discover areas of interests and passions (Ginsburg, 2007; P. Gray, 2013; Holt, 2004). This is a significant finding, as these are all skills highlighted as being important for positive mental-health outcomes for youth (see *Bottom-up Participation for Greater Well-being*, Chapter Two). However, as Hood (2015) notes the majority of schools in Aotearoa New Zealand follow strict timetables for subject based, classroom learning (see

Changing Mindsets, Chapter Two). In such an environment teenagers get very little time to play or mess around with their learning, in the presence of peers or unassuming, yet supportive staff. The data supports Hood's supposition that intensely scheduled classroom time is unnecessary for positive academic learning. Further, it offers the notion that social, emotional, and academic benefits for teenagers arise from unscheduled time in a safe school environment.

It was beyond the scope of this research to review learning through play, however, the notion of unscheduled or free-time and/or 'messing about' (Hawkins, 2002) (see Student-led Learning, Free-time & Learning Through Play, Chapter Two) on academic learning was explored (see Downtime is not Wasted Time, Chapter Seven). Hannah gave the example of using this unscheduled time to work on a science fair project "and explore that interest", Caitlin discussed using unscheduled time to liaise informally with staff about her learning, and Brooke talked of using this time to collaborate with others and find connections through areas of interest. The research findings align with and extend literature, arguing that free time for self-directed activity provides and enhances multiple physical, academic, interpersonal, and socio-emotional skills (Ginsburg, 2007; O-Rourke, 2012). It extends the extant research by reinforcing the importance of unscheduled free time in a safe school environment for the overall academic development and well-being of teenagers, a cohort often overlooked in literature on learning through play. Through the findings one can determine that non-scheduled time in a safe learning environment benefited participating alumni in multiple ways including time for individual and creative thought, to initiate learning around interests, collaborate with peers, and to liaise with staff members.

Fundamental Respect for the Student as a Whole Human; Trust and Support

Grounded in the data is the definition of a safe learning environment as one where students are trusted to manage their own ways of being, space, place, time, and movement, supported through ongoing deliberative dialogue from positions of equity. Trust, not only within the classroom but throughout the school environment, was a concept that came through strongly in the data as being part of a safe learning environment and important to both well-being and authentic student voice. Schools in Aotearoa New Zealand are required to implement strategies to ensure inclusive learning, to increase student voice and encourage active student participation in their learning (Ministry of Education, 2007). The Ministry of Education acknowledges that “for authentic student voice, there needs to be a high level of trust within the classroom” (Ministry of Education, 2015, para. 6). Alumni in my study clearly appreciated the trust they received, which validated their self-worth. However, the trust participants enjoyed was not only within the classroom; it permeated throughout the school culture, reinforced by the democratic school structures. Further dissemination of information on the impact of adult mindsets around trust and control on student behaviour, genuine dialogue, and student-staff relationships is needed.

The findings assert that through the democratic structures the participating schools established a foundation of respect for the student as a whole human, resulting in less tension, negative behaviours, and aggression, and empowering students to take on greater responsibilities. Being trusted to manage agency and their own ways of being resulted in feelings of dignity, significance and belonging for students. Hannah referred to the supportive safe environment at her democratic school helping her to become a “healthy human”. Conversely, Jackson directly

related the lack of trust in a mainstream school environment to feeling “presumed as bad, untrustworthy, incompetent”. These findings directly correlate with those of Aquarone (2021), who also found that students felt they were treated as humans, rather than just students (see *Outcomes of Democratic Schooling*, Chapter Two). This shows that despite the difference in setting (the two studies being in different parts of the world) democratic school structures established safe institutional environments of respect and support, including space and time needed to deal with mental health issues. This is a particularly important finding for schools in Aotearoa New Zealand, where rates of self-harm, suicide and psychological distress among youth are some of the highest in the world (Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand Mauri Tū Mauri Ora, 2023). The dignity resulting from being respected as a whole human, with a myriad of needs, connections, responsibilities, beliefs, and understandings, and as a valued citizen of the school community, was significant to the positive well-being outcomes for participating alumni.

A particularly interesting finding was the tendency of alumni from both regions to use notions such as home, whānau and community to describe their association with the democratic school they attended, indicating their sense of belonging and connection. A correlation of supported agency and freedom of space, time, and ways of being, with belonging and connection is reinforced in the data. Looking at well-being from the standpoint of the child, the findings of Fattore et al. (2016) and Bishop et al. (2003) support the argument apparent in the current data that through the empowerment of each student as an individual, alongside the space needed for individuals to express themselves, created by democratic structures of trust and support, students were able to establish healthy connections with others and obtain the sense of belonging important to one’s sense of well-being. Again, the impact of equitable relationships and genuine

dialogue is evident here, as the findings indicate that democratic schooling structures including equitable relationships, agency, and reciprocal negotiation contribute strongly to students' sense of well-being within an inclusive school environment. The current study adds to the existing literature by offering concrete examples of schools in which, well-being, defined from a student standpoint, is being upheld and maintained. Such information can assist school leaders in developing structures and systems that better support student mental health. Further research on the systems and structures of the schools represented in the data, from a leadership and administrative perspective is needed.

The focus of this research was on the impact of schoolwide structures rather than classroom pedagogy; nonetheless, classroom behaviours and learning were topics of discussion among participants. The data reinforced reflections of Hecht (2010), Greenberg (1987) and Neill (1995) with respect to academic learning and teaching, who observe that children and teens are more engaged and productive learners when given the choice to attend class and tend to move through standard curricula more quickly when ready to learn (discussed in *Outcomes of Democratic Schooling*, Chapter Two). Similarly, as shown in the findings (see *Finding Time to Support Students on Individual Learning Pathways*, Chapter Seven), students at School 1a successfully worked on standard NCEA courses in 3 hours a week per subject as opposed to the 5 normally scheduled in mainstream schools. Both teachers and alumni participating in this research noted that formal lessons in democratic schools were less disruptive than their experiences in mainstream schools, and generally had a greater focus on learning, as opposed to behaviour management, than comparative mainstream classes. An example is Hugo's comment: "the learning environment was very positive, as if you were there, you were there to learn" (see

Participant's Initial Reflections on Their School, Chapter Five). Again, this supports extant literature on democratic schools (Gray & Chanoff, 1986; Greenberg, 1987; Neill, 1995; Rietmulder, 2019).

Alumni appreciated a seamless transition from school to work or higher education, attributing this to a number of reasons including meta-learning and relationship building skills, as well as having the self-confidence and purpose needed to succeed at these higher levels. The findings validate that of Gray and Chanoff (1986) (see Outcomes of Democratic Schooling, Chapter Two) undertaken at Sudbury Valley School in the USA, that students from democratic schools are in no way disadvantaged in their future ambitions, be it higher education or directly to the workforce. Participants in both the current research and that of Gray and Chanoff (1986) felt advantaged by their democratic schooling experiences in terms of attitude, relationship building with colleagues, lecturers and/or managers, purpose, and ability for self-direction. In both the current study and Gray and Chanoff's research a small minority of participants expressed concern that they were behind academically in some areas, but then countered that by saying in the end it did not matter as they felt that through democratic schooling, they had gained the confidence and meta-learning skills needed to recognise and easily fill any academic gaps in their current pursuits. The findings also supported the anecdotal stories of alumni from Summerhill School in England, presented by Lucas (2011), many of whom noted that democratic school gave them the vision to follow passions, the communication skills needed to collaborate with diverse groups of people, and the self-direction required to fill any academic gaps identified to pursue desired goals. Again, the different setting, culture, and time period of the current study to that of existing research adds a new dimension to the growing body literature on this topic,

showing that these positive outcomes are sustainable across differing places and over differing periods of time.

In their qualitative survey, Gray and Chanoff (1986) also asked participants whether they were glad they attended democratic school. Like my research, the overwhelming answer to this question was yes. Again, my research validates Gray and Chanoff's, with participants from both studies (which together includes three separate schools from 2 different countries each implementing different iterations of democratic structures) observing that at democratic school they felt respected, learned tolerance, appreciation of diversity and valuable communication skills, and gained self-confidence. In Chapter Five (Alumni Views of the Biggest Impact of Democratic Schooling), Caitlin observed that unlike her friends attending mainstream school, she loved going to school and wanted to go to school every day, even when she was sick (and through a major natural disaster). Almost all other participants also observed enjoying and wanting to go to school. Conversely, Aotearoa New Zealand has seen a decline in school attendance rates, both pre- and post-COVID-19, across all ethnicities (Education Review Office, 2022).

Many of the learner and school issues found by the Education Review Office (2022) to impact on low attendance in Aotearoa New Zealand's mainstream schools (Bottom-up Participation for Greater Well-being, Chapter Two) were addressed by the democratic systems of the sampled schools, with positive outcomes resulting. For example, alumni from the democratic schools found school to be a safe place, whereas not feeling safe at school was a reason given for low attendance at mainstream schools. Similarly, the positive relationships between staff and among peers, focus on individual needs of learners, inclusivity, and a positive school climate

described throughout the three findings chapters, were issues raised by students surveyed in the ERO study as lacking in their mainstream schools. Students at mainstream school asked for more freedom, more optional activities, greater independence, more trust, greater support and for staff to be more understanding when mistakes were made (Education Review Office, 2022). The alumni I interviewed appreciated all these things in their democratic schools. This is significant, as it seems that many of the key reasons for declining attendance across mainstream schools, can and is being addressed through democratic school structures practised by the participating schools and outlined in this study.

Individual and Emergent Bespoke Learning Pathways

Individual and emergent learning pathways built around student needs and interests, where success is defined as meeting one's individual goals (rather than standardised age-based goals), means student learning is relevant and meaningful to them. Apparent in the findings were correlations between individual learning pathways and student focus on the discovery of learning (rather than collecting grades), reduction of class disruptions, less comparison to others, apparent lack of bullying, and increased acceptance of difference.

