

Youth Lives Democracy

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Oftentimes today people are disturbed by a seeming lack of a positive approach in the teaching of democratic ideals in schools. They ask that freedom of discussion and examination of various ways of living be accompanied by a study of the values and responsibilities of the democratic way of life. Stanley E. Dimond, director, and Grace L. Weston, member of the Citizenship Education Study of Wayne University and the public schools, Detroit, Michigan, illustrate the way one group is making a positive approach to this vital problem of education for civic competency.

THE GOAL of the American people is perfectly clear. It has been expressed many times in the speeches and writings of our great statesmen. The poems of Walt Whitman and the historical writings of such men as James Truslow Adams have clarified it. It has surged up from the masses of people in our two world wars. That goal is the *democratic way of life*.

We, the people, believe in democracy. We sometimes have difficulty in explaining its meaning, but within ourselves we have a feeling that it expresses the way of life which we cherish. We strive to make democracy work; yet we recognize that we are not completely successful. In one sense democracy is a noble ambition toward which we aspire, but something which we have not completely achieved.

WHAT'S IN THE WAY?

Why haven't we achieved our democratic goals? What gets in our way? Certainly one obstacle to the complete fulfillment of our democratic way of life is our inability to solve our great social problems. We are confronted by overwhelming problems of war, peace, housing, employment, health—prob-

lems of age, problems of youth. Because we have not yet learned how to solve these problems we are unable to accomplish our democratic goals.

Another block that keeps us from attaining our highest aspirations is our inability to satisfy basic human needs. For the past two decades we have heard much about the "ill-fed, ill-clad, ill-housed." Certainly, adequate food, clothing, and shelter are necessary for *all* people if democracy is to be completely successful. But there are other basic needs of equal importance; the great human needs for love, affection, and a feeling of belonging. If our people do not get these emotional needs satisfied, the resulting personality maladjustments get in the way of our democratic ideal.

Our imperfect human relationships are also a hurdle in the path of an ongoing democracy. A society, confronted by race riots, religious cleavages, labor-management quarrels, and an increasing divorce rate, exemplifies the fact that our personal relationships destroy democracy at the very roots of our society.

Similarly, we are not able to make democracy function as well as we would

like because we lack the knowledge, the skill, and the abilities which are necessary. As a people we do not know well enough how to operate our democratic institutions. We lack sufficient knowledge of the causes of human behavior. We do not know as yet enough about the workings of our economic system. We need to improve our skills in reading, listening, discussing, and observing. As the Gallup polls have pointed out we lack information about the great issues before our country and, even, about our congressmen. We are not an ignorant people, but we are lacking in the knowledge and skill necessary to make our democratic dream come true.

HOW SHALL WE EDUCATE?

Education for civic competency, if it is to be truly effective, must focus upon some such analysis of our present situation. The goals of civic education must be goals which get at the essential aspects of our social dilemma. Two years ago in Detroit a Citizenship Education Study financed by the William Volker Fund was instituted to find ways of developing more competent citizens. The staff of the Study helped make the analysis which has been described above, believing that civic education must be concerned with a greater fulfillment of the democratic ideal. In order to do this educators must be concerned with improving problem solving ability, getting better satisfaction of basic human needs, improving human relations, and increasing the knowledge, skills, and abilities of citizens. During the past two years the eight schools in the Study have attempted to find ways of improving civic education. Activities which relate to the five goals

of the Study indicate how we are trying to give boys and girls real experiences in a living democracy.

Democratic Values Require Action

The Good Citizen Cherishes Democratic Values and Bases His Actions On Them. He is as thrilled with situations in which all men are recognized as worthy as he is with situations in which symbols of democracy are dramatically displayed. He is as emotionally aroused when his fellow men are concerned about opportunity for all as when he first views the rich wheat lands of the Middle West or the national Capitol.

The schools in the present era of social conflict are realizing their obligation to develop loyalty to the democratic way of living. To do this, however, means that schools must deliberately provide opportunities for young people to examine their democratic values and beliefs in situations which are realistic. For example, recently a group of ninth grade students had made the decision that there would be no "skip day." However, thirty members of the class did not abide by the decision of the class majority. This raised the whole question of the responsibilities and rights of the minority and required an examination of values involved in democratic living. Here was a situation in which the value supposedly believed in by the group was not manifested by the actions of some members.

