

A report on:  
The 16<sup>th</sup> International Democratic Education Conference

August 11-17, 2008

University of British Columbia  
Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

IDEC 2008 theme:  
Democracy in schools...What?!

IDEC 2008 organizers:  
The Society for the Advancement of Noncoercive Education  
[at.org/whs/sane/index.html](http://at.org/whs/sane/index.html)

[www.idec2008.org](http://www.idec2008.org)

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## Quotes from IDEC 2008

*If we want democracy, it must start from birth in the schooling of young people.*  
-- Matthew Rich, Montessori educator

*Democracy has its downside; it is a fantastic way to have control over people.*  
-- Matthew Rich

*The understanding of relationships is more important than the search for a plan of action to deal with behavior.*  
-- Gabor Mate', Physician

*In a society that values its economy over culture, the building of strong adult/child attachments gets lost in the shuffle. Children and youth are lured by a system that appears to want their good, but it only wants its own financial good: more enslaved workers and consumers.*  
-- Gabor Mate'

*Are children learning what we think we're teaching?*  
--Jennifer Shifrin, Child psychologist

*Absolute rules are dangerous; guidelines are better.*  
--Jennifer Shifrin

*Democratic education supports the natural ability to remember who we are.*  
-- Don "Four Arrows" Jacobs, writer, educator

*Fear makes people susceptible to control by an authority figure. Fear cuts out thinking; we are easily manipulated and cannot ask the right questions.*  
-- Don "Four Arrows" Jacobs

*We want varieties of success, not standards.*  
-- Peter Prontzos, Professor of Political Science

*Our public schools are not preparing students for our democracy, but for post-industrial capitalism.*  
-- Peter Prontzos

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## **The 16<sup>th</sup> International Democratic Education Conference**

The Vancouver event went well. See [www.idec2008.org](http://www.idec2008.org). Around 200 from New Zealand, Australia, US, England, Palestine, Israel, India, Germany, Peru, Brazil, Korea, Japan, Canada, Russia, and South Africa attended. The largest group (27) from Seoul was also there to coordinate plans for their hosting of the 2009 IDEC.

It was mentioned some 380 people attended the recent European regional IDEC in Leipzig, Germany. See [www.eudec2008.org](http://www.eudec2008.org). The 2010 IDEC will be in Israel.

Democratic schools generally share most or all of the following characteristics, although there is no exact definition or requirement for a democratic school:

- shared decision-making among the students and staff
- a learner-centered approach in which students choose their daily activities
- equality among staff and students: both seen as learners, both bring experiences/knowledge to school
- the community as an extension of the classroom

There are currently 208 democratic schools in 29 countries and 85 schools in 33 U.S. states & Puerto Rico. Most are private. See the entire list at: [www.educationrevolution.org/lisofdemscho.html](http://www.educationrevolution.org/lisofdemscho.html)

### **Notes from some of the keynote speeches and presentations**

**Thursday evening's (August 14) keynote speech was by Yaacov Hecht** of the Institute of Democratic Education (IDE). He spoke of the 26 public democratic schools in Israel. The themes of the schools are centered on (discovering and developing) the uniqueness of each student. Here K-12 students may choose how, when, where and what they do in school in a context that is connected to life outside the classroom. Each school is self-determined with a student parliament working with staff to run the school.

Democratic schools involve pluralistic learning, the opposite of the one-size-fits-all "square" traditional public schools must create (and force each student to fit into by using rewards and punishments) since these educators cannot deal with the complexities of large and growing amounts of knowledge.

This creates, inside the square, a bell curve where 30% are excellent and 70% are weak to mediocre. We tell students to go to school and they will be successful and make money, but Yaacov noted, due to the one-size-fits-all bell curve paradigm, few make it. National testing makes the square more exclusive. Ignoring the variety of talents and interests students bring to school makes the "square" the most restrictive and consequently the least democratic.

This fit well into the theme of his presentation: The relationship between democratic education and violence. Noting that self-actualization reduces the aggressive impulse, he stated that the triangular pyramid hierarchy created by the one-size-fits-all square in which

traditional education is trying to fit all students allows for just a few to self-actualize. This triangle organization reflects the competitive model for society, creating violence. In the pluralistic learning circle of democratic schools everyone, not a few, self-actualize.

As well as discussing the self-actualization that manifests from the discovery and development of each student's uniqueness, Yaacov introduced the IDE concept of *social actualization*: 1) the ability to know the uniqueness of others--find and see that each person is different and unique; 2) the ability to know the culture of each person—find that which is beautiful and unique in each person's culture and seeing your culture is not the best; and, 3) the ability to make connections and enable cooperation between individual differences and individual cultures.

Yaacov finished his talk with 4 principles:

1. The “other” person, even if a child, is an opportunity for growth
2. Sometimes the “other” is called an “institution”
3. The “truth” is probably not “in your pocket”
4. The importance of self-criticism: criticism is a tool for growth. The IDE actually pays people to criticize the institute.