Individual pathways also impacted significantly on meaningful dialogue between students and teachers as discussions have tangible outcomes. While student-teacher-whānau dialogue is common-place in Aotearoa New Zealand schools, the standard educational pathway, strict scheduling of time, and general lack of choice that secondary school students encounter on a day to day basis (Hood, 2015), in reality leaves little context for discussion, other than subject choice once a year, setting goals on grade attainment, or analysis of how a student's behaviour patterns fit the predetermined expectations of adults. Evident in the data are examples of genuine

discourse between staff and students, and staff-student-whānau dialogue. For example, in Chapter Five (Participant's Initial Reflections on Their School), Hannah described discourse between herself and her LA where she has opportunity to weigh up options for her learning pathway and justify her decision-making. Similarly, Brooke discussed opportunity for genuine problem solving and calculating risks when deciding on her best use of time (see Alumni Views on the Most Valuable Things About Democratic Schooling, Chapter Five). Individual learning pathways and agency of place, space, time, and ways of being give genuine context and purpose to student-teacher dialogue, resulting, not only in communication skills, but also a range of meta-learning skills including critical thinking, managing agency, decision-making and self-reflection.

Alongside the inclusive environment and appreciation of diversity, participants in the current research noted a comparative lack of bullying in their respective democratic schools (see Chapter Five; Alumni Views on the Most Valuable Things About Democratic Schooling and Staff Views on What was Valuable for Students). Three components of the *Bullying-free NZ School Framework* (shown in Figure 9, Chapter Two) are clearly evidenced throughout the findings: being “a positive school climate that promotes respect and values diversity”; “working with parents, carers, whānau and the wider community”, and “enabling student leadership, agency and voice” (Bullying Prevention Advisory Group, 2023). In this way the findings support the framework. Recollections on bullying did differ between the two schools; participants from School 2 noted some bullying (although much less so than they experienced at mainstream school); and participants from School 1/1a confirmed they did not experience, observe, or hear about bullying at their school. The more targeted individual support at School 1/1a (explored in The Need for Relational Support, Chapter Six) was one key difference between the two schools,

which as suggested by both the data and the *Bullying-free NZ School Framework*, also likely impacted positively on bullying prevention (Bullying Prevention Advisory Group, 2023).

A feature of the two schools, particularly in School 1/1a, was the focus on diverse and flexible individual learning pathways for all students, which was integral to the special character of the school. Discussion of individual learning pathways for all students is not evident in the *Bullying-free NZ School Framework*. However, Thornberg (2011) identifies both a narrative on normality and the competitive culture commonly found in schools as having an impact on bullying (discussed in *The Hidden Curriculum and Participation*, Chapter Two). A link between inclusivity, acceptance of diversity and everyone following their own individual learning pathways was apparent in the findings. For example, Hannah talked about being accepted as you were, and no judgement of others because everyone understood each was on their own journey (see *Participant's Initial Reflections on Their School*, Chapter Five). In line with constant comparative analysis used in grounded theory, this link was explored explicitly in later interviews (see *Inclusivity, Partnership, and Individual Learning Pathways*, Chapter Seven). When asked, Samuel agreed that there could be a link between individual learning pathways for all students, and the bullying-free atmosphere of School 1a. This is an important finding as it adds to the conversation on bullying prevention in Aotearoa New Zealand. To further assist steps towards bullying-free schools in Aotearoa New Zealand, investigation on the impact of the discourse of normality, the factory-style sameness of students segregated in year groups, following similar timetables and timelines, as well as the competitive nature of conventional secondary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand described by Hood (2015) (see Chapter Two; *Schools as Places of Diversity and Changing Mindsets*), on bullying in schools is needed.

Equitable Relationships that Acknowledge Power Imbalances

Through the findings we can see student empowerment through respect, trust, and equity resulting in a perceived levelling of power, leading to feelings of dignity, belonging and self-worth. This, in turn, resulted in student praxis of values including respect, trust, inclusiveness, and contribution to community well-being. Also clear in the findings was the need for staff to abandon traditional approaches of behaviour management to one that can be described as ‘trust first, support if needed’. This approach is encapsulated in Samuel’s words, worth reiterating here: “we start from a position of trust—go and explore your learning—and if you are demonstrating that you're struggling to manage that, then part of our job is to support you to get better at it” (see *Downtime is not Wasted Time*, Chapter Seven).

Evident in the positive academic, social, and emotional outcomes and experiences alumni attributed to the equitable positioning of students in democratic schooling, as well as both alumni and staff comparisons of power and control at mainstream school as opposed to the more supportive culture they encountered at democratic school, the data confirmed that traditional imbalances of power between staff and students in secondary schools are both unnecessary and unhealthy. By removing unnecessary power imbalances and focus on control, the cynicism that Thornberg (2010a) found students feel when asked to be open, vulnerable, and critical in a control-based hierarchical, competitive environment, can be eliminated, further opening genuine and meaningful communication and allowing truly deliberative, inclusive systems that work better for both staff and students.

A change from a teacher control model, or what Varnham (2005b) calls an “authoritarian hierarchical model of ‘them’ and ‘us’” (p. 99) (see full quote in *Critical Pedagogy* and

Democracy, Chapter Two), to a democratic model of trust and support managed through equitable dialogue is a new paradigm for many. Evidence of this in the findings includes Paul's discussion of deschooling, where he indicates that for some this process can take 2-3 years. (Note the concept of deschooling raised by Paul is not specifically related to concept of deschooling offered by Illich (2002) or the unschooling movement, but rather a process of adjusting to the freedoms of a participatory schooling environment after transitioning from a more authoritative mainstream environment, see *Adjusting to Democratic Schooling*, Chapter Six). This supports the assertions of both Shor (1993) and Varnham (2005b) (see Chapter Two, *Changing Mindsets and The Hidden Curriculum and Participation*, respectively). Nonetheless, the web of positive outcomes for students identified in the findings (illustrated in Figure 13, Chapter Seven) supports the value in making this change of mindset and conversely, the negative outcomes of anxiety, absences, and general cynicism among students resulting from control-based structures give justification of why a change in mindset is necessary.

A key finding in the data was that to amend the disconnect between the promotion of critical, reflective, communicative pedagogies in the classroom and the hidden curriculum created by the systems and structures of the school which demand student subservience and obedience and insist that teachers maintain these expectations with power and control, adults need to show vulnerability and listen to and trust students more. The findings indicate that we need to extend this vulnerability to not only the classrooms, but also to school structures and systems, as has been achieved by the sampled schools. The building blocks of democratic schooling, illustrated in Figure 15 (earlier in this chapter) offer a foundation for schools that work to support more equitable positioning of students within the school environment and more

meaningful, genuine dialogue to better understand differing positions. Through ongoing dialogue, not only did students feel respected themselves, but they also felt greater respect and understanding towards staff, as Hannah describes in Chapter Seven (Walking the Talk, Living the Values). When staff communicate with students as equals, students understand staff as people with backgrounds outside of their position and start to see intersections on which to build shared understanding.

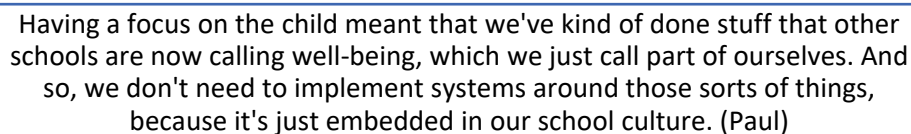
To realise these outcomes students, staff and whānau need to continually challenge their own epistemologies about schooling. Extending on the work of Collins et al. (2019) and hooks (2003) (discussed in *Critical Pedagogy and Democracy*, Chapter Two), the data indicates that to improve student well-being outcomes we must not only think about our biases in the classroom, but also think critically about our biases when developing school structures and systems. Grounded in the data is recognition that to improve well-being and develop a school culture more closely aligned to the ideals of modern pedagogies, adults must look at schooling through the standpoint of the child in their present reality, in order to better understand their perspectives. Lundy (2007) gives us a model with which to give students the voice, space, audience, and influence to share their perspectives, that specifically aligns with Article 12 of the UNCRC (see Lundy's Model Conceptualising Article 12, Chapter Two). Similar models of engaging student voice and perspective can be seen across the sampled schools, thereby endorsing Lundy's model. Embedded throughout the data, demonstrated by comments such as "being heard and being heard in a really constructive way and giving you kind of control over what you're saying, and then having people listen to it. I think it's really important" (Brooke; *Walking the Talk, Living the Values*, Chapter Seven) and Hannah's notion that being heard was more important to her than

being right (Participant's Initial Reflections on Their School, Chapter Five), is evidence that Lundy's model can and does work when implemented within a secondary school environment.

Moreover, also apparent in the data, and of specific significance to the successful implementation of any model of equitable student participation, is the understanding that by embedding these elements of active listening and child standpoint within the everyday culture of the school, or in Paul's words "part of ourselves", (see *Walking the Talk, Living the Values*, Chapter Seven and Figure 16, below), where students themselves make the call on when and how their perspectives are shared, as opposed to adult decisions on how, when, and why student voice should be heard and considered, the positioning of students within the school becomes more equitable and a culture of empowerment and inclusivity is created. The findings suggest that active consideration of schooling from the standpoint of the child or adolescent not only can, but has worked successfully. Through democratic ways of being, guided by the building blocks of democratic schooling in Figure 15 (earlier in this chapter), in which students participate as active and equal citizens within a school community, schools can create an environment in which all children feel empowered, respected, and valued.

