

CHAPTER 1

Roots and Shoots

The Democratic Life Skills
and Progressive Education

SUGGESTED GOALS FOR READERS

1. Form a working knowledge of the five Democratic Life Skills (DLS).
2. Learn about ways early childhood educators teach for the five DLS.
3. Gain understanding of connections between Dewey's philosophy of democracy, progressive education, and the goal of civility in contemporary democracy.
4. Describe how early childhood education is a major platform for progressive education.

This is a book about bringing things together. If I do my job well, the connections, intersections, nexuses, congruences, harmonious temporal sequences, and efforts at synthesis will be apparent. Readers will be nodding yes and not nodding off. If the book is not clear, it will be due to too many sentences like the second one above. The book has a wee bit of humor sprinkled in, ranging in quality from fairy dust to troll droppings, but always friendly. Along with (1) pursuing intellectual truth, (2) proactively following one’s passion, (3) communicating with others in mutually affirming ways, and (4) enjoying the arts, (5) friendly humor gives meaning to our eternal human traffic jam. To me, friendly humor is one of the best assets teachers at any level can cultivate. The book will endeavor to radiate these five values (but probably will not glow in the dark).

In this chapter we take a beginning look at four important concepts and the connections between them:

1. The five DLS
2. John Dewey’s philosophy of democracy
3. The congruence of the DLS and progressive education
4. Early childhood education as a platform for progressive education and the DLS

The Five Democratic Life Skills

As I’ve written about the **Democratic Life Skills (DLS)** across time, they have become ever more clear to me. The five skills are these:

Safety-Needs Skills

DLS 1: Finding acceptance as a member of the group and as a worthy individual

DLS 2: Expressing strong emotions in nonhurting ways

Growing-Needs Skills

DLS 3: Solving problems creatively—independently and in cooperation with others

DLS 4: Accepting unique human qualities in others

DLS 5: Thinking intelligently and ethically

We’ll return to the DLS shortly. First, some insight into where they come from.

Dual Motivations Behind the DLS

As catalyst for his iconic hierarchy of needs, psychologist Abraham Maslow ([1962] 1999) wrote about two universal motivational needs, for safety and for growth—a concept that developmental scientists Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) and Benarroch (2020) in their own ways have studied since. The first motivational source, for safety—what Maslow called “deficiency motivation”—is the stronger, especially in young children. By “deficiency,” Maslow was not referring to a person’s character but to an inability of an individual to have physiological and psychological safety needs met, and the resulting strong motivation to meet them.

Needs or Skills?

People attribute the term *needs* to Maslow, the manifestations of his two motivational sources, for safety and for psychological growth. As educators, we tend to speak more of skills, the particular abilities people need to meet the needs. Even with DLS 1, where dependence on significant others to meet their needs is high, children must develop skills that allow them to take the steps to find a place of acceptance in the group and to muster self-esteem. Teachers do all they can do to ready children to take the active step, but children must take the step on their own.

Because of children’s basic needs for belonging, security, and affection, work on gaining DLS 1, the ability to gain affirming acceptance, precedes work on gaining DLS 2, the ability to express emotions in nonhurting ways. Due to adverse experiences (more in the next chapter), children who are emotionally adrift have difficulty learning to manage their strong emotions with respect for themselves and others. Even more so than adults, children besieged by unmet safety needs may experience unmanageable **toxic stress**. To relieve the stress, children show survival behaviors—often aggression through unintentional or intentional **conflicts**, but also through psychological withdrawal.

As children often experience with caregivers, *conflicts* are expressed disagreements between individuals. Because each person is unique, conflicts are a normal part of life. From when an infant feels discomfort and cries, to when an elderly person in care would rather watch the snow fall than come to lunch, conflicts mark the intersection of one life with another, every minute of every day.

The central question in teaching for the five DLS is how we humans learn to handle conflicts. Children struggling with DLS 1 and 2 need gentle but sometimes firm guidance leadership within the context of a secure relationship. As they mostly achieve Skills 1 and 2, children organically switch to the work of the young, making gains with Skills 3, 4, and 5. Children busy with the **growing-needs skills** still require nudging and support, and still from the context of secure relationships, but they need less guidance leadership. Most of us adults struggle to attain a mature comprehension of the role of conflicts in life. I hope the book helps early childhood professionals to progress with this understanding—perhaps a task easier for us old-timers who have mostly “graduated” (in one way or another) from the fray.