To see more of Hecht's ideas go to: [www.democratic-edu.org](http://www.democratic-edu.org)

**Friday night's (August 15) keynote speaker Peter Prontzos** was concerned that our planet has yet to create a more humane approach to the way we work out our conflicts.

To help us deal with conflict, he discussed 6 major ideas/issues and/or solutions:

1) The affective, not the cognitive domain will situate our future. Humans need to increase their respect for the affect. Feelings are not irrational. The various elements of the brain are connected. Thus, emotions are integrated into our reasoning; they guide our decisions.

2) We are social beings—this is a survival strategy. *Lack of empathy is not natural.* Since we are hard-wired to connect to others, bad relationships can affect the brain and our physical health; relationships of power and consequent lack of self-determination create stress.

3. We do not have democracies—we have a liberal oligarchy where a few call all the shots. He wants an “inclusive” democracy—*democratic nurturing societies* where citizens have real power and can enjoy individual, social, political, environmental, and economic self-determination.

4. Private use of public schools *Schools are preparing for a post-industrial capitalism, not for democracy.* The dividing line between business and government has become almost

non-existent as the US rushes to privatize as many functions as possible. The purpose of public education is to produce citizens, not workers.

5. Pathocracy Even worse than war are poverty and disease. He claimed poverty and disease are a result of artificial scarcities created and maintained by global elites seeking profits and power. Every 6 seconds a child dies of hunger while the world spends \$220,000 on the military in that same brief amount of time.

*He asserted, a global system that wastes over \$1,000,000,000,000 a year while 10s of millions die from preventable causes is dysfunctional and pathological. Systems of power and domination tend to produce the most socially stunted people—those least able to trust and cooperate with others---and places them in positions of power; indeed, he noted, it is a “pathocracy.” Although this goes against common sense, ruling elites establish such power over populations through fear, ideology, or violence that this tragedy goes unquestioned.*

6. Global public opinion as the other “superpower” People must realize that things can change: power is primarily a social/psychological construct. *Aggression and war are not biologically driven.* The elite minority in power will do whatever they please as long as citizens allow them to get away with it. Developing an inclusive participatory democracy will enable people to decide to take control of their lives and actively refuse to obey.

He suggests *environmental and social justice movements work together with peace groups to organize around a single goal.* He suggested the single goal be to demand a reduction of military budgets and the redirection of resources to meet human needs and protect the natural world. As an example, he mentioned how the power of public opinion was formed and used to reduce smoking and drunk driving.

This strategy of demanding a change in national priorities allows each group involved to remain autonomous while at the same time speaking with one voice for a peaceful and equitable world—embodying the ecological principle of “university in diversity” encouraged by the Social Ecology philosophy of Murray Bookchin.

Prof. Prontzos teaches political science at Langara College in Vancouver. He recommended reading *Stumbling on Happiness* by Daniel Gilbert and *Moral Politics* by George Lakoff.

**The keynote for Saturday evening (August 17) was given by Dr. Gabor Mate’.** He presented ideas from his 2004 book, *Hold on to Your Kids*, where he discussed what he sees as the current trend of peers replacing parents in the lives of many children.

After birth, an attachment/bonding forms between the child and its parent(s) which makes nurturing parenting possible. Having this attachment in place, parenting is natural and easy. Without it, parents can not reach the child.

Unfortunately, Mate' notes, we have gone from a world where children used to be largely adult-oriented to a world where everything in it (day care/pre-school/after-school, longer school days, endless activities geared towards youth--as well as technology such as cell phones and instant messaging) acts like the Pied Piper, grooming children to transfer their attachment needs from adults and becoming more "peer oriented." The problem is peers are not qualified to adequately meet these attachment needs.

This is a situation that goes across racial, ethnic, and social class lines: when children give the place in their hearts reserved for parents and parental figures to their peers, they develop all sorts of neuroses.

Mate' says parents are not aware of this and if something goes wrong, they try to find remedies in parenting techniques. If that does not work, they look for problems in themselves or they look for problems in the child, when in fact *the problem is in the relationship, not behavior*. This was his main point: *The understanding of relationships is more important than the search for a plan of action to deal with behavior*.

Thus, society thinks the problem is behavior and goes about trying to change/fix it with behavior modification and drugs. For example, Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) is best understood through relationships with adults—over-attachment with peer increases “counter-will”/defiance by youth. When children/youth tell parents, “You’re not my boss,” they are just being honest. Indeed, they now follow the commands of their peer group.

To make his concerns relevant to the IDEC audience, Dr. Mate' pointed out this lack of healthy attachment to adults, (where children/youth must connect to some one--which may be, by default, their peers), represents a phenomenon that threatens democracy.

To prove his point he listed his characteristics of the democratic person. They:

- think for themselves,
- are curios,
- are self-awareness—do not just react, they can stand away and understand themselves,
- are vulnerable—don't suppress feeling, open to emotions, and
- respect others.

Because of the “peer-oriented tribal youth culture,” youth are kept immature, and thus they are not ready for democracy.

Showing allegiance to peers in order to become a part of a group whose members attend school less to learn than to socialize squelches curiosity.