Figure 16

A Focus on the Child is Part of Ourselves (quote from Paul)



Having a focus on the child meant that we've kind of done stuff that other schools are now calling well-being, which we just call part of ourselves. And so, we don't need to implement systems around those sorts of things, because it's just embedded in our school culture. (Paul)

Individual Contribution to Community Well-being; Inclusive, Collaborative and Cooperative Communities and Shared Experiences

One of the key positive outcomes highlighted by participants was the inclusive environment, complemented by a respect for difference, individuality, and diversity. Feldman (2000) argues that the communicative, participative environment characteristic of a democratic school is important in the development of children's moral reasoning. Feldman observed the moral behaviour of students at the same democratic school as Gray and Chanoff (1986). He noted that students appreciated feeling equal to others and being able to express their perspective freely, highlighting the importance of participation being meaningful. Feldman also noted that students understood that responsibility includes recognition of the needs of others (see Outcomes of Democratic Schooling, Chapter Two). The findings of the current study support those of Feldman (2000), reinforcing the value of democratic school structures in promoting meaningful dialogue to hear and appreciate a wide range of perspectives and in building improved understanding of diverse values and epistemologies.

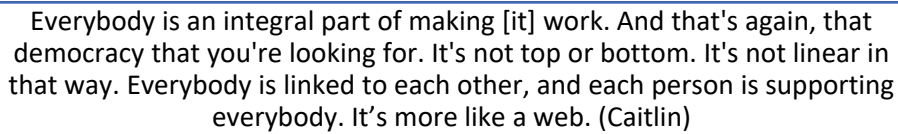
Individual contribution to a cohesive community was a key theme apparent in the data. This theme was encapsulated in Jackson's words "our understanding of a community was not one of individualism, but was one of individual contribution" (discussed in Collaboration and Individual and Collective Well-being, Chapter Seven). Participants indicated that a healthy collective was vital for the success of both the whole school community and individual achievement, as is evidenced by Anahera's reflections in Chapter Seven (Walking the Talk, Living the Values), where she observed "our actions as students impacted on others (...) a lot of us felt this sort of pressure of responsibility that this was like a magic special place". In Aotearoa

New Zealand responsibility towards the collective group is highlighted within the Māori culture (see discussion in Chapter Two; Democracy in Pre-colonial te ao Māori), and as such, we have a responsibility under *te Tiriti o Waitangi* to consider collective well-being and decision-making within educational settings. My research extends that of Feldman (2000) in that it looked more specifically at the relationship between individual agency and collective well-being.

This understanding of participants of the interrelationship between collective and individual well-being is a significant and important finding. Just as deliberative dialogue was fundamental to indigenous forms of democracy (discussed by Behrendt (2011) and Kizza (2011) in *Different Perspectives of Democracy*, Chapter Two), the findings showed that open deliberative discussion was fundamental to balancing individual freedoms and community well-being. Again, this reinforces the importance of genuine opportunity for student voice and meaningful dialogue. Further, as evidenced in Caitlin's analogy of the structure as a school as a web where "everybody is linked to each other" (discussed in *It Operates as a Web*, Chapter Seven and shown in part in Figure 17 below), the data shows that through ongoing participation in democratic deliberation, as active citizens within the school community, students learned to inherently understand that democracy is more than just voting and accepting majority opinion, but rather it is about consensus reaching through consideration of different perspectives and ongoing deliberative discussion; that rules should be about collective well-being rather than power.

Figure 17

Everybody is Linked to Each Other (quote from Caitlin)



Everybody is an integral part of making [it] work. And that's again, that democracy that you're looking for. It's not top or bottom. It's not linear in that way. Everybody is linked to each other, and each person is supporting everybody. It's more like a web. (Caitlin)

Democracy considered without the influence of capitalism removes the facade of individualism and competition, allowing one to differentiate between the student as consumer and student as a citizen (Fielding & Moss, 2011). Participants in the current study considered themselves as citizens of the school and wider community, as clearly evidenced in the findings. They appreciated collaboration and community, as well as the ability to contribute on their own terms. As established above, the differentiation between individual and collective choice is fundamental to a cohesive inclusive community. In keeping with the conclusions of Biesta (2015), Fairley and Wilson (2017), Fielding and Moss (2011) and Harber (1995) participants in the current research expressed a clear understanding of the impact of their individual choices and contribution to collective well-being and took significant regard of their responsibility towards the collective.

A focus on collaboration, community well-being and contribution to the collective found in the data was counter to research on democratic schools by Wilson and Scarbrough (2018), who concluded that democratic schools resonate a neoliberal discourse of individualism over collective well-being (see *Opposing Arguments*, Chapter Two). Rather, the position of Fielding and Moss (2011) (discussed in *Critical Pedagogy and Democracy*, Chapter Two), that democratic

school structures create future citizens who are able to balance individual choices with collective well-being, was reinforced and shown to be viable within a state secondary school setting. Further, the data provides potential avenues for school leaders to establish a collaborative, inclusive, collective school culture, not based on sameness, but instead valuing individual difference in a cohesive, as opposed to competitive, environment. These avenues include ongoing democratic deliberation of school rules, conflicts, and opportunities for contextual and social learning, where students learn compromise as they directly see the outcomes of their opinions and actions, including how others are affected by them.

Everyday Praxis of Values as a Natural Part of the School Culture

Everyday praxis of values as a natural part of the school culture is a fundamental theme entrenched in the data. This theme can be evidenced through two examples already discussed in detail; Paul's quote referring to a culture of well-being (illustrated in Figure 16), and Caitlin's discussion about a web (Figure 17). It is telling that these two examples arise again, as it indicates the interdependence of the democratic building blocks and their influence on student well-being. When combined they represent a school community where all members, staff, student, and whānau, have an equitable positioning in the foundational operation and culture of the school. Having opportunity to meaningfully critique their schooling experiences, with genuine ability to influence outcomes, gave students a sense of belonging and a feeling of responsibility to contribute towards a positive school culture. The embedding of democratic practices in the culture of the school which lead to a praxis promoting positive well-being as an everyday part of the identity of the school, relates to the notion of democratic fellowship discussed by Fielding and Moss (2011) (see Democratic Schools as a Distinct Typology, Chapter

Two). The practice of democracy as an organisation form within the participating schools, then lead to participants (both alumni and staff) experiencing democracy as a way of being. This alignment of democratic organisational structures with democratic values was important in alumni feeling safe within their schools and was a key element of the positive school culture, as staff and students experience shared understandings.

Changing Existing Epistemologies

The findings affirm that students are able to take a greater participatory role in their education and that schools can function effectively with greater student participation and equitable communication structures. This finding supports the writing of those involved in democratic schooling including Greenberg (1987), Hecht (2010), Neill (1995) and Rietmulder (2019), and the research of, Feldman (2000), Fielding and Moss (2011) and Gray and Chanoff (1986). Extrapolating from the data one can see indications that mainstream schools, while valuing progressive pedagogical models still tend to view these within traditional epistemologies of adult authority and control, thereby undermining their value. This aligns with the conclusions of Hood (2015). Conversely, at the participating schools, where inequitable power structures were acknowledged and addressed, students were able to succeed academically with trust rather than control. The deschooling process talked about by Paul (see *Unhappy Experiences at Democratic School*, Chapter Six and *Equitable Relationships that Acknowledge Power Imbalances*, earlier in this chapter) play an important role in the effective functioning and long-term sustainability of democratic schools.

The findings confirmed the need for constant critical reflection of school structures and systems, through ongoing equitable dialogue. Participants from School 2 felt that a lack of

willingness from some staff to adjust and review structures over time contributed somewhat to friction and eventual closure. Consequently, Paul, a school leader from School 1a felt that it was important that the school keep on changing, otherwise it was “not doing its job” (see *Walking the Talk, Living the Values*, Chapter Seven). Essentially both schools followed the process of structural unbundling explored by Hess and Meeks (2010), discussed in Chapter Two (*Schools as Places of Diversity*). The data indicated that constant, ongoing democratic review of schoolwide institutional systems and structures is necessary. Student and whānau involvement in reviewing school structural processes was sought, valued, and responded to throughout. There is constant change in society and democratic systems respond to this by allowing dynamic processes developed through continuous dialogue. The inclusion of students in democratic deliberation of school systems, meant students were able to participate in the development of the school and its culture, thereby both increasing student sense of belonging, but also keeping the school systems relevant to the needs of current cohorts of youth. We need to recognise that as society changes, individual needs change, and schools must also change to address both community and individual needs. The findings show that this needs to be a constant flux of change, not a small tinkering around a rigid system.

Summary

Democratic schooling offers the possibility of sustaining a deliberative democracy through developing citizens with the skills needed to participate actively. The structures of democratic schooling are reflective of indigenous forms of democracy and align with Lundy’s model of space, voice, influence and audience, conceptualising Article 12 of the UNCRC. Democratic structures also align with the values and skills of critical pedagogy and culturally

sustainable pedagogy, which both aim to dismantle oppressive structures; and offer the chance to eliminate the hidden curriculum created by authoritarian and hierarchical systems. Through democratic school structures we can create state school environments that develop positive individual and community well-being and shared experience through diverse and inclusive definitions of success, participation, and contribution.

In this chapter I have reviewed the key findings of the research with respect to the related extant literature. I explored the interplay of democracy and schooling within the participating schools, and developed a set of democratic building blocks, which emerged as the basis for the structures of the participating schools. I then examined some of the key building blocks with respect to the extant literature. After that, I looked at the everyday praxis of democratic values as a natural part of the school culture, where students and staff practised democracy as a way of being, as citizens of the school community. The final section discussed the need for a change from traditional epistemologies around schooling, confirming that teachers are not being critical practitioners if do they not consistently critically reflect on the impact of the hidden curriculum of school systems and structures on students.