In another situation a class was upset by a fairly aggressive member who was not accepted by either of two racial groups present. When this belief in "equal opportunity for all" and "that each person counts" was examined, they

discovered that they verbalized the democratic ideals well, but actually did not live them because they had not assumed any responsibility to help him with his problems.

Through such experiences, students discovered that it is necessary to test beliefs in actual situations in addition to giving verbal expression to these beliefs. When decisions in relation to conflict situations are made by some older authoritarian, students are denied the opportunity to test their own beliefs in action.

Moreover, it is necessary for students in the process of their education to get some clear understanding of the meaning of democracy so that they will have an intelligent basis for testing their beliefs. This understanding can be obtained, for example, from courses in American history and literature if those courses are focused on this objective. Some interesting developments are also arising in the use of units on democracy which provide opportunities for boys and girls to search out the bases for their beliefs.

Problems Involve Solution

The Good Citizen Recognizes Social Problems of the Times and Has the Will and Ability to Work Toward Their Solution. Such ability is developed by students only when they understand the process of solving social problems. Working together to determine facts; examining facts to delete prejudices; testing conclusions in action must become a pattern so ingrained in the thinking processes of our students that they habitually use these steps in the solution of problems. As pupils mature, the areas in which they plan

and act should expand from their own small world to the larger areas of school, neighborhood, national, and international communities. Our interdependent society with its complex problems requires that this process receive major emphasis in the school curriculum.

Consider a situation which recently occurred in a secondary school. The question of garbage and rubbish disposal was being discussed and sweeping generalizations as to the condition of alleys and reasons for these conditions were made. The class decided to phrase the problem; collect data by making a survey of the alleys in the neighborhood; examine the data; and base their actions on their findings. The group discovered that in some cases, individuals were not providing adequate containers and were not following other provisions of the city ordinance. The generalizations made after the survey were then based on actual data. As a result, the students appealed to the city department concerned. The commissioner announced plans for the cooperation of the Department of Public Works in obtaining conformance to the city regulation. Several thousand leaflets were distributed to the homes in the community notifying people of the need and their responsibilities for cleaning the alleys and, in addition, enforcement procedures were improved.

The relationship of the problem-solving process to an understanding of democracy is perhaps more clearly sharpened by the following illustration. Two classes in two different schools were studying about Mexican people. One school had many Negro children. The other had none. When the stu-

dents from the latter school visited the other to share their learnings about Mexico, they found themselves for the first time working on a problem with children of another race. Two comments made later seemed significant. One child said, "Why, those Negro children are smart." Another added, "Those Negro children are clean."

When schools provide opportunities for the attacking of problems which exist both in the school and community, they provide situations in which students may examine their behavior in relation to their democratic values. By continually re-examining their actions, they are guided to develop a pattern of behavior consistent with democratic beliefs, and at the same time they will be provided with opportunities for the recognition of social problems and the chance to master the techniques for the solutions.

Needs Are Recognized

The Good Citizen is Aware of and Takes Responsibility for Meeting Basic Human Needs. The individual is so important in a democracy that a consideration of his needs must be given by every school. Basic to each human being is the need to be free from aggression, domination, or exploitation; the need for love and affection; the need to belong to groups, and to be accepted by others; the need to take responsibility in cooperation with others; the need for a level of living which provides for adequate health, housing and recreation; the need to have high standards of spiritual, ethical, and moral values. Well-adjusted individuals who will not intensify social problems but who are emotionally able to help in

their solutions are the bulwark of a democratic society. If basic human needs are not met, it is very difficult for individuals to hold to their democratic values and consistently operate in accordance with them.

Teachers have made some good beginnings toward this goal. As more has been learned about human behavior they have moved from a somewhat general practice of severe discipline and regimentation to a greater understanding of children. Yet it is difficult to find a school where the working philosophy recognizes all the basic needs. Attempts are being made, however. For instance, in one participating high school, all the pupils in one grade are enrolled in a Personal Relations class where their own personal problems become the course content. They exchange ideas and share experiences with each other. The purpose is to provide a situation in which they may release guilt feelings; establish warm relationships with an adult and their own classmates; receive substitute satisfactions; and consider their own ethical and moral values.