To attain the first two **safety-needs skills**, young children depend on caring, supportive adults. Secure relationships and the use of **guidance**—adult responses to conflicts that calm and teach rather than punish—are key. Gaining DLS 1 and 2 lets children shift attention to the second motivational source—Maslow’s “growth motivation”—for learning and psychological growing. In the book’s terms, this means DLS 3, 4, and 5: learning to solve problems creatively, independently and in cooperation with others; accepting differing human qualities in others; and thinking intelligently and ethically. In line with his mentor Alfred Adler, Maslow wrote that the state of mind for being able to actualize one’s potential is essentially positive—for me, *an enjoyment of life*.

The Democratic Life Skills, Introduced

In future chapters I discuss the specifics of each skill, but this section provides an introduction by illustration. For each DLS, an anecdote offers an informal case study of educators guiding children to attain that skill; this is followed by a brief author reflection.

Across a Common Bridge

As a matter of spiritual faith for some, humanistic psychology for others, there seems to be a common thread among the scholars cited in the book. I have found this to be articulated exquisitely in the writings of Maslow: a life force in the form of a dynamic for development powers the brain. This life force is fragile, especially in the early years. Maslow’s contribution—that healthy psychological growing can occur only when psychological safety is attained—has been corroborated (as mentioned) by developmental scientists since the advent of the concept over 60 years ago.

When the motivation for psychological growing is released (made free or, in my wording, supported and nudged), the intrinsic life force, which some call *mastery motivation*, comes to the fore. Amazing, child-generated learning then takes place—such as by Cynthia, just 5, who one afternoon completed five class puzzles simultaneously. When children walk a hard road to reach this space, a common term for their state of mind is **resilience**. DLS theory is only a current iteration of this miraculous but vulnerable guiding force within everyone, which, if empowered, potentially leads to individual fulfillment and the betterment of democratic society.

Skill 1: Finding Acceptance as a Member of the Group and as a Worthy Individual

Composite anecdote/case study. Rahmi, 40 months, had just joined the child care community. The teaching team (TT), with Morgan as lead, could not miss that Rahmi was showing a particular pattern of behavior. He played alone; tended to reject social initiatives made by other children and the TT; and, when he could, physically or psychologically distanced himself from organized activities. Rahmi sometimes sought to hide when it was time for large groups or sitting at the meal table. When “discovered,” he refused to participate. At other times, like cleanup, he seemed to blend in to his surroundings. (The TT noted that he was not grinning when he did this.)

With Morgan’s leadership, the TT recognized that punishing Rahmi for not following the routine would only aggravate his isolation from the group. Instead, the TT remained especially matter-of-fact in their interventions, inviting rather than forcing, and emphasized building relationships with the child. They also had built communications with Rahmi’s family from the first day and talked with the designated family members who picked Rahmi up each day.

With quiet persistence, individual TT members—especially Claudia, who took particular interest in the child—looked for times during the day to have **contact talks** with Rahmi. (Contact talks are intentional moments of quality time during which a TT member engages a child in friendly conversation. The purpose is for the child and adult to get to know each other better and build mutual trust.) Here’s a short contact talk Claudia had one day with Rahmi as he was playing with a truck loaded with “stuff.” Claudia had been sitting beside Rahmi, sharing the moment with him.

Claudia: Your truck is really loaded.
(*Pausing to give Rahmi time to respond.*)

Rahmi: Yeah, Uncle Cy hauls stuff.

Claudia: Bet you like to ride with him.

Rahmi: (*Smiling slightly.*) Yeah, he got a 150. He takes me sometimes.

Rahmi concentrated on getting his truck onto a rug without “stuff” falling off. Claudia decided to end the conversation, but continued to spend a few more minutes with the child. By building secure relationships with Rahmi outside of conflict situations, Claudia and the TT helped Rahmi gradually decide the community was a safe and welcoming place.