Chapter Nine presents the conclusions and implications of implementing democratic systems and structures in the secondary school environment, as well as recommendations moving forward, and potential areas for further research.

Chapter Nine Conclusion

Through this research I have explored the impact of democratic school structures on students and school communities. A definition of democracy that fits Aotearoa New Zealand's diverse society, existing research on democratic schooling, the participation of young people within democracy, and classroom pedagogy that aligns with democratic concepts were critically examined and reflected upon in the literature review. Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews and question-and-answer emails with 21 participants from two democratic secondary schools in different regions (and running in different time periods) of Aotearoa New Zealand. The findings illustrated a range of positive academic, emotional, and social outcomes impacting positively on both individual and collective well-being, interrelated with the democratic ways of being modelled within the schools. Also established is the notion that, as democratic structures in secondary schools work to develop alumni with strong understandings of both their rights and responsibilities as citizens, as well as an appreciation of inclusive communities, such structures will contribute towards a more sustainable national democracy and aid movements towards decolonisation.

I begin this chapter with discussion on how the findings addressed the initial research question. I then move on to outline implications of the findings. How the study contributes to the research fields is explored next, followed by a look at the limitations of the study. Recommendations and suggestions for further research are offered before I make my concluding comments.

Addressing the Research Questions

Democratic school structures at secondary level create shared understanding among staff and students through equity of status and individual expression. Individual learning paths based on student interest both encourage and are managed through meaningful dialogue. Individualised education does not cause a lack of collaboration or community. Quite the opposite. Through acceptance and appreciation of diversity and individuality, we build stronger more inclusive communities. Underpinning the foundation of individualised learning is a fundamental respect of the student as a whole human. This involves removing the power differential in the traditional view of teacher and student and replacing it with a focus on role, rather than status. The ongoing practice of equitable and meaningful democratic deliberation is essential to this process. The broader concept of participatory democracy with a focus on deliberation, is fully understood and realised in this context. Rather than one of voting and majority rules, democracy is understood as one of deliberative debate, collective discussion, and negotiation to find a way forward.

The whole premise of democratic schooling in this study is a focus on supported agency. Somewhat an oxymoron, this notion of supported agency redefines the stereo-typical teacher-student relationship. The concept of adulthood takes on new meaning in a democratic schooling environment moving from one of authority to one of support and guidance. Through providing support for agency there is movement from obvious equality to subtle equity. The conventional understanding of success within schooling is also redefined within democratic schooling. Students define their own success by setting and meeting individual and shared learning goals. Through authentic participation students also play a valuable role in the overall success of the school, giving genuine meaning to their contribution.

The main research question asked how democratic processes in secondary schools impact adolescent students. A wide range of positive outcomes across academic, social, and emotional realms have been highlighted. The web of interactions of positive outcomes and democratic structures illustrated in Figure 13 (Chapter Seven), shows the key positive outcomes for participants, and the interrelationship of these outcomes with democratic structures.

Participants felt valued and respected within their schools and valued and respected others in return. Those with special learning needs appreciated the individual learning pathways, and, importantly, the extension of individual learning pathways to **all** students removed competition and comparison among and between students, adding to the inclusive school environment. Opportunities for genuine and meaningful student-driven dialogue, with equitable positioning for students and staff, resulting in tangible outcomes, were promoted as being important in developing the positive outcomes participants highlighted. Agency of time, place, and ways of being for students meant students felt trusted and dignified as whole humans and, when managed through a philosophy of trust and active dialogue, led to participants feeling safe within their school environment.

My research has brought together perspectives on critical and culturally sustaining pedagogies with democratic schooling and has incorporated aspects of the relatively new research ontology of child (or student) standpoint. Critical pedagogy requires ongoing critical reflection. Democratic student participation provides opportunity for ongoing critique of the impact of school structures and resulting hidden curriculum, from the standpoint of the students.

A key idea in any grounded theory methodology is that the data, rather than the research question, guides the research through an underlying objective of determining ‘*what is going on*

here?' (Birks & Mills, 2015; Ross, 2016). The democratic building blocks illustrated in Figure 15 (Chapter Eight) show the key democratic structures apparent in the findings as being essential to developing the wide range of positive outcomes resulting from democratic schooling. The relationship between and among the positive outcomes and democratic structures is one of interdependence. All aspects of the democratic structures are needed as each relies on the others.

Wider aims of the study included an exploration of the hidden curriculum created by rules, structures and processes within the subject schools and consideration of how democratic processes relate to the interplay of individual and community well-being within the school environment. Characteristics of participatory democracy align closely with those of critical and culturally sustainable pedagogies. All three have an underlying purpose of attaining justice for all people through equitable positioning of individuals and groups. It is apparent that through the structuring of schools around democratic ideals (illustrated in Figure 15, Chapter Eight), a school environment is created which embodies the ideals of critical and cultural sustaining pedagogies, and those sought by the New Zealand Curriculum, therefore removing any negative hidden curriculum created by traditional hierarchical authoritarian structures often found in mainstream schools. The reality of the participating schools matched the rhetoric of their values and ideals.

Through the everyday praxis of democracy, the interplay of individual and school community needs is complementary. Via improved individual well-being a healthy community was created. Reciprocally, a healthy community was also found to be integral to individual well-being. The elements of genuine meaningful equitable dialogue, and student agency of time, place, and ways of being, are important components in the interplay of individual and

community well-being. Students were empowered to collaborate within communities of interest and learned to understand the need for collaborative relationships and a healthy whole.

The final two objectives of the study were consideration of the impact of democratic processes in secondary schools on the wider community and participant understandings of democracy. These two objectives were also found to be interrelated. Participant understandings of democracy align closely with those of participatory democracies, including the participatory systems of governance of many indigenous communities, including tangata Māori. The learning of democratic practices through everyday praxis, where students and staff were considered active and equal citizens within the school community, resulted in well-developed understandings of democratic ways of being, and alumni who understood the need to participate actively within wider society. Active, emotionally and socially healthy, citizens are vital to the effective functioning of any healthy democracy.

Implications of the Findings

Alignment of Pedagogical Values with School Systems and Structures

The pedagogical theories of Dewey (1916/2011) and Freire (1968/2018) have become common place in teacher educator programmes and have significant positive impact on teaching and learning in school classrooms. This is evident in the values and vision of the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) and the Ministry of Education's *Statement of Intent 2021-26* (Ministry of Education, 2021). In Aotearoa New Zealand culturally sustainable strategies that aim for greater inclusion and empowerment of Māori students, and those of other cultures, seek the implementation of similar values including equitable relationships, dialogue, critical questioning, and the dismantling of hegemonic structures of domination to empower and include

a diversity of students (Bishop & Berryman, 2009; Penetito, 2010; Penetito et al., 2011). Nonetheless, as outlined in the literature review, there is an apparent mismatch between classroom pedagogy aimed at inclusivity, empowerment, and dialogue and conventional institutional school structures of authority and control (Hood, 2015; Thornberg, 2010a; Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012; Varnham, 2005a, 2005b).

The need for the democratic structures of participation, diversity, inclusiveness, voice, community and critical reflection to be reflected in mainstream schools has been highlighted by education researchers for over 100 years (Apple & Teitelbaum, 2001; Blaisdell, 2000; Dewey, 1938/2015; Freire, 1968/2018; McLaren, 2001; Neill, 1995; Shor, 1993). Nonetheless the disconnect between these concepts as purported goals of modern schools and the outcomes created by a hidden curriculum of generic learning programmes, regulation of time, place and movement, and control-based behaviour management systems, both in Aotearoa New Zealand and elsewhere, remains as a significant obstacle to student well-being (Apple, 2004; Hood, 2015).

It is apparent in the findings that democratic school structures work to address the gap between discourse and experience identified in Aotearoa New Zealand schools, resulting in highly positive student outcomes across a range of measures. Not only do democratic school structures impact positively on the academic, social, and emotional well-being of individual students, but they also work towards building a positive and cohesive collective community within the school. Implications of the findings suggest that through democratic ways of being in secondary schools, which allow greater consideration of the experience of schooling from a student standpoint in school decision-making, are reflective of indigenous forms of democracy,

and align with the requirements of Article 12 of the UNCRC and Lundy's model of space, voice, influence, and audience, as well as critical and culturally sustainable pedagogy, we can create state school environments that develop highly positive individual and community well-being, and shared experiences through diverse and inclusive definitions of success, participation, and contribution.

Reduction of Bullying and Improved Well-being for Youth

Alongside a structure for school systems that align with pedagogical values, opportunity to remove the hidden curriculum currently causing harm to secondary students is also offered through democratic school systems. It has been established that young people in Aotearoa New Zealand are suffering, with some of the highest levels of bullying, self-harm, psychological distress and suicide across all cohorts, in the developed world (see discussion on Bottom-up Participation for Greater Well-being, Chapter 2). Schools need to take some responsibility for these alarming statistics. Participants in the study not only felt respected and valued as whole humans as a result of democratic school structures, but they also expressed that their experiences of democratic schools helped to heal the harm caused from mainstream school environments. It is apparent that mainstream schools need to review their current school structures in their entirety. The unbundling of school structures in Aotearoa New Zealand schools was suggested in a 2012 working paper for the New Zealand Council of Educational Research (Bolstad & Gilbert, 2012). It is time for New Zealanders to listen to this recommendation. Consequently, this research offers a way forward for schools to rebuild effective school systems and structures that meet not only the academic needs of a diverse range of students but also their social and emotional needs.