Peer oriented youth can not become individuals because they are trying to please their friends. Healthy adults know there is no growth without emotional vulnerability. Since vulnerability is a sign of weakness in the teen culture, youth are stuck in immaturity. Thus,

they are not concerned with love. The hyper-sexuality of teenage girls is simply a way to get attention.

Teenage emphasis on belonging, loyalty, and being important and significant leads to shunning, “dissin’,” hostility, and aggression. This is epitomized by bullying where youth who want to belong and get respect push other students around. This also leads to youth murdering each other, as well as committing suicide at increasing rates.

*In a society that values its economy over culture, the building of strong adult/child attachments gets lost in the shuffle.*

*Children and youth are lured by a system that appears to want their good, but it only wants its own financial good: more enslaved workers and consumers.*

To counter the power of the teen peer culture, Mate’ suggests parents must re-establish a caring adult hierarchy. His suggestions range from simply spending more time with children/youth to home schooling. Other points of advice were:

Parents need not foster independence from a young age; the child needs dependence first in order to develop independence skills.

Parents need not focus on the child’s behavior; focus should be on connecting, the “bonding” process, closeness, contact, and building the relationship.

Parents need not teach children a lesson for bad behavior; the child won’t learn from the lesson if there is no healthy attachment.

Asked to comment on public schools, Mate’ expressed these opinions:

- Public schools are a system designed to support conformity. A place where students learn to follow rules and directions.
- Schools have become “bully” factories.
- Schools are also peer-orientation factories; the major place youth congregate.

To find out more about Dr. Mate, see [www.drgabormate.com/bio.php](http://www.drgabormate.com/bio.php) and/or his website at [www.drgabormate.com](http://www.drgabormate.com)

## **Various presentations**

### **Democracy in public schools**

Adam Fletcher of Soundout.org gave several unprecedented workshops on public democratic schools. This point is being emphasized because this is the first of the previous 6 IDECs where this topic was seriously discussed. Since most of the people attending IDEC represent private schools, the topic of democratizing public schools has not been an immediate concern.



For more of Adam Fletcher's ideas see:

[www.freechild.org](http://www.freechild.org)

[www.soundout.org](http://www.soundout.org)

Check out his blog at: [www.youngerworld.org](http://www.youngerworld.org)

### **Classroom democracy at the Academy**

The title of this session was "Democratic pedagogy in action: Community comes with responsibility." Graduate student Paula L. Argentieri presented on what democratic education looks like in an innovative and experiential undergraduate classroom at the University of California at Berkley. The democracy-oriented program currently attracts over 300 applicants each semester from every field and discipline.

The presentation covered the theme she experienced over a semester: "Education as a vehicle for social change and liberation." Concepts such as experiential learning, sharing the journey, community action co-ops, theories and praxis, personal reflection, liberty, unity, equal voice, social responsibility, justice, consensus, and building a democratic community informed the orientation of this teacher/student co-created course curriculum.

Each semester a class creates its own mission statement. This spring semester's class statement was: *Our mission is to build a democratic community collectively which will be an amalgamation of our thoughts and experiences. By connecting personal experiences to the assigned literature we propose to participate in group discussions to better relate our current education system to what education should be.*

*The idea is to promote social justice through educational goals, exercising team teaching and cooperative projects. Reflective journals will serve as the basis in which we evaluate the effectiveness of our system. In order to achieve the goals, we will confront social issues to foster cultural sensitivity through group interaction and respecting each other's differences.*

For more information e-mail Ms. Argentieri at [paula@berkely.edu](mailto:paula@berkely.edu)

### **Non-violent Communication**

This workshop by Matthew Rich began by having the group list the basic needs of human beings. He then pointed out how universal they were and how this was the basis of understanding non-violent communication: All we/people do are ways/strategies to meet these needs.

Non-violent Communication (NVC) is sometimes referred to as compassionate communication; it is a spiritual act.

Its purpose is to:

- create human connections that empower compassionate giving and receiving, and
- create governmental and corporate structures that support compassionate giving and receiving.

NVC involves both communication skills that foster compassionate relating and consciousness of the interdependence of our well-being and using power with others to work together to meet the needs of all concerned.

The process of NVC encourages us to focus on what we and others are observing separate from our interpretations and judgments, to connect our thoughts and feelings to underlying human needs/values (e.g. protection, support, love), and to be clear about what we would like with respect to meeting those needs. *These skills give the ability to translate communications from a language of criticism, blame, and demand into a language of human needs--a language of life that consciously connects us to the universal qualities "alive in us" that sustain and enrich our well-being.* NVC focuses our attention on what actions we could take to manifest these qualities.

