

Schools Can Foster Democratic Values

ROBERT H. BECK

“Teaching democratically for democracy is the most strenuous teaching of all,” declares Robert H. Beck, Associate Professor, Philosophy of Education, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

UNDER the pressure of authoritarian enemies the United States and other countries with republican forms of government and democratic ways of living have had occasion to spell out why they cherish democracy and reject its authoritarian alternatives. There have been countless opportunities for school children to write essays on the American Way, Freedom, and Democracy. The community believes its schools are capable of sustaining faith in democratic values.

In a sense, it may be asking a purely academic and rhetorical question to inquire whether the schools can foster democracy. Of course they can. The question is not whether the schools can reinforce democracy but how this can be done with greatest efficacy and the least indoctrinating. This latter point is of crucial importance. We must be zealous not to train our pupils in lip-service only. Anyone can salute the flag and recite a pledge. Oaths of loyalty do not necessarily make loyal citizens. They may do no harm but also they may fail to accomplish little positive good.

Those anxious to forward understanding and love of democracy have the formidable task of “preaching” democracy while encouraging the habits of critical thinking, rejection of dogmatism, willingness to allow the chips

to fall where they may (in discussion and research), and everlasting willingness to cooperate with those whose religious persuasions, economic views, political biases and what-have-you differ from one's own.

Obstacles to Fostering of Values

Obstacles to the fostering of values are numerous. One only has been cited, the tendency to coerce students into acknowledging democracy. The coercion, often subtle, is everywhere present. Each person who teaches is armed with bribes (gold stars, Phi Beta Kappa keys, promotions, seats in the Jenny Wren section, smiles and praise) and with goads (below-passing marks, Jolly Robin sections, scowls, and the mourner's bench outside the principal's office).

If these are not subtle, but, rather, pretty obvious devices, think of the truly sophisticated dodges, the psychological ones. The students sit facing us. *We* are the symbols of authority. *We* dispense justice and, at times, mercy. All eyes are on us. Any whispering or persistent and searching student questioning challenges our authority. We usually discourage such questioning. Some of us have the added advantage of lecturing (presenting the “Truth”) from a raised dais, a podium, from which we can look down on the stu-

dents. They look up to us. Not a few of us have lecterns quite like the minister's pulpit.

Even many of those who boast of free group discussions, pupil-teacher-planning, as they call it, harbor a trace of coercion. For one thing, there is the "hidden agenda." We may ask the students to assist in choosing problem-topics. Up our sleeve, or in our notes, may be the problem-topics that will "emerge." Observers of discussions on occasion discover that the "leader" (teacher) manages to steer the discussion pretty well.

Perhaps our picture is unfair. After all, magnificent efforts are being made to provide teachers with realistic workshops in which they can learn confidence in real pupil-teacher planning, uncoerced discussion, and the arts of sensible self-evaluation in groups. It takes workshops, practice and study. Teaching democratically for democracy is the most strenuous teaching of all. It demands high-grade intelligence and imaginative group-membership, as well as a fund of knowledge about students, discussion and the facts under discussion.

Facts Are Important

This raises the old issue. How important are the facts or what once was labeled subject matter? Is it enough to conduct productive discussions through the use of tested techniques of "group dynamics"? Is it enough to avoid reliance on charm, "to get in there and work with the group"? Is it enough to know how to encourage learning, participation in group activity, and rational behavior (freedom from prejudice, etc.)? Most of us believe it is not.

It is well to admit that we teach students and not subjects. The teacher would do well also to disavow any wish to instruct "disembodied minds whose bodies have been checked in the cloak-room." Each of us will profit from acknowledging that emotions are important in the educative process. It will do no harm, either, to denounce loudly those teachers who think the mind is a wastepaper basket, filing cabinet, or blackboard. Let us agree also that it is harmful to underwrite distinctions between liberal and vocational education. No one of us covets the title of moss-back or, worse, reactionary. We stand solidly behind Growth.

Group Dynamics a First Step

Having gone through the motions of exorcising traditionalism, it may be well for us to admit that group dynamics is but a step in teaching. After the group is geared to work, work is in order. All too often group members objectify their values (tell one another what is on their respective chests) and prepare to be rational (rid themselves of cross feelings, hatreds and boredom) only to find that the time has come to dismiss. The problem-topic to be studied is still untouched. This may be good therapy, helpful in advancing the "mature personality" and "mature mind," but democracy cannot live on good group dynamics alone.

It should be admitted, however, that we have lagged in our understanding of human inter-group and intra-group relations. Discovery and use of good group dynamics is long overdue. Nevertheless, students and teachers cannot know enough about themselves (as social, psychological and biological or-

ganisms), the physical world (conservation of resources, for example), economic relations, social forces, political theories, and the numerous forms of aesthetic expression. This is not the place, however, to outline the content of a defensible general education.

Democracy upholds a belief that the common man, if trained to see and to understand his personality needs and the social forces by which he is surrounded, may be expected to play fairly and judge sensibly. The teacher genuinely committed to promoting the welfare of the common man (democracy) will be more nearly able to cope with anti-democratic forces, if he or she knows this and a few other principal democratic values and education appropriate for their existence. One of these values is ability and willingness to recognize that all men have interests, values and purposes. Common sense indicates that there are vast differences among men, some biologic, some cultural and some usually described as psychological. Experience shows these values are, from time to time, irreconcilable. The democrat admits this situation. Of course the education that will permit him to live with these differences does not presuppose that there is any general body of subject matter (values) which can be *imposed* on all students.