More work needs to be done on changing epistemologies around school systems and structures and adjusting perceptions of adult and student in school environments. Without this we remain in a situation where progressive classroom pedagogy and school values are undermined by traditional institutional structures and mindsets. The harm caused to students in mainstream environments will continue, and students will not be able to take full advantage of development opportunities proven possible by the democratic schools in this research.

Redefinitions of Common Understandings Within Schooling

To effectively implement democratic school structures a change of mindset around many aspects of schooling must occur. A redefinition of *adulthood* in the schooling environment is necessary to create more positive outcomes for secondary students. Reimagining the role of the teacher from the culturally accepted role of authoritarian decision-maker to one of supporter through dialogue, and a sharer of relevant knowledge and experience when appropriate, is necessary. Schools must work alongside students to empower them to follow their own individual learning pathways. Equity, deliberation, and open communication from equitable positions are fundamental in secondary schools if we wish to achieve healthier student outcomes.

Alongside a redefinition of teacher, a redefinition of success within schools is also necessary. Success measured along narrow confines of examination results is no longer adequate. Rather, as set by the examples of democratic schools, success should be defined around setting and meeting individual goals for how one acts now and how they will participate in society following graduation.

A redefinition of common understandings of school is also necessary. While learning happens at school it is not the only place we learn or gain an education. Further, schools should

not be places where adolescents go to obey rules and bells and be required to justify their behaviours. Rather, schools should be places where learning is recognised as a lifelong journey, and where staff and students work alongside each other to help young people develop interests and establish collaborative learning relationships with others.

Acknowledgement of Inequitable Power Imbalances

Student voice is already promoted within schools in Aotearoa New Zealand. However, without recognition of inequitable power imbalances student voice is limited and risks of student cynicism are high (Thornberg, 2009b, 2010a). School systems built around democratic building blocks offer opportunity for more effective student voice however, to achieve these it is essential that existing power imbalances between adults and students within the school environment are recognised and addressed. While this may lead to initial vulnerability of adults (and some students) the outcomes are worth the exposure.

Power imbalances among students, created by competitive learning outcomes and school policies promoting sameness also need to be addressed. Further, the potential for the removal of a discourse of normality within schools, identified by Thornberg (2011) as impacted on bullying, is also promised by democratic school structures. This study confirms that the implementation of individual learning plans for all students and agency of time, place, and expression of self, thereby removing sameness, promote greater inclusivity and are possible under existing education legislation in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Equitable Dialogue with Students in School Environments and School Policy

Current systems of student participation in school decision-making primarily consists of representative groups such as school councils, colonial constructions such as head students and

prefects, and a sole student representative on the Board of Trustees. It is necessary that school policy is developed that ensures **all** students have opportunity to participate in school decision-making when students themselves feel it to be necessary, and that their concerns are adequately acknowledged and addressed. The building blocks of democratic schooling offer school structures that support such measures. It is further suggested that measures for equitable democratic participation are established within school policy to ensure all members of the school community have formal recognition of their rights as active citizens within the school environment.

Implementation of Article 12 UNCRC within Mainstream Schools

Clearly participants in the research felt heard within their schools. Their descriptions of student voice aligned with Lundy's (2007) model encapsulating the requirements of Article 12 of the UNCRC (discussed in detail in Chapter 2; Lundy's Model Conceptualising Article 12). This significant finding has possible implications on the incorporation of children's rights within school practices. The findings provide both practical examples and a theoretical foundation for state schools to ensure student rights under the UNCRC (with specific respect to Article 12) are upheld.

The data also suggests that such rights are not being provided for within mainstream secondary schools. Some scepticism of mainstream teachers towards the concept of student voice is evident (Bolstad, 2011a; Lundy, 2007). Bolstad (2011a) notes that "many structures and practices that define typical school culture are simply not conducive to youth–adult partnership thinking". An important part of the implementation of Article 12 and related articles is the removal of adult-driven compulsion on when, where and how children should communicate their

opinions (Lansdown, 2001). Young people may need support in expressing their opinions and it is the adults' responsibility to support them with this (Lundy, 2007). Participants who transferred from democratic school to mainstream were frustrated at not having opportunity to negotiate learning or weigh up options to find solutions suitable to all. This includes younger alumni who attended secondary school between 2005 to 2015; being 13-23 years after the ratification of the UNCRC. There was a clear contrast between experiences at mainstream school where student's rights did not seem to be met adequately and alumni who felt harm had been caused by school staff and systems, versus their experiences at democratic school where they felt heard, supported, and dignified as human beings.

Lansdown (2011) recognises that a change in cultural attitudes on the authority of adults over children may be needed for the proper implementation of Article 12, writing "the participatory thrust of the UNCRC demands – sometimes profoundly – change in cultural attitudes towards children" (p. V). Nonetheless, at the current time, we are 29 years after ratification of the UNCRC. Must we wait another generation before we see real change?

The disconnect between UNCRC Article 12, adult interpretations of student participation and student experiences at school, discussed above and in the Literature Review (see The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Chapter Two) was not evident at the schools participating in this research. The schools provided structures that implement proper participation of the relevant UNCRC Articles and Lundy's (2007) model conceptualising Article 12. It is concerning that these schools are unique in their approach. This research adds towards a foundation for development of a national framework to support school structures in Aotearoa

New Zealand that meet UNCRC obligations with particular respect to Article 12 (as has been done in Ireland (Bourke & O'Neill, 2022)).

Sustaining Democracy through Schooling

Rather than learn about democracy as an abstract concept within a non-democratic institution, alumni in this research learnt an inclusive, deliberative democracy through everyday praxis, as a way of living. This is vital for the sustainability of a diverse, multicultural, inclusive democratic community. Many educators and researchers highlight the need for democracy to be understood as a set of values and moral codes around individual freedom, collective responsibility and shared decision-making that must be learned through ongoing day-to-day practice in school environments (Alshurman, 2015; Englund, 2006; Fairley & Wilson, 2017; Fielding & Moss, 2011; P. Gray, 2013; Hecht, 2010; Morse, 2007; Tikoko et al., 2011). Nonetheless, conventional secondary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand are predominantly hierarchical and authoritarian institutions (Hood, 2015), educating youth in systems that run contrary to the democratic structure of society.

Democracy offers an inclusive system of governance that provides for a diversity of people (Chou & Beausoleil, 2015; Isakhan, 2012). A deliberative, participatory democracy can empower minorities through assuring their perspective is heard and giving all people agency and processes to effect change if and when needed. However, democracy can be hard to sustain. It requires citizens who are willing and able to participate openly and who are aware of the need to balance their individual freedom with their responsibility towards collective well-being (Dewey, 1916/2011; Englund & Sockett, 2000; Glassman & Patton, 2014). Through democratic building blocks in schools, including equitable relationships, ongoing and meaningful deliberative

dialogue, freedom of individual expression, space for students to be themselves, open participation, and contribution to community well-being, practiced as an everyday way of being by all members of the school community, students develop into, not only academically competent individuals, but also confident communicators, empathetic towards diverse perspectives, and with the understanding and skills needed for effective democratic participation within communities. A long-term implication of democratic schools is a more sustainable national democracy, creating a society less susceptible to fundamentalism.

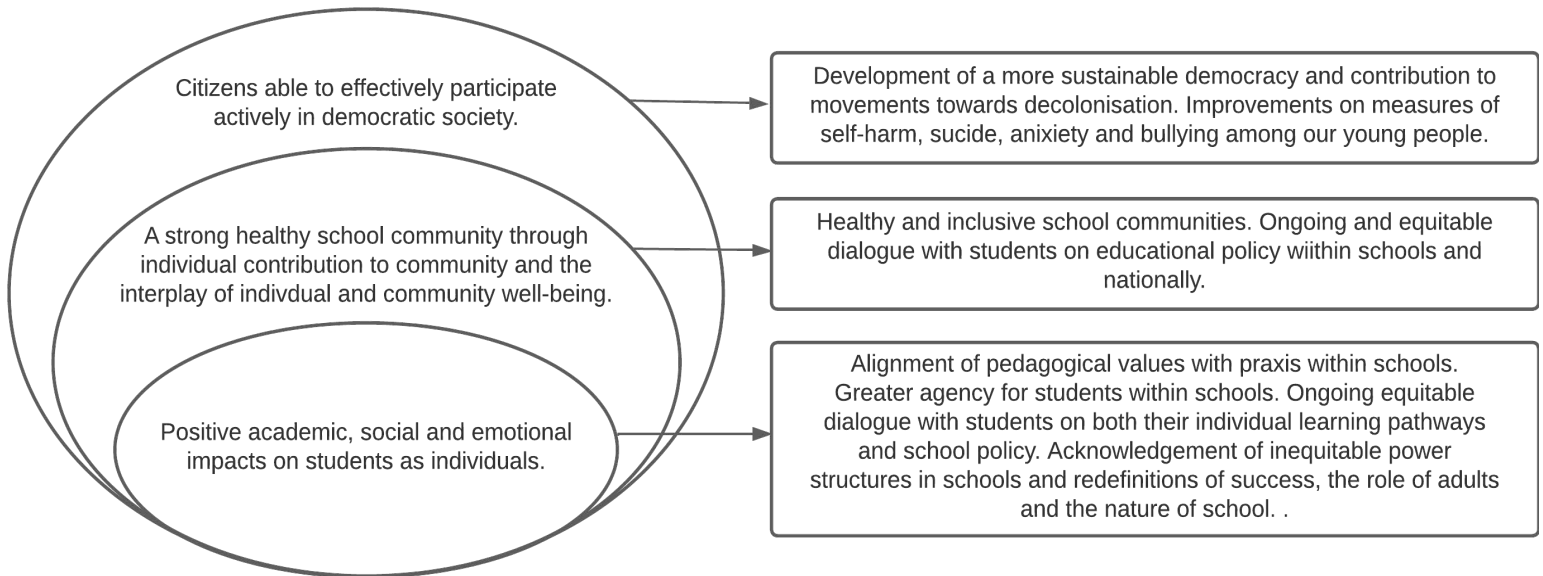
Movements Towards Decolonisation

The potential of democratic schooling to offer a positive pathway towards educating future citizens in deliberative and inclusive consensus building, with a solid understanding and appreciation of diversity, inclusion, and partnership, has a possible implication for Aotearoa New Zealand's obligations under *te Tiriti o Waitangi*. The environment described by participants appeared to align with traditional Māori systems of government outlined in Chapter 2 (Democracy in Pre-colonial te ao Māori). It is also one that supports active listening, empathy, and genuine effort to understand and accommodate different perspectives. Relationship, collaboration, and dialogue feature strongly in culturally sustainable pedagogies (Bishop et al., 2003; Bishop & Glynn, 2000; Ministry of Education, 2013; Savage & Hindle, 2011), and were also prominent concepts in the findings. Schools in Aotearoa New Zealand are places of diversity, and inclusive, culturally sustainable practices that incorporate democratic characteristics are vital to ensure equitable outcomes.