Rich pointed out the differences/orientations of communication:

<b>NVC</b>	<b>Regular Communication</b>
Observation (facts)	Judgment
Feelings (emotions)	Evaluations
Needs (values)	Strategies
Requests (actions)	Demands

NVC offers practical, concrete skills for manifesting the purpose of creating connections of compassionate giving and receiving based in a consciousness of interdependence and power with others. These skills include:

- Differentiating observation from evaluation, being able to carefully observe what is happening free of evaluation, and to specify behaviors and conditions that are affecting us;
- Differentiating feeling from thinking, being able to identify and express internal feeling states in a way that does not imply judgment, criticism, or blame/punishment;
- Connecting with the universal human needs/values (e.g. sustenance, trust, understanding) in us that are being met or not met in relation to what is happening and how we are feeling; and
- Requesting what we would like in a way that clearly and specifically states what we do want (rather than what we don't want), and that is truly a request and not a demand (i.e. attempting to motivate, however subtly, out of fear, guilt, shame, obligation, etc. rather than out of willingness and compassionate giving).

Contact the Center for Non-violent Communication at [www.cnvc.org](http://www.cnvc.org)

### **Sociocracy: Democracy for people who have a social relationship**

Matthew Rich also led a presentation on the concept of Sociocracy (dynamic self-governance). This form of governance, using consent-based decision-making among

equivalent individuals and an organizational structure, is based on cybernetic principles--cybernetics being the interdisciplinary study of the structure of complex systems, especially communication processes, control mechanisms and feedback principles. It literally means rule by the "socios," people who have a social relationship with each other --as opposed to democracy: rule by the "demos," the general mass of people.

See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sociocracy>

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### **Why are there no democratic schools created by African Americans?**

I presented on the topic of how particular progressive educators, in this case African American, believe there are limitations and drawbacks to democratic education (as defined by the majority of those attending the conference) with respect to African American children and families.

I explained that Blacks can't politically and educationally "afford" free schools. To be Black in America is to be conscious of being Black and of Whites at all times. Black people do not have resources and power to protect themselves if they fail. There is risk involved in allowing Black children to exercise their freedom (choosing what to learn) in school. The consequences of the "experimenting" turning out poorly are devastating.

Blacks, a minority still at-risk, can not be as "creative" as Whites. They can not fall back on "the majority Eurocentric system" as well as White children can if their time at a free school is unproductive.

Another way of looking at the situation is that White children are advantaged from the start and can well be more "free" or leisurely with learning and schooling, thus taking more chances. They won't pay as high a price as Black children, who may never catch up to their White peers, if they do not get the basics.

Most of the debate concerning the possibilities of democratic education for African American students concerns the definition of liberal: Those whose beliefs include striving for a society based on maximum individual freedom and autonomy. Both traditional and current democratic schools center on the White middle-class value of individual self-validation through self-reliance, autonomy, and achievement. These values can go against the more collective (less individualistic) value system of African American and Latino cultures where learning, in many instances, has no value apart from transforming societal relations and confronting other social/economic justice issues that affect their community.

Using *Teach Freedom: Education for Liberation in the African-American Tradition* (Payne & Strickland, 2008) I showed progressive liberal democratic education orientations, "predicated on an optimistic view of America's racial future" (p. 65), presuppose "an elastic, democratic social order in which there are no artificial barriers against the social mobility of the individual. In such a society classes are assumed to be highly fluid and there can be no such thing as caste" (p. 92). Since this is not the case for students of color in America, the more collectivist values do not stress individual achievement and

independence from others, but encourage/enable individual achievement toward *social change for the benefit of the group—education/learning for liberation in order to change the current power structure and liberate those oppressed by it*. Generally, free/democratic schools in America are a White middle-class phenomenon, thus students have no stake, per se, in social justice issues because they do not suffer from these injustices.

I suggested if IDEC is to branch out to a variety of families to share the intent and potential of democratic education, “members” must make sure their schools have a realistic understanding of the limitations of liberal orientations/values (individual self-validation through self-reliance, autonomy, and achievement) for citizenship in a global society.

Using the arguments of one Black progressive educator, Dr. Lisa Delpit (1995), I asserted popular progressive “child-centered” or “holistic” ideas supported by many IDEC members can leave some children of color unable to read/write—without the “codes/language of power” necessary for success in American society. Most free schoolers come from middle-class families and acquire the language of power (Standard English) naturally at home. Students of color, most of whom are not middle class and whose home language is Black English--a variety of Standard English (Alim, 2007)--may not learn to read, write or speak Standard English without teacher-centered direct instruction.

As well, I explained Delpit’s concerns over what she sees as the narrowness of progressive’s beliefs about democratic education: students are at the center of determining learning. She claims discussions among progressives in the 70s and 80s left Black progressive educators out. Their White peers did not listen--hear the voice of Blacks who wanted to be involved in creating progressive initiatives--especially with respect to reading. Thus, African American teachers retreated from progressive educational settings, feeling obligated to critique such concepts as open classrooms and whole language.

On the whole, White progressives must realize that although they believe in their ideas and that they work for many, there is another voice, another reality.

Finally, I used Lisa Delpit’s arguments to show that progressive educators of either culture are in a unique position to create what she calls, “A collaboration that will be the most powerful yet in education” and insists it is the White progressives who must reach out and negotiate a collaboration which will:

- put all issues on the table, creating a dialogue with each side seeking to understand those perspectives that may differ most from theirs;
- bring an understanding of one’s own power (or assumed privilege due to being in the majority); and
- encourage Whites to not be afraid to raise questions about discrimination and voicelessness with people of color and to listen to (not hear) what they say.