Reflection. Contact talks don’t have to be lengthy, but they need to happen with every child, at least every day. With Rahmi and other children struggling to gain DLS 1, the talks need to happen even more than that. Ample individual *choice time* (work time, playtime) afforded by developmentally appropriate programs allows for the talks to happen. Chapter 4 gives further analysis and illustration of contact talks, as well as seven other related communication practices for building secure relationships.

From contacts with the family, the TT surmised that Rahmi was dealing with developmental challenges, and not traumatic challenges outside of the program. Being only months old and just joining a group of unfamiliar peers and adults, Rahmi was reacting with high stress levels. The TT recognized that the 40-month-old needed general affirmation of his acceptance and worth, and so the team coordinated in using contact talks to help him. At the same time, the TT met and began to develop partnerships with Rahmi’s family (including his Uncle Cy, who picked up Rahmi some days, always driving his pickup truck). All the team worked to establish the connection with the child that Claudia had, through friendly one-on-one conversations. Over a few weeks, Rahmi came to recognize that the community was a safe place.

Skill 2: Expressing Strong Emotions in Nonhurting Ways

Composite anecdote/case study. From the first day, Caroline (59 months) showed behavior that indicated a high need for attention and to be in control of situations and people, including the TT. Caroline’s actions suggested a mistrust of others—evident when it was her turn to catch a bounced ball from the teacher and, instead of throwing it back, she ran off with it. One morning, Caroline was observed crowding out a smaller child who was washing a truck in a dishpan (“like at the car wash”) to wash it herself. Caroline seemed to give thought to when she chose to show bullying behavior, appearing to intentionally cause conflicts.

This was also a pattern of behavior the TT could not miss! (Lead teacher Ina said to me that one adult on the team already seemed to harbor negative feelings toward Caroline.) Ina and the team talked. Ina noticed that her colleague Scout (new but catching on) seemed to get along with Caroline. Ina asked Scout to do extra work with the child. With backing from Ina, Scout had frequent, informal contact talks with Caroline (again, when conflicts were not happening). The team agreed that Ina would handle most conflicts involving the child. By playing the “good teacher,” Scout became a big sister figure to Caroline, someone the child could go to when things got tough. (With a classroom guideline of “We are friendly to others,” Ina consistently

intervened when Caroline aggressively asserted her will—and the entire staff encouraged her when she did not.)

Reflection. Like other children who assert their will to get what they want, Caroline had likely learned that people couldn't be trusted to help her meet her safety needs and concluded she must act for herself. She was showing a **mistaken behavior**—which can be intentional as well as reactive. (See Chapter 4 for further information.) Important in helping young children gain DLS 2 is giving them a support system to develop trust while teaching them they needn't bully to find a place in the **encouraging early learning community**. Teaching kids who show intentional mistaken behaviors how to use their ego strength to become community leaders is the challenge. The long-term difference might well be between an adult who is a virtuous civic leader and one who is self-serving.

Skill 3: Solving Problems Creatively—Independently and in Cooperation with Others

Reconstructed anecdote/independent problem solving. Karin (44 months), from the Ojibwe village of Redby, came into the room with even more than her usual enthusiasm. She barely got her coat hung before she raced to the stand-up paint easel and threw on a paint shirt. I watched as Karin painted five large squiggles in blue. "Another one, Dan," she said, and I hung the first picture to dry as she went to work on the second one. This time she made five figures approximating *p*'s and *q*'s. Looking at it, she said, "Another one, Dan." As I hung the second to dry, she was already busy on her third picture. She made five large circles. In each she painted spots for eyes and lines for smiles. She looked at her picture and put down her brush. Smiling, Karin said, "Maze and Luke came home. Ma says we are going to have a real Indian Thanksgiving!" Still beaming, Karin took off her paint shirt and went to find her friends.

Reflection. Until this day in November, I had never seen Karin make anything other than distinct blotches or shapes. The second picture with the letter-like figures made me think she was really trying to say something through her art. She told me what when she finished her third. I had almost said

something to her about wasting paper, but I was glad I didn't. In terms of Rhoda Kellogg's ([1969] 2015) classic stages of art development, Karin went from "controlled scribbling" to "shapes" and "designs" to "early pictorial" within 10 minutes!