The understanding and praxis of democracy within the sampled schools aligned with that of indigenous understandings of democracy (discussed in Chapter 2, Different Perspectives of

Democracy). Many indigenous practises of democracy involve a system of governance that promotes inclusivity, participation, deliberative mechanisms, debate, free speech, equal access to information, diversity, egalitarianism, non-hierarchy, and accountability (Behrendt, 2011; Chou & Beausoleil, 2015; Isakhan, 2012; Kizza, 2011; Muhlberger & Paine, 1993). These characteristics were prevalent in the structures and systems of the participating democratic schools. This suggests that we can learn from indigenous wisdom to build a more egalitarian society. Giroux (1993) argues that Freire's critical pedagogy can be presented as a pedagogy working towards decolonisation, as it works to dismantle hegemonic dominance and empower oppressed groups. Similarly, I argue that the enactment of democratic school structures allowing the praxis of democracy as an everyday way of being within schools, can support work towards decolonisation through critical analysis of existing colonial structures and the empowerment and consideration of a range of diverse perspectives within school decision-making.

Figure 18, below, provides a brief outline of the findings and implications across individual, school and the wider community.

Figure 18*Outline of the Findings and Implications of the Study***Contribution to the Research Field**

After more than 100 years of development (Apple & Teitelbaum, 2001; Blaisdell, 2000; Dewey, 1916/2011; Neill, 1995) democratic schooling remains an alternative to the status quo (Apple & Beane, 2007; Fielding & Moss, 2011). While the fundamental change from traditional to more progressive pedagogies is a long-term process (Freire, 1968/2018; Shor, 1993), it is well past time for an adjustment of traditional school structures in secondary schools. Accordingly, research discussing democratic processes in schools is growing and can now be found from many countries around the world, including the U.S.A. (Feldman, 1997, 2000; Feldman & Gray, 1999; Gray & Chanoff, 1986; Greenberg, 1987), the U.K. (Angrilli, 1974; Fielding & Moss, 2011; Neill, 1995, 2006), the Netherlands (Osório & Shread, 2018), Brazil (Osório, 2015), and Israel (Hecht, 2010). This much needed study adds to this growing body of research.

My research is the most comprehensive study on democratic schools in Aotearoa New Zealand. The unique Aotearoa New Zealand setting offers a new comparative context for the international body of research on democratic schooling. Aotearoa New Zealand-based research specific to this field exists, although is not prolific (Hardman, 2013; Peck, 2009; Vaughan, 2002). The breadth, validity and broad focus of this research adds significantly to this domestic field.

Further, sampling across two separate democratic schools provided a unique opportunity to compare and contrast two different approaches to student participation. The differing approaches to participation, different regions of the two schools, and difference in time periods participating alumni attended secondary school, all provided a unique means of triangulation of the data, and further reinforced its validity. The difference in provision of support is a key difference between the two schools, with the findings reinforcing the need for one-on-one support for students to assist them in navigating agency.

The grounded theory methodology allowed the research to be driven by the data, rather than the research question. This adds a unique perspective to the existing literature as it was the needs and concerns of the participants that drove the pathway of the research. It became evident at the beginning of the data collection process that a grounded theory methodology was especially important, due to the overwhelming number of respondents to my initial requests for participants. Alumni from the sampled schools wanted their voice to be heard. They believed strongly that their school experiences impacted positively on their long-term well-being and that the democratic systems in their schools should be replicated to improve the lives of young people

today. Using grounded theory, I was able to hear and build on the messages participants felt to be most important.

The purpose of grounded theory is to explain or predict something through systematic analysis of the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Through systematic analysis of the data, driven by the voices of participants, I have been able to provide not only a description of many of the positive outcomes for students resulting from democratic schooling, but also a detailed explanation of the interplay of democratic structures and the resulting individual and community well-being. Together this offers a theoretical basis for those wishing to improve well-being outcomes within their school communities to consider.

My study has revealed that in Aotearoa New Zealand we are able to create schools, within existing state legislation and curriculum, that cater to a diverse range of perspectives and learning types, support our obligations under Article 12 of the UNCRC, attend to critical and culturally sustainable pedagogies, and improve student emotional and social well-being. It has also provided a theoretical basis for school structures that meet these goals. Further, it has revealed that urgent work is needed to disseminate information on the impact of existing mindsets around many concepts of schooling on student well-being.

Limitations of the Study

A number of limitations to this study have been discussed throughout the text. These include the limited number of schools to choose from, the need to focus on positive outcomes, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the research strategies and methodology. Further limitations were the special character classification of the schools participating that allowed flexibility in student enrolment, and the cost and resourcing of the study.

There are a very limited number of schools in Aotearoa New Zealand which could be considered as democratic, and even less so catering to the secondary level. This limited the potential range of participants significantly. While I was able to liaise with 23 participants from an initial sample of over 50 initial respondents, the sample is not highly reflective of Aotearoa New Zealand's diversity of cultures and ethnicities, with most respondents being Pākehā.

The schools in this study were both categorised as special character schools. This meant that, while being state integrated, they were not subject to zoning restrictions and could choose the students on their roll. While both schools assured me that they had a diverse range of students (socio-economically, culturally, and learning ability and style), they also conceded that all students (and their whānau) who enrolled were supportive of the special character of the school. It would be interesting to investigate the implications of democratic structures on schools with compulsory attendance.

School 2 has been closed for several years. While as a positive this meant that staff and alumni had significant time to reflect on their experiences and how they benefited from them through adult life, it also meant that their reflections were not fresh and had perhaps been tainted by time and nostalgia. It is also possible that their experiences were not entirely applicable to current needs of secondary schools and students.

One of the participating staff members from School 1a did not consider the school as democratic, in the way that other schools are democratic. This referred to the level of participation students had in administrative and disciplinary decisions. For example, disciplinary matters in School 1a were largely dealt with by staff, unlike in School 2 where such issues were discussed in whole school meetings. Nonetheless, the school met most of the criteria for

democratic schools outlined in the literature review and was therefore considered suitable for this research. The other participants from School 1/1a did not question the democratic description of the school.

The focus on positive outcomes added an obvious bias to the research. This focus was in place to ensure no harm to participating school was caused from the study. In the end, the changed methods (see paragraph below) meant that I was able to include a school that was now closed, which allowed for more flexibility in interviews with School 2 participants. While the positive bias remained, negative comments that were made were neither covered nor deleted. When considering the research conclusions, readers should note that the positive bias may have deterred applicants who did not have positive experiences at democratic school from participating in the research.

COVID-19 impacted on the study through the need for continual national and regional lockdowns and limitations of visitors to schools. Data was collected during 2020. At this time Aotearoa New Zealand took a safety first approach to addressing COVID-19, through extensive lockdowns and strict rules around travel and in-person social engagement. The original research strategies of visiting schools and workshopping with groups of students had to be abandoned. This was disappointing, as it limited options to consider democratic schooling from the standpoint of the adolescent student experiencing it. Even so, there were positives arriving from the modification of research methods. Talking to alumni meant participants had had time to reflect on their experiences, compare with peers who attended conventional schools, and consider how their education played out within university and workplace settings.

A further limitation involves cost and resourcing of the study. Being a PhD project, I was limited to myself as researcher (with the ongoing support of my supervisors). This meant I was only able to conduct research on a relatively small sample and analysis took longer than a more

collaborative project perhaps might have. It would be interesting to undertake a much wider study, with a greater focus on different cohorts within the community.

I would like to take particular note here of how keen alumni were to participate in the research. More than enough respondents for a PhD study were obtained through 2 simple Facebook posts (one for each school). While this limited the initial sample group to only those who followed the Facebook alumni group/s (or friends of those following through word of mouth), it does reflect the enthusiasm alumni and staff have for democratic schooling and their wish to assist further dissemination of information about the topic.

Recommendations and Further Research

The results from this study are highly significant for how we view future democratic school structures. Through democratic ways of being and administrative structures in secondary schools, we can create state school environments that support highly positive individual and community well-being. The schools studied prove it is possible to successfully organise a secondary school around deliberative democratic values, that align with critical and culturally sustainable pedagogies, and support our obligations under the UNCRC. It is recommended that school leaders take a risk and develop similar democratic systems to implement more extensive measures of student participation in their schools. Further dissemination of information on the impact of adult mindsets around trust and control on student behaviour, genuine dialogue, and student-staff relationships is needed to assist school leaders in this pursuit.