This will, Delpit says, help all teachers and all children.

To help such collaboration, I discussed what both Dr. Delpit and IDEC have in common:

- drugs for ADHD/ADD: Families of color, if shown otherwise, will denounce drugging children so they fit into the tiny square of the “sit still, be quiet, and listen” classroom;

- particular families of color, if shown otherwise, will want to provide a free school atmosphere for their child;
- as well as the language of power, students of color must know/be able to use the language of democracy—the democratic habits of mind for success in the mainstream;
- both Delpit and IDEC believe there is no one best way to learn (Delpit, p.132);
- both seek a variety of sound progressive methods in teaching reading;
- both emphasize the lives of students outside of school so as to recognize strengths and respect their home culture;
- both see the need for critiquing public schools: politics, curriculum, methods, modes of assessment, and definitions of intelligence. IDEC educators, like progressive Black educators, tend to use/promote internal sources of knowledge where students reflect on their own experiences/own ability to assess and create ideas (Delpit, p. 117);
- both are open to influencing the many gatekeepers to open their doors, pushing for a variety of codes.

### **All children can learn: Fact or slogan?**

At my Tuesday (August 12) presentation, I asked two questions to those attending my workshop: Do you believe we humans are born curious and motivated to learn? How do we know all children can learn? I went about stating arguments showing we are naturally curious. I presented *Homo curaos* as the example. I also presented brain research and other psychological and philosophical evidence.

Lastly I discussed how I created A Learner's Bill of Rights and explained its rationale:

#### What A Learner's Bill of Rights is and is not

Objective: To preserve the child's integrity, self-worth, and innate curiosity.

Statement: Virtually all children are born with the motivation to learn. This is a characteristic of our species.

Problem: The problem is defined as the inability of the child to retain and maintain the qualities of curiosity and motivation.

Solution: To provide a form to address the needs of the child by enabling the child to develop the assertiveness necessary to desire the best and to require the best from those involved in the education process.

#### What is a Learner's Bill of Rights?

- Deals with learning and the processes involved with acquiring knowledge in a way so as to reduce anxiety and promote the joy and passion for learning.
- Tries to investigate the issues/factors involved motivation, joy, and passion.
- Attempts to address the student's relationship with "self", the teacher, and learning—how the student views learning, "self", and how the learner is viewed by the teacher/school.

#### What a Learner's Bill of Rights is not:

- Does not deal with student's responsibilities directly such as is done in a

discipline code.

- Does not concern locker searches, arm bands, property rights, management and control by school staff, or general/ordinary rights of a student.

What are some of the possible issues/factors that relate to the joy and passion for learning?

#### Learning/Anxiety

- grades
- guessing/risking
- failing/succeeding
- making mistakes
- learning at one's own speed
- learning styles
- having more than one chance to succeed
- negative self-talk

#### Teacher/School

- having questions
- not understanding
- saying one does not understand
- questioning facts/authority
- evaluating teachers
- understanding the grading process
- needing and getting extra help
- fair treatment
- having more than one chance to show learning

#### Student's Values

- accepting oneself
- being accepted
- being different
- having own opinions/values
- having one's own expectations /limitations
- defining success in one's own terms
- expecting others to view them as capable
- having innate ability to learn
- being born full of wonder, curiosity, and motivation to learn
- grades and self-esteem
- personal identity
- thinking for oneself

#### Participation

- participation in the decisions/responsibility for decisions that deal with one's education

## A LEARNER'S BILL OF RIGHTS

I am a human being. I have an innate ability to learn. I was born full of wonder, curiosity, and motivated to learn. I view myself and I expect others to view me as capable of learning.

1. I have a right to a safe learning environment.
2. I have a right to accept myself as I am and to be accepted as I am.
3. I have a right to be respected and to define success in my own terms.
4. I have a right to learn at my own speed and in my own way.
5. I have a right to ask whatever questions I have, to say I don't understand, and I have a right not to understand.
6. I have a right to be different, to have my own culture, opinions, and values.
7. I have a right to think for myself, question authority and challenge facts.
8. I have a right to express my own views without ridicule.
9. I have a right to need extra help and to ask for it.
10. I have a right to be treated fairly and to understand the grading process.
11. I have a right to evaluate my teachers and how they teach.
12. I have a right not to base my self-worth solely on my academic performance.
13. I have a right to my own expectations and limitations, to change my mind, to give up, to succeed, to fail.
14. I have a right to make mistakes, to risk, guess, to have more than one way and one chance to show what I have learned.
15. I have a right to be a part of the decision making process that concerns my education, classroom, and school—with my involvement determined progressively by my age and grade level.