Planning Is Continuous and Inclusive

Planning the term's work must be a continuous process involving both the students, with all their individual differences, and the teacher. Does this rule out pre-planning by the teacher? Not at all. It means only that the pre-planning will be concerned more with the psy-

chological, biological and cultural differences of the students. It will gather a great deal of information about the community and its cultural values. It will lead into home visits and pre-school census-taking, which always give the teacher opportunities to meet the parents and size up the sorts of pressures these parents and their social backgrounds are likely to exert on the pupils and on their teacher.

This says simply that all the pre-planning will not go to the selecting of texts, writing out assignments, drafting tests and setting up seating charts. The information, attitudes and skills are not here forgotten. Neither is the student, the parent, or the community.

This reference to attitudes, skills and information may be unfortunate. Experiment has shown that students learn and behave as integrated persons. The information you offer them will involve attitudes and skills as well. Not a few of us overlook this. When Junior sits through the shop period he picks up a few attitudes towards his teacher and friends. He does not learn skills only. Allow Junior to have experiences with you and with the other students which will incline his sympathy, his habits, toward democracy.

Students Need Practice in Evaluating

Yet another great value in democracy is intellectual-emotional fortitude. The democrat has developed attitudes encouraging unrestrained inquiry into *all* aspects of reality and living—morals included. We shall have, as a consequence, to encourage our students toward practice in evaluating. Not all evaluating is marking. Our students must mature in their thinking about

subject matter. We can work at their appreciation of logic, sensitivity to propaganda, realization that hard work in and out of groups is mandatory, if their interests are to be fulfilled.

There is no room for dogma or for dictatorial teaching devices. The teacher is a leader, he or she leads in helping the students to assume leadership. What is leadership in the classroom? Is it not learning to evaluate discussion and the facts or values discussed? Is it not the acquisition of good manners and humor? Is it not pulling one's weight and learning how to pull together and with an end-in-view? The democrat is no gold-brick. Nor does he dictate. Neither is he a wallflower, endless dissenter, or distractor.

Administrators Can Foster Attitudes

What goes for teaching holds for supervision of teaching and the administration of schools or school systems as well. Administrators can aid in creating democratic attitudes among teaching personnel. All that has been said about teaching is equally applicable to supervision and administration. Merit systems are no better than gold stars. Formal orders from "above" rank with the worst of traditional assignment-recitation-test teaching techniques. Whatever improves the efficiency of group work in the classroom will do so in teachers' meetings and in board sessions. Superintendents, supervisors and principals should learn about motivation, individual differences, and the whole gamut of social-psychological forces. The learning can benefit administrators and supervisors quite as much as it can teachers.

These are some of the ways our schools will revitalize and reinforce democracy's values. These practices already actually are being put into effect. There is every reason to believe that their benefits will become increasingly manifest.

The tale is nearly told. It has been oversimplified and altogether too optimistic. Teachers should study and review learning theory to the extent that they overcome the faults of the old faculty psychology (with its insistence that mind is a bundle of separate powers to be exercised by special subjects, *e.g.*, mathematics for reasoning) and the inadequate forms of transfer theories (theories presuming the sensibility cultivated in the literature class to make the students generally sensitive, of good taste and noble sentiment). Dropping faculty psychology and the illusions of transfer of training will help immeasurably, especially when complemented by the interment of what someone has designated the "assignment-study-recitation-test" technique. Also to be dropped are the panoply of rewards and punishments and the authoritarian techniques in teaching or administration.

Democracy Grows from Strength to Strength

Even when these improvements are effected, democratic values will not be finally secure in the school. The enemies of liberalism (we have sponsored a liberal philosophy throughout this essay) are enemies of democratic education. Their remarks about "progressive" education are thrusts against democracy's intent to foster every man's critical intelligence. These "enemies of

the people" know that the ideas we have called anathema will help them to break down democracy, or at least to keep it, as in Pericles' Athens, for the few.

The surge of democracy grows from strength to strength. Great as it is, it can be turned aside, even stopped. It is young but strong. Young, it will have to be nurtured, to be protected. Democracy allows so much that its enemies find it easy to win tolerance. This permissiveness may well be necessary. If it is, and I believe that it is, the democracy surrounding these malignant

spots will preserve health only if truly vigorous. The educator certainly is challenged in this health program! As an expert in the school, he or she must be diligent to study community, pupil and subject. As a citizen, he or she must join organizations dedicated to the enhancement of liberalism and the improvement of the schools. As a citizen, he or she can hardly afford not to be a "reformer," zealous for universal democracy (minority rights, for example). The citizen fulfilling this active role is the fitting partner in classroom democracy.

Children Express Their Values

ALICE V. KELIHER

Value judgments and reflections begin early, and school and home have primary responsibility in shaping these, according to Alice V. Keliher, Professor of Education, New York University, New York.

ASKED what she expects to do when eighteen, a ten-year-old girl replies, "I expect to be a tap dancer. If I can't do that I'll be a teacher."

A six-year-old boy doubles up his arm proudly, saying, "Boy, feel that muscle!"

A four-year-old climbs to the top of the jungle gym calling out, "Look at me! Look at me! I'm at the top!"

A girl of six proudly points out how her hair ribbon, socks and dress match.

A seven-year-old, echoed by the three-year-old brother, inquires, "Daddy, did you bring me a present from New York?"

A five-year-old boy has his first view of the kindergarten room, fixes his

gaze on the house play equipment, snorts, "Huh! Sissy stuff!"

A fifteen-year-old girl spends the evening dissolved in tears. She has not yet been invited to the spring prom but her girl friend has.

An eight-year-old boy has had trouble with spelling. He gets his first 100 per cent mark. He rushes home, paper in hand to show it exultantly to mother. It blows from his hand to the tracks. Chasing it, he is killed.

These expressions and activities of boys and girls, ranging from trivial to tragic, are subtle assertions of values. Almost every move we make and everything we say is somehow an indication of what we value, what we hold dear.

Copyright © 1951 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.