While the current research gives a comprehensive overview of the positive outcomes possible from democratic school structures, it is beyond its scope to provide detail on administrative particulars. A closer look at leadership roles and responsibilities, administration

systems, and how democratic schools address the applicable legislation is required. This would work to assist other schools in developing similar democratic systems suitable to their communities. Further research in this area is recommended.

One of my key personal motivations for the study was my deep concern about the poor state of mental health of Aotearoa New Zealand's youth. Aotearoa New Zealand scores high in rates of youth suicide, self-harm, psychological distress, and bullying. The current research investigated bullying, with a consensus that there was little to no bullying in sampled schools. Research on moral development of students at democratic school was undertaken by Feldman (2000), who concluded that students from the democratic school he studied had higher than normal moral reasoning. Nonetheless, further research into this area is required. A comparison of mental health issues and bullying of students in democratic schools with their peers from conventional high schools would be highly beneficial.

Thornberg (2011) identified a prevailing discourse of normality within schools as a factor influencing rates of bullying. The inclusivity, individual learning journeys, and acceptance of difference displayed in the sampled schools, alongside the low rates of bullying participants reported, correlate with Thornberg's finding. Further research into discourses of normality within schools, and the impact on bullying is needed.

A comparative study with conventional schools is thereby recommended. A comparison of the current research on positive outcomes of schooling is suggested. Research comparing the understanding of democracy, and participation in democratic systems of students and alumni (and staff) from democratic schools to that of students, alumni, and staff from non-democratic schools is also suggested.

The positive relationship between democratic school structures and culturally sustainable pedagogies has been discussed. It is recommended that more detailed investigation into this relationship is explored. Further, a comparative study within kura kaupapa Māori schools may better support *te Tiriti o Waitangi* partnerships.

Finally, it is suggested that research is needed to determine whether schools in Aotearoa New Zealand currently meet their UNCRC obligations. Further research is required around teacher and school leader understandings of Article 12 and related articles, as well as a more in-depth look at the systems and structures of the few schools meeting these requirements, than was able to be achieved in this study.

Concluding Thoughts

A fear of the unknown is suggested by both Varnham (2005b) and Gray and Chanoff (1986) as to why deliberative dialogue and democratic schooling have not had a bigger impact on the school systems in democratic nations, despite a wealth of evidence justifying their value. If things were okay, keeping to the status quo would be understandable. However, Aotearoa New Zealand's poor rates of youth suicide, psychological distress, bullying, self-harm, and truancy is a stark reminder that for young people things are not okay. By providing evidence from Aotearoa New Zealand and offering democratic building blocks to guide schools who wish to pursue more equitable well-being outcomes for all students in their school community, this study builds on the growing body of evidence proving that democratic schooling offers a positive alternative that has the potential to address the shameful statistics on youth mental health.

Alumni in this research benefitted from, valued, and appreciated the challenge and experience of democratic agency in their schooling in a wide variety of ways. Notable about the

schools selected for this research is they are state schools. As such they are not unique in their ability to prioritise learning and provide individual learning plans for all students; all schools in Aotearoa New Zealand are set up to do this. It is the school leaders who decide where to put their focus.

Social justice and equity will not happen if we merely assume the needs of others, or through good intentions only. We need to action our intentions. To achieve authentic inclusiveness, we need to address each individual student's social reality. We cannot do this through guessing. To do this we must seek and respect their own explanations of their social reality. We need to listen to students. To truly listen we need to create opportunities for students to express their views, and ensure their views are given due weight in decision-making and are responded to. Democratic schooling structures provide a framework for schools to meet these goals. Critical pedagogy requires ongoing critical reflection. Democratic student participation provides opportunity for ongoing critical reflection by school staff from the standpoint of the students.

In 2019, I spoke at an education research conference about my upcoming research plans. A person in the audience asked me how democratic schools deal with the notion of 'you don't know what you don't know'. She believed that students would not access the knowledge they needed without adults to tell them what they must learn. At the time I was unsure how to address this and I mumbled something about how as a society we do not always know what we need to know, and current curricula needs constantly change in a fast-moving world, before passing the question to the audience.

I now have an answer. The answer is we do not know what we do not know. At democratic school students learn deeply that they do not know what they do not know. They learn that learning is an ongoing journey, and you will never know everything. You do not know what you do not know is part of the hidden curriculum of this type of education. However, adults also learn this. Adults learn that they do not know what they do not know. They learn to listen to students. They learn through dialogue, empathy, and trust. They learn through partnership. They learn to support, rather than control. Partnerships are formed and together adults and students create a safe space to learn and celebrate each other.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – Human Ethics Approval

Date: 11 December 2019

Dear Kylie Smith

Re: Ethics Notification - **NOR 19/65 - New Application - Democracy, Freedom and School: Realigning power in Aotearoa's secondary schools.**

Thank you for the above application that was considered by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Human Ethics Northern Committee at their meeting held on Wednesday, 11 December,

Approval is for three years. If this project has not been completed within three years from the date of this letter, reapproval must be requested.

If the nature, content, location, procedures or personnel of your approved application change, please advise the Secretary of the Committee.

Yours sincerely

Professor Craig Johnson
Chair, Human Ethics Chairs' Committee and Director (Research Ethics)

Appendix B – Alumni Consent Form and Information Sheet



Institute of Education
Massey University Albany
Private Bag 102 904
North Shore Mail Centre
Auckland 0745

Democracy, Freedom and School: Realigning power in Aotearoa's secondary schools.

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM - INDIVIDUAL

I have read, or have had read to me in my first language, and I understand the Information Sheet attached as Appendix I. I have had the details of the study explained to me, any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time. I have been given sufficient time to consider whether to participate in this study and I understand participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time.

1. I agree / do not agree [*choose one*] to the interview being sound recorded.
2. I agree / do not agree [*choose one*] to the interview being image recorded.
3. I wish / do not wish [*choose one*] to have my recordings returned to me.
4. I wish / do not wish [*choose one*] to have data placed in an official archive.
5. I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Declaration by Participant:

I _____ [print full name] hereby consent to take part in this study.

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____



Institute of Education
 Massey University Albany
 Private Bag 102 904
 North Shore Mail Centre
 Auckland 0745

APPENDIX I

Democracy, Freedom and School: Realigning power in Aotearoa's secondary schools.

INFORMATION SHEET

My name is Kylie Smith. I am a PhD student at Massey University and an experienced Primary and Secondary teacher. As part of my PhD, I am looking to identify democratic initiatives and processes happening in Aotearoa's secondary schools and the positive impacts these have for students. The aim of the research is to develop theory around student participation in democratic processes specific to NZ secondary schools and students, to further the development of participatory processes for all secondary students in Aotearoa.

In order to do this, I would like to spend some time taking with you regarding your experiences attending a democratic school, and how you think you have benefited from these experiences in your adult life.

For this phase of the research I am particularly interested in answers to the following questions:

- How did your school practice democracy?
- What opportunities for student voice, student participation in decision making or democratic initiatives were happening within the school?
- What did you enjoy about the processes, and what skills and learning do you think you gained from this participation?
- Any other information that you think might be useful to my investigation.

Project Procedures

- This would involve:
 - A one-on-one, or group, semi-structured interview with you discussing the questions above; or correspondence via email.
- Formal consent will be sought from you regarding your participation in the interview.
- The interview would be audio-recorded so that I can accurately transcribe the conversation later.
- All data will be collated, aggregated and used to present findings to the research questions. Along with data gathered from other phases of this project, this data will form the basis of my PhD research report. Once data from all phases of the project have been analysed, I intend to develop 'user friendly' teacher resources with guidelines on how other schools in NZ could use democratic processes to increase opportunity for student voice and participation.
- All raw data will be stored for a period of five years in a lockable filing cabinet at Massey University.



Institute of Education
Massey University Albany
Private Bag 102 904
North Shore Mail Centre
Auckland 0745

- All participants will be anonymous, unless they specifically ask otherwise.

Participants Rights

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation to participate in the research. If you agree to participate, separate consent will be sought from all participants.

All participants have rights as set out in the Massey University Code of Ethical Conduct. These include to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview;
- withdraw from the study at any time prior to publishing of results;
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.

Project Contacts

If you have any questions about this research please feel free to contact me, or my supervisors. Contact details are:

Researcher:

Kylie Smith

One Tree Point

NORTHLAND 0118

Phone

Email kylie.hitchcock@gmail.com

Supervisors:

Prof Roberta Hunter

Professor of Pasifika Education Studies
Massey University College of Education

Private Bag 102904

Auckland 0745

Phone (09) 414 0800 ext. 43530

Dr Ksenija Napan

Associate Professor

Massey University College of Social Work

Private Bag 102904

Auckland 0745

Phone (09) 414 0800 ext. 43363

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named above are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you wish to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Prof Craig Johnson, Director, Research Ethics, telephone 06 356 9099 x 85271, email humanethics@massey.ac.nz.

Appendix C - Staff Consent Form and Information Sheet



Institute of Education
Massey University Albany
Private Bag 102 904
North Shore Mail Centre
Auckland 0745

Democracy, Freedom and School: Realigning power in Aotearoa’s secondary schools.

PARTICIPANT (SCHOOL STAFF) CONSENT FORM - INDIVIDUAL

I have read and I understand the Information Sheet attached. I have had the details of the study explained to me, any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time. I have been given sufficient time to consider whether to participate in this study and I understand participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time.

1. I agree / do not agree [choose one] to the interview being sound recorded.
2. I wish / do not wish [choose one] to have my recordings returned to me.
3. I wish / do not wish [choose one] to have data placed in an official archive.
4. I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Declaration by Participant:

I _____ [print full name] hereby consent to take part in this study.

Signature: _____

Date: _____



Institute of Education
 Massey University Albany
 Private Bag 102 904
 North Shore Mail Centre
 Auckland 0745

Democracy, Freedom and School: Realigning power in Aotearoa's secondary schools.