Most pictures young children see are in picture books telling stories. It is natural for them to want to tell stories through their art. If we pause to give the child a chance to think, she may tell us how her family has reunited and is going to celebrate "a real Indian Thanksgiving."

Reconstructed anecdote/cooperative problem solving. On this Monday, Brian, Louella, and Darwin (all 52–56 months) were the only ones in the dramatic play area. My teaching teammate Josie and I watched the three take everything out of the wood refrigerator, stove, and wardrobe; place the furniture pieces on their backs on the floor, sit down in them; and make loud machine noises. My teammate started to walk over and remind them of the "correct" way of using the play furniture. I asked Josie to wait, and we went over to ask what they were doing.

"There's a fire across the lake," one child said. "Yeah, we got to get the water and put the fire out," said another. "We gotta get the water in them bucket planes. That's very dangerous," added the third.

I turned to Josie. Resigned, she told me, "Yeah, there was a fire on the west end (of Red Lake) over the weekend. They had to fly a forestry [water scooper] plane up here from Bemidji. They got it out." She told the children that they could use the furniture as planes this once, but they needed to put them back and restock them when they were done. The three played water-scooping planes putting out a wildfire for nearly a half hour—getting out occasionally to fight the fire by hand. Under Josie's watchful eye, they put everything back after they were done.

Reflection. I refer to DLS 3 as the *learning skill*. Of the skills, DLS 3 most directly refers to the implicit mental processes of sizing up an activity, applying oneself to it through mental and physical activity, seeing it through to a conclusion, and cognitively and affectively (if intuitively) evaluating the outcome. In early childhood education, learning activities that afford rich learning opportunities are most

appropriately open-ended ones, with children feeling welcome to uniquely engage in them. When involved in developmentally appropriate learning experiences, young children don't think about adults' conventional expectations about materials and the program. Karin was not thinking about paper conservation, and the firefighters were not concerned that they were using play furniture unconventionally.

A guiding insight for me that readers will occasionally come across is from John Dewey, paraphrased like this: curricula are set up logically. Children learn *psychologically*, according to the varying individual patterns of their development. Teachers use responsive leadership to mediate between the fixed logical curriculum and the dynamic psychological child.

Skill 4: Accepting Unique Human Qualities in Others

Reconstructed anecdote. Back in the 1960s, our Ojibwe Head Start program at Red Lake was informal about guidelines like participation age and income eligibility. It was a community program, and besides Red Lake community members, it served a few of the young children of doctors and school officials who lived close by. James Druso was the 50-month-old son of the White school superintendent who lived at Red Lake with his family. James was in our room, one of maybe 18 in the group. The other kids didn't care that he was White or who his father was. James had lots of friends and clearly enjoyed Head Start.

Knowing that the families of some of our kids sang traditional songs at Red Lake dance gatherings (powwows), my teaching teammate Josie and I brought in two 5-gallon plastic buckets, supplied easel brushes for drumsticks, and played a cassette of songs by the Red Lake Singers. We had this powwow activity going outside on a regular basis and, when it got too cold on occasion, in the room.

James danced regularly with his mates and occasionally joined the few who were beating the drums. On a Wednesday after the kids had gone home, I got called to the Head Start director's office. Director Jody grew up in the nearby village of Redby and had worked herself up through the ranks. She was professional and on occasion, especially with the White male

teaching staff (me), formidable. She informed me that the superintendent wanted to meet with her and me that afternoon to discuss whether we were allowing powwows at Head Start. Jody said she had a meeting and sent me.

When I walked into Mr. Druso's office, I saw a picture on the wall of Native Americans attacking a stagecoach! (Remember, this was in the 1960s.) He informed me that the powwows were inappropriate. He asked me if other teachers were doing the same thing in their rooms. I said I didn't know, but they were in my room. Mr. Druso told me then, and the next morning told Jody, that if the powwows did not stop, he would pull his son, James, from the program—and that there might be other ramifications. After talking with me, Jody called Mr. Druso and told him that powwows were a part of Red Lake culture, and Dan would not stop. On Friday, James did not attend.