In a school in a blighted area, teachers felt that little could be accomplished until basic physical needs were made. A hot lunch program was instituted to insure that all pupils received at least one adequate meal a day. The faculty, with other community groups, is now engaged in making a housing survey as the first step in a plan to improve living conditions.

Democracy in All Relationships

The Good Citizen Practices Democratic Human Relations in the Family, Community, and in the Larger Scene. The good citizen needs to personalize

what happens to others thereby earning respect and confidence. He strives to develop his ability to cooperate with others. He sincerely desires to help other persons.

One of the most important elements in obtaining democratic human relationships is student participation in the government of the school. As the Student Council becomes a vehicle for improving the practice of democracy in schools, better human relations within the school can be fostered. Similarly, as teachers provide increased opportunities for pupils to participate in planning, executing, and appraising classroom practices, there is a better chance for getting good human relations.

There are, also, a host of activities which may be summarized under the classification "Services for the General Welfare." These services range from safety patrols, student library assistants, student helpers in lunchroom and on hall duty, through activities for community betterment. Frequently many of these activities are taken for granted. When pupils are asked on questionnaires what they have done for their school or what other students have done for them the results show that most pupils have little idea of giving or receiving service.

The great impetus which has been given to intercultural education during the past few years has provided renewed drive for the improvement of human relations. The school that provides an intercultural club or committee, or a class that studies discrimination in the community and presents informal dramatizations such as those described by the expression "the living newspaper" is moving in the direction of

a finer type of human relationship. The increased attention which is being given to school-community relationships through the organizations of Mothers clubs, parents teas, P.T.A. groups, community service, and the integration of community social agencies is another important avenue for achieving this goal.

For example, one team of seventh grade teachers has been meeting regularly during the past year with the parents of their pupils. Working in an area of low socio-economic status these teachers learned that parents did not understand the report cards and "beat up" their children for low marks. As a result of getting a better understanding parents and teachers together have developed a new report card.

Similarly, teachers had been greatly disturbed by the way pupils matched pennies, pitched pennies, and in general used pennies to "disturb" school. When they learned that pennies were used in the home as entertainment, that "pennies" were an acceptable part of the cultural pattern of a lower class community, they were able to improve human relationships in their classes by their own change of attitudes.

Skills for Democratic Living

The Good Citizen Possesses and Uses Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities Necessary in a Democratic Society. He needs skills and abilities in reading, listening, discussing, and observing. He uses these skills and abilities to gain understanding of the present structure and functioning of society—the working plans of representative government, the impact of pressure groups, the operation of the economic system, and the relationship

of all these to our complex social heritage.

Dr. Gallup has recently pointed out that "Schools and colleges fail to give students even a rudimentary knowledge of the workings of government." According to his findings only thirty-one percent of voters know when a congressional election is to be held; only one-third of the college trained students know the term of a representative to Congress. In a similar vein various groups have been stressing the need for teaching more American History. Other groups point out the need for increased attention to current affairs. These deficiencies are not new to teachers. Any teacher who has ever given a final examination has been chagrined by the lack of information of the students.

People, however, usually do not remember facts unless they have need to use them. People will learn the term of a Congressman or the date of the next election most readily if they have a real reason for wanting to elect or defeat a particular person. In this sense, knowledge and skills will be best learned as they are related to problem solving, meeting basic needs, and improving human relations.

In keeping with this point of view, schools of the Study have emphasized unit planning, direct experience, social studies laboratories or workshops, and have used a wider variety of learning

materials. Pupils are given opportunities to work on real problems. Through these experiences they are developing skills necessary to good citizenship.

WHAT CAN THE TEACHER DO?

In developing competent citizens, teachers occupy the key position. Their methods of teaching and their relationships with children are crucial. Teachers must provide a school atmosphere in which pupils are happy because they have feelings of belonging, of affection, of responsibility, and service. They must be concerned with developing an allegiance to the ideals of democracy. They must provide opportunities for pupils to make choices and to examine the basis for these choices in relation to their democratic values. They must be concerned with the pupils' willingness and ability to solve social problems. They must be willing to provide a generous allotment of time for the continuous application of the scientific process involved in solving such problems. The kind of human relationships in which it is possible for pupils to live democratically must be encouraged.

Although we have not entirely achieved our democratic goals, the future of our way of life depends significantly on how honestly our schools work at reaching the goals of good democratic citizenship.



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