Explanation of the above rights:

1. I have a right to a learning environment free from violence, drugs, and threats to my psychological and physical well-being.
2. I have a right to be who I am, to like myself, and determine my own identity. I have a right not to fulfill some predetermined image someone else may have of me. It is not the role of the school to go about changing someone's positive character, personality, or cultural identity.
3. I have a right to self-determination and to have my own standards to judge my efforts beyond the formal grading system. I have a right not to compare myself or be compared to others.
4. I want to be recognized as a unique individual. I may learn at a different pace and in a different way from others. I recognize that I may have the ability to excel in some areas and subjects and may have difficulty in others.
5. I realize that knowledge and understanding come from questions. I see that questions can be more important than answers. Questioning helps me transform the world into terms that I can understand. If I do not understand, I will be able to continue asking questions or accept that I do not have to have instant meaning. I can live with an extraordinary amount of uncertainty confusion, ignorance, and suspense. The statement, "I don't know," does not bother me. This does not mean that I want to look to the teacher for all the answers because I want them to encourage me to learn on my own.
6. As an individual I am aware and proud of my cultural heritage and its values. I have a right to be free from the pressure and requirement to conform.

7. I prefer to develop my own judgment. I want to be a critical thinker. My role as a student is not to be a robot, memorizing facts without understanding the source of the data, or just to pass tests. I see that facts may change, and I must be encouraged to make the distinction between fact and opinion. I distrust authorities who discourage others from thinking for themselves.

8. I have a right not to be made fun of, harassed or punished for my point of view.

9. I am not embarrassed or ashamed to need help and ask for it. In order to function at my potential, I may need help and it should be given freely.

10. All methods and standards for determining my grades must be made clear to me as well as the objectives of the class/course so that I may be freely responsible for my efforts. I expect all grades to be determined in a fair and unbiased fashion.

11. Who, but students, know how teachers really perform in the classroom? Who else, besides other teachers, could really help teachers do better? So that my teacher knows what is effective, thoughtful, relevant, and respectful student feedback is necessary.

12. I realize that grading does little to sustain a deeply felt desire and motivation for learning for the sake of learning. Grades are not my reason for learning. I also realize that grades are an important documentation of learning. Yet, at its best, grades are imprecise. Failing grades do not mean I am a failure or unintelligent.

13. I am not afraid of being wrong, giving up or failing. I see my limits and suffer no loss in seeing what I thought was the case is not. In other words, good learners change their minds. In fact, changing the nature of my mind is what I am interested in doing and in doing so, I am not afraid to succeed.

14. I have a right and an obligation to learn from my mistakes. I see my mistakes are eliminating possibilities and so I am getting closer to an answer or solution, not necessarily farther away. A mistake can be a friend and a helpful warning. I am not embarrassed or ashamed when I guess. I do not have to have an absolute, final, unchangeable answer to every problem. I realize that intelligence may be defined as not what you know or how much you know, but what you do when you don't know. I also appreciate that I sometimes need more than one chance or different ways to show that I have succeeded in learning.

15. Freedom and responsibility are two different sides of the same coin. I am accountable only to the extent that I am free to choose. As I grow and progress through school and life, more choice and thus responsibility is my inherent right. It is the duty of the education system to gradually prepare me for participation in a free and democratic society. Providing me with opportunities to share in decisions about my education, classroom, and school can do this.

Visit A Learner's Bill of Rights on You Tube at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=SqNL-vk5Ntl](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SqNL-vk5Ntl) and the LBR MySpace account at [www.myspace.com/learnersbillofrights](http://www.myspace.com/learnersbillofrights). Both are created by Amy Peacemaker,

## Commentaries and Conclusions

This was an important and much needed conference especially since it was on the North American continent. Though unintended, the location encouraged a forum for unprecedented discussions on democratic education in US public schools. I have attended the last 6 IDECs and democratic education in public schools (except for IDEs/Israel's 25+ democratic public schools) was simply not a necessary topic.

IDEC 2008 also brought non-coercive public education, with its advantages and disadvantages (see p. 12), closer to consideration by American families and educators.

### **Democracy in US public schools: International recognition**

Although Adam Fletcher is not a public school employee, he did bring what he is doing with student engagement in American public schools to an *international audience*. Such organizations as the Forum for Democracy in Education, Project 540, We the People, Rethinking Schools, the League of Democratic Schools, and the Lewis & Clark professors who publish the *Democracy in Education* magazine were either out of touch or chose not to attend.

### **The process to democratize America's public schools and classrooms begins**

Therefore, special recognition must be paid to Fletcher's awareness of and presence at IDEC 08. Now that the international community recognizes the individuals and organizations (SoundOut.org and Democratic Education Consortium), I predict this will become the first step in this process, a process which now has the global recognition, momentum, and responsibility to move forward, as never before, to support and enable democracy in American public schools.