But something happened in the family over the weekend—perhaps Mrs. Druso and James outvoted Dad—and on Monday James returned. He kept close with his mates but told me he wouldn't dance “Indian” again, and didn't.

Reflection. An intolerance of differing human qualities in others is passed down in families as a part of childrearing and too often is reinforced by media, many schools, and other societal institutions. This is no big news, and neither is pressure from prestigious families to influence a program to make unwarranted changes—ask most directors. Two points of interest strike me in relation to this true story pertaining to DLS 4.

First, James returned to the program he really cared about. His mates probably missed him when “doing powwow,” but they welcomed him back, and he was glad to be with us. At his tender age, James apparently had to make a difficult sacrifice in the arrangement that let him return. How this compromise affected him in the long term, I do not know. But one thing is for sure: when children attend inclusive programs, a family member's racism will not be the only influence on a growing child.

Second, the TT and director stood together to remain inclusive, welcoming, and culturally relevant. A school superintendent is a powerful person in the community, but the Head Start program did what was right to support the unique cultural heritage of

the community. Within a few years, Mr. Druso and his family moved on, but Head Start continued, and the school district eventually got superintendents who were more attuned to the culture of the families served by the schools. Some years later, the Red Lake High School Pow-Wow Club was invited to the White House!

Skill 5: Thinking Intelligently and Ethically

Teacher Beth Wallace shares this account:

Jeremiah was almost 3 when I started teaching at the center. He was one of those very physical kids, whose feelings and thoughts always moved through his body first. He'd had a turbulent life and when I came to the center, he was living mostly with his mom, and some with his dad. They were separated, and neither made very much money. Jeremiah was curious about and interested in everything. He loved stories and connected with others with his whole heart. He knew much about the natural world and was observant and gentle with animals, insects, and plants.

When I first started working with Jeremiah, he had a lot of angry outbursts. The center used time-out at that point (the dreaded "green chair") and Jeremiah spent considerable time there. While I was at the center, we moved away from using time-outs. Instead, we introduced a system called "peer problem solving." By the time Jeremiah graduated to kindergarten, we had been using the system for three years, and he was one of the experts.

One day, I overheard a fracas in the block corner. I stood up to see what was going on, ready to intervene. The youngest child in the room, who was just 2 and talking only a little bit, and one of the 4-year-olds were in a dispute over a truck. I took a step forward, ready to go to their aid, and then I saw Jeremiah approach them.

"What's going on?" he asked (my standard opening line). He proceeded to facilitate a discussion between the two children that lasted for five minutes. He made sure both kids got a chance to speak; he interpreted for the little

one. "Jordan, what do you think of that idea?" he asked. Jordan shook his head and clutched the truck tighter. "I don't think Jordan's ready to give up the truck yet," he told the 4-year-old.

It was amazing. Jeremiah helped the kids negotiate an agreement, and then he walked away with a cocky tilt to his head I'd never seen before. His competence was without question; his pride was evident. (Gartrell 2000, 131-32).

Reflection. Early childhood educators model and teach for intelligent and ethical decision making every time they interact with others in the encouraging community. Beth did so by not judging Jeremiah and by teaching him to resolve conflicts peaceably within the context of the group's peer mediation program that the teacher had started.

Showing DLS 5 is difficult for all of us and especially for young children who are still only months old in their **personal development**. While we shouldn't try to "boost" young children into consistent intelligent and ethical decision making, we can guide them in this direction. As they gain DLS 3 and 4, children become more able to show DLS 5. In teaching for the DLS, TTs empower the very young to build brain structures and reaction tendencies that make intelligent and ethical decisions possible. Teachers facilitate progress in this direction whenever they view as positive children's efforts to be prosocial and offer them encouragement.

Working Cooperatively with Families

The reality is that a child's basic needs are met primarily via the child's family members. Teachers only help. But, by building secure relationships with children *and* family members, and by using the encouraging communication skills of guidance leadership with both, teachers can be a big help.

In the learning community, guidance leadership assists children by modeling and teaching for the five skills. In building family-teacher connections, as parents learn that the relationship with teachers is authentic and can be trusted, they become open to and feel supported in actively helping children meet their needs (Mancilla & Blanco 2022) and gain the DLS.