SCHOOL STAFF INFORMATION SHEET

My name is Kylie Smith. I am a PhD student at Massey University and an experienced Primary and Secondary teacher. As part of my PhD, I am looking at democratic initiatives and processes happening in Aotearoa's secondary and intermediate schools and the positive impacts these have for students. The aim of the research is to listen to student voice on opportunities to participate in democratic processes in NZ secondary and intermediate schools, to further the development of student participation in decision making in Aotearoa.

In order to do this, I will be visiting your amazing school as it is already leading the way with student participation in decision making.

My research will involve individual interviews with willing staff and group interviews with consenting students (aged 16 plus) as well as observations of processes happening within the school. There may also be the possibility of returning briefly following analysis of the data to confirm any uncertain findings.

For this phase of the research I am particularly interested in answers to the following questions:

- What student voice, student agency and / or student participation in decision making initiatives are happening within the school?
- What positive outcomes do these initiatives and processes have for students, for staff and for the community?
- How do students and staff define concepts such as student voice, student agency, student participation in decision making, community and democracy?

Project Procedures

- In-school research would involve:
 - Formal one-on-one interviews with staff and group interviews with students discussing how student voice, participation and agency occurs within the school and what benefits they believe arise from these processes. I anticipate these will take approximately 40 minutes each.
 - Observation of such processes happening within the school.
- Formal consent will be sought from all participants prior to their participation in the research. Parental permission will also be sought for any participants under the age of 16. Only people who are able to give informed consent will be selected.
- In the case of too many volunteers some may not be selected to participate based around reasons of time, numbers and data saturation.



*Institute of Education
Massey University Albany
Private Bag 102 904
North Shore Mail Centre
Auckland 0745*

- One-on-one interviews will be audio-recorded so that the researcher can accurately transcribe the conversation later. Group interviews would be either video- or audio-recorded (video-recording is preferable to help with transcribing as it can get confusing when people speak over each other), depending on permissions given by the participants.
- I would be the only researcher visiting the school, unless participants choose to respond in te Reo Maori, in which case a translator will accompany me. At least 2 weeks prior notice will need to be given to the researcher should this option be preferred.

Data Management

- All data will be collated and used to present findings to the research questions. Along with data gathered from other phases of this project, this data will form the basis of my PhD research report. Once data from all phases of the project have been analysed, I intend to develop 'user friendly' teacher resources with guidelines on how other schools in NZ could use democratic processes to increase opportunity for student voice and participation.
- All raw data will be stored for a period of five years in a lockable filing cabinet at Massey University. All participants and schools involved will be anonymous, unless they specifically ask otherwise.
- Confidentiality will be preserved for all participants. Personal details asked of participants will be limited to name, age, year level (if appropriate), position within school, and ethnicity. This information will be used for data analysis only and individual details will not be shared publicly.
- A 2-page summary of the research findings will be made available to the school on conclusion of this project. Alternatively, you can contact the researcher directly at the address below should you wish to obtain a personal copy of the research outcomes.

Participants Rights

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation to participate in the research. If you agree to participate in this research please complete the consent form attached and return this to the researcher.

All participants have rights as set out in the Massey University Code of Ethical Conduct. These include to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview;
- withdraw from the study at any time up to 3 months after the interview date;
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded (see above).

Appendix D – Final List of Questions for Alumni


Alumni Question Schedule

Name:

*Interview Date:**Interview Mode:***Section 1: Personal Details**

- a) Can I get an idea of which schools you attended and when?
- b) Please briefly outline your career progression since finishing the democratic school you attended, *e.g. apprenticeship, 10 years in building industry?*
- c) Which ethnic / cultural groups do you identify with?

Section 2: General Introduction

1. So, tell me about 

Section 3: Democracy specific questions

2. **What does democracy mean to you? What does this look like?**
3. **What was 'democratic' about the school?**
4. How did your school practice democracy?
5. What opportunities for student voice, student participation in decision making or democratic initiatives were happening within the school?
6. Who decided this? Who created opportunities for student voice?
7. **What did you enjoy about the processes, and what skills and learning do you think you gained from this participation?**
8. **Why were these opportunities important?**
9. Can you describe how the school ran?

Section 4: Personal Experiences in a Democratic Schooling Environment

10. Why did you choose to attend a democratic school?
11. Can you describe what you personally did on a day to day basis in general terms?
- 12. What was the biggest impact democratic schooling had on your life?**
- 13. What was the most valuable part of your schooling?**
- 14. What was the hardest thing about being a student in a democratic school?**
- 15. Do you feel like you missed out on anything?**
- 16. Do you think there were any challenges you faced when leaving your school that a student at a traditional school may not have faced?**
- 17. Have you ever regretted your decision to attend a democratic school?**
- 18. I often hear people talk about the things that students in democratic schools miss out on from not attending a traditional school; what do you think you gained in a democratic environment, that students in a traditional school missed out on?**
19. If you transitioned from or to a traditional school, how would you compare the two experiences?
20. What do people generally ask you when talking about your unique schooling experiences?
21. Do you feel that a democratic schooling environment gave you room to draw on the things you loved and / or follow your passions? Can you talk to that?
- 22. Do you feel you have a better understanding of 'community', and participation in democratic environments than most people your age?**
- 23. What is community? What does community look like?**

24. If you were to go back and do it over again, so in hindsight, is there anything you would change about how the school ran?

Section 5: General Questions on Democratic Schooling

25. Would you recommend democratic schooling for all students? When might it not work? Is there a special kind of student suited to democratic schooling?

26. I've read literature that argues that democratic schooling is very individualistic (and neoliberal), with a focus on individual wants rather than a concern for collective wellbeing, what are your thoughts on this?

27. There have also been arguments in literature that democratic schools primarily cater to white, middle-class students, from somewhat privileged and / or academically driven backgrounds. What are your thoughts on this?

28. Do you feel that democratic schooling addresses differing cultural and / or socio-economic needs appropriately?

29. What advice would you give to parents of children who want to attend a democratic school?

30. Is there anything else that you think people should know about democratic schooling?

31. Is there anything you would suggest I ask about in further interviews with alumni, staff or current students?

Building off what other Alumni have said

32. Someone else said that there were kids that kind of just gamed and didn't really do anything, and I was wondering if perhaps those kids just needed that time to, to actually do nothing and whether that was looked down on at, at [REDACTED] or if perhaps the teachers just went actually let's just them figure out who they are?

33. Other students mentioned there was always really good support at the school, and a couple have mentioned there was very little bullying, do you agree with this?
34. And I was just wondering... Is it about the individualism and universality of the support do you think? Everyone gets it, everyone gets it in their own way, no one judges because you are all following your own journey and you are very much aware (at that school) that you don't really know other people's journey?
35. So, might this be where equity comes on rather than just equality? There is opportunity for teachers to provide extra support without anyone else even knowing that is happening because it looks normal?

Appendix E – Final List of Questions for Staff

Alumni Question Schedule

Name:

*Interview Date:**Interview Mode:***Section 1: Personal Details**

- a) How long have you worked at the school?
- b) Positions?
- c) Career progression?
- d) Which ethnic / cultural groups do you identify with?

Section 2: General Introduction

1. So, tell me about [REDACTED]
2. What do you enjoy about [REDACTED]
3. What do you think is the best thing about [REDACTED] for the students?

Section 3: Democracy specific questions

4. What opportunities for student voice, student participation in decision making or democratic initiatives is happening within the school?
5. Who decides this? Who creates opportunities for student voice?
6. What skills and learning do you think students gain from this participation?
7. Why are these opportunities important?
8. Can you describe how the school runs?

Section 4: Personal Experiences in a Democratic Schooling Environment

9. Why do you choose to work in a democratic school?
10. What do you think is the biggest impact on students?
11. What is the most valuable part of your school for students?
12. What is the hardest thing about being a teacher in your school?
13. Do you feel like students miss out on anything?
14. Do you think there are any challenges they face when leaving your school that a student at a traditional school may not face?
15. What do you think is gained in a participative environment, that students in a traditional school miss out on?

16. Do you feel you your students have a better understanding of ‘community’, and participation in democratic environments than most people your age?
17. What is community? What does community look like?
18. Is there anything you would change about how the school runs?

Section 5: General Questions on Democratic Schooling

19. Would you recommend democratic schooling for all students? When might it not work? Is there a special kind of student suited to democratic schooling?
20. I’ve read literature that argues that democratic schooling is very individualistic (~~and neoliberal~~), with a focus on individual wants rather than a concern for collective wellbeing, what are your thoughts on this?
21. There have also been arguments in literature that democratic schools primarily cater to white, middle-class students, from somewhat privileged and / or academically driven backgrounds. What are your thoughts on this?
22. Do you feel that democratic schooling addresses differing cultural and / or socio-economic needs appropriately?
23. Is there anything else that you think people should know about democratic schooling?

Building off what other Alumni have said

24. Someone else said that there were kids that kind of just gamed and didn’t really do anything, and I was wondering if perhaps those kids just needed that time to, to actually do nothing and whether that was looked down on at, a [REDACTED] or if perhaps the teachers just went actually let’s just them figure out who they are?
25. Other students mentioned there was always really good support at the school, and a couple have mentioned there was very little bullying, do you agree with this?
26. And I was just wondering... Is it about the individualism and universality of the support do you think? Everyone gets it, everyone gets it in their own way, no one judges because you are all following your own journey and you are very much aware (at that school) that you don’t really know other people’s journey?
27. So, might this be where equity comes on rather than just equality? There is opportunity for teachers to provide extra support without anyone else even knowing that is happening because it looks normal?