### **To use the term "democracy" or not**

One interesting topic brought up at the discussions was the advantages and disadvantages of using the term "democracy" and/or "democratic" when dealing with American public schools. Adam Fletcher avoids the term(s) and uses "Meaningful Student Engagement." At the 2008 Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO) conference it was suggested by Dr. Dave Lehman (Lehman Alternative Community School) that one not use the word "democracy" with respect to communities of color--so-called minorities who have had many negative experiences with the "majority rules" side of democracy--and perhaps the phrase "shared decision-making" would better serve democratic education proponents purposes. This is ironic since America's current foreign policy is pushing and supporting democratic governance and movements globally, but democratic education supporters find it best not to use the term. Go figure! Consequently, within this discussion are the reasons why almost all American public schools are not democratic. See "What are the barriers to democratic classrooms and schools?" p. 9.

### **The Academy as a laboratory for democracy**

The U. C. Berkeley course, "Education as a vehicle for social change and liberation," and Paula Argentieri, who brought to the attention of the international democratic

education community at IDEC 2008, must be further recognized. This course provides an example for other colleges and universities to begin to incorporate democratic rights/responsibilities into one or more courses. This can be especially useful in a school of education. See “Teach teachers democratically” (Loflin, 2008).

### **Non-violent communication and democratic education: Two ideas enabling peace and justice in society**

The potential of democratic education to bring peace and justice to society (Loflin, 2006) fit well with the basics of non-violent communication (NVC). The fundamentals of both ideas understand the importance of meeting basic needs and higher level emotional and social needs. The theory of NVC argues, “*All we/people do are ways/strategies to meet these needs.*” Meeting the various human needs, ranging from shelter to recognition to self-actualization, reduces the aggressive impulse, an impulse which certain people feel may be a necessary “strategy” when they are hungry, or feel oppressed, alienated, and powerless (May, 1972). This is why both NVC and democratic education, where the goals of each intend to meet human needs, will bring peace and justice to society.

### **Non-coercive public schools**

Indeed, most of the schools/programs represented at the conference were private. This is mentioned because in America the two terms “non-coercive” and “public education” have opposite meanings. Attending school is mandatory until one is 16--in some states it is 18. Due to the superstition and myths surrounding school uniforms, in a very few districts students are even coerced into wearing certain clothes and even underwear. Each state has a required curriculum students must show they know and understand to graduate. In no instance are students “allowed” not to go to classes.

Yet there are public schools where this is the case. Two were represented at IDEC.

#### **Windsor House School** <http://whs.at.org/about>

Windsor House is a parent-participation, democratic, academically non-coercive K-12 public school with about 170 students and 12 staff people.

Students may ask for classes and activities, and efforts are made to provide what the students have requested. Students are not made to go to classes, nor are they stigmatized for non-attendance. The main focus of the school is for people to run their own lives and be engaged in undertakings of their own choice.

Complaints about behavior, for adults and children alike, go to the School Council for settlement. We try to not burden the system with complaints, and so attempt to work out any difficulties immediately with the people concerned. When that fails, community members may write a complaint and put it in the red box in the hall. School Council will either deal with it at once in a caring and respectful way, or put it to a committee to discuss in depth and report to the next council meeting.

School Council meets each day (12:30 to 1:30) except Tuesday. School business, such as resolutions (which require a 2/3 majority—adults/students each have one

vote), complaints, or any ideas/concerns community members put on the agenda are discussed.

**Blue Mountain Charter School** [www.bluemountainschool.com](http://www.bluemountainschool.com)

Located in Cottage Grove, OR this K-12 public school gives students freedom and encourages them to take responsibility for their own education. They play, learn, and grow on their own, in small groups, as well as in democratically structured group meetings. Every child of every age has a vote and understands his/her place in this family-like and fun environment.

Blue Mountain has a democratic environment full of resources with which students direct their own learning. The school is deeply grounded in a long history of democratic non-coercive educational principles. Blue Mountain School is founded on the beliefs that people do best what they have freely chosen to do, in an environment where the decisions they make are real and meaningful. Students of all ages and staff mix freely in a community environment, teaching and learning from each other.

Students participate in all aspects of the governing of the school. They may participate in the weekly School Meeting, which runs by Robert's Rules of Order and oversees the day-to-day operation of the school. In the School Meeting, laws are approved and placed into the Blue Mountain School Lawbook. Motions are considered to spend money, do projects, approve volunteers, hire staff and make a litany of other decisions. Each student and staff member in the School Meeting has one vote.

**Public urban free schools: Educating America's urban school refusers**

Free schools by definition must be non-compulsory; public schools by definition are compulsory. In urban areas many students either dropout or are pushed out. Others refuse to attend even if it is breaking the law. *If students are not attending anyway, why not offer a public school where student choose to attend classes* (Loflin, 2008)?

**Both blackness and free/democratic schools as forms of resistance**

If, as Ginwright argues (2004), "blackness as a form of resistance" is the common theme among the expressions of Black identity, then urban free/democratic schools, which are also constructed in resistance (to the *status quo* of public schools) and black urban culture, have very much in common.

**Are urban public free schools and hip-hop culture made for each other?**

Since free/democratic schools are, by definition, non-traditional and created by educators, parents, students, and community members who feel alienated from and thus critical of the mainstream, the learning climate would be conducive to respecting black urban identity formation in which black youth and their communities respond to oppression through the often unacknowledged strengths, resilience, and resistance which emerge from alienation (Ginwright, 2006).

This would take *oppositional resistance* (a set of shared values, beliefs, and attitudes that reject dominant social norms and contribute to behaviors that make it difficult to development of a black achievement ideology where academic success supports their

achieve) and change it into what Ginwright calls *transformative resistance*—the notions of what it means to be black. Also see, “Re-examining Resistance as Oppositional Behavior” (Akom, 2003).

Using transformative resistance, urban free schools will take advantage of Black (as well as the oppositional stance of most urban youth of color and working class Whites) and link it to political struggles for equity and justice in their lives and in their communities. This links transformative resistance to social change and allows urban youth to reject self-blame for social/economic problems while enabling a critical worldview that is informed by their own social, economic, and political position (Ginwright, 2006).

#### **The future of urban education reform: Public urban free schools**

Starting with the assumption that urban youth should be understood in the context of communities and neighborhoods rather than the confines of schools (Ginwright, 2004), reform efforts must be strengthened by the potential of youth to transform their school and communities.

These young voices hold great promise for effective educational, socio-economic and globally oriented reform strategies for the hip-hop generation. *This is the democratic potential of urban public free schools.*

#### **Rethinking urban educational strategies through public free schools**

School attendance will be optional for grades 10-12, but will be required for grades K-9. Otherwise, classes or attending classes/taking exams will be optional. Graduation or passing state tests will not be mandatory. (The K-12 public School of Self-determination in Moscow, Russia, the brilliant concept of the late Dr. Alexander Tubelsky, is an international example. See [www.734.com1.ru/eng/](http://www.734.com1.ru/eng/)) By definition, students will share in decisions about the school’s mission and climate, rules, curriculum, learning, assessment, personnel, and budget. This will guarantee the focus will be on the tangible day-to-day problems students face in their schools and neighborhoods, thus developing strategies that are more connected to students’ experiences--their political struggles for equity, justice, and self-determination.

#### **The challenge: New and more inclusive forms of democratic possibilities**

Many urban educators have reacted to low graduation rates by raising the age one can dropout to 18. Others have worried that liberal schooling approaches have left children of color without the ability to read, write, and cipher--the codes of power needed to get their fair share of society’s socio-economic blessings. See p. 13.

Yet, if youth resist/reject schooling altogether, we must create and support public free schools so these schools might revive new and more inclusive forms of democratic possibilities. This is the challenge to educators, policy makers, and the African-American community.

#### **Empowering students to require they receive a democratic education**

The Learner’s Bill of Rights (LBR) concept was created in order to enable students in public schools “...to develop the assertiveness necessary to desire the best and to require the best from those involved in their education. LBR article number 15 (p. 17)

provides both students and pro-democracy advocates a way of bringing about a democratic classroom and school culture.

America's public schools must be committed to the idea that the democratic way of life is built upon opportunities to learn what it is about and how to lead it. Thus *public schools*, as a common experience of virtually all young people, *have a moral duty to introduce students to the democratic way of life* (Apple & Bean, 1995).

This moral obligation is based on the beliefs that:

- such a life is learned by experience;
- it is not a status to be attained only after other things are learned;
- democracy extends to all people, including the young; and
- democracy is neither cumbersome nor dangerous--in that it can work in societies, it can work in classrooms and schools.

America is a democracy that has historically supported pro-democracy movements around the world and is presently requiring each American soldiers to put their life and their family's well-being on the line for the sake of Iraqi democracy. In this light, if the public schools of the world's most powerful democracy are not assuming this moral responsibility, pro-democracy advocates are compelled to take seriously the possibilities of empowering students directly to require, even demand, their public schools and classrooms be both moral and democratic. A Learner's Bill of Rights can help America's public schools be accountable.

Discussions at the 2008 Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO) conference lead to ways of by-passing school personnel and appealing directly to students. In this light, the distribution of the LBR via the Internet is a viable idea.

Discussions in Vancouver revolved around ownership: Would students "buy into" the LBR if they had not created it?

## **Conclusions**

An opportunity to host a democratic education conference for a global audience thrilled the Canadians, I know. I was in Brazil where they were busy with anticipation, seeking ideas and advice as they watched the Sao Paulo IDEC unfold. Oddly, no decision was made at the Sydney IDEC about 2008. So in early 2007, they took it on. At a fair price, they offered food, lodging, stimulating educational/political/intellectual dialog, music, an on-site democratic school, national and world-class speakers and presenters, fun, and opportunities for friendship--all this at if not Canada's best university and in one of the globe's most livable cities: Hard to resist this invitation.

As a result of such efforts, students, staff, and parents of Windsor House got to share the school's concept, its history, and their struggles to do something truly unique in North America: a public free school. Think of it, a taxpayer-supported, non-coercive, democratic, and public...school. Remarkable! *Now the world knows it is possible.*

Appreciation and recognition goes out to the vision of school founder Helen Hughes, ALL those involved with the Windsor House over the years, and S.A.N.E. Well done.

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