

Teaching for Democracy

When schools have a vision of students as citizens, they give students a sense of community that helps them make connections with the world.

Photographs by George H. Wood



Katy Beck, a 5th grade teacher at Hubbard Woods Elementary School in Winnetka, Illinois, helps her students set up their exhibit on the big news of spring 1990—the destruction of the Berlin Wall. (Reaching out to the world outside the school stems from the strong sense of community within.)

What does it mean to educate for democracy? What do schools look like when they focus on students as citizens and neighbors rather than as test-takers and employees? To find out, I have spent the past three years in the classrooms of teachers who see their task first and foremost as nurturing the skills, attitudes, and values necessary for democratic life. These visits have taken me to schools in rural Georgia, New Hamp-

shire, and Ohio; to the cities of New York and Milwaukee; and to the suburbs of Chicago. In every case, these schools are guided by a sense of the democratic mission of public education.

This mission manifests itself in a variety of ways. It can be seen in how adults and young people are treated, how the physical environment is utilized, and how instruction is organized, for example. While there are differences among schools, each and every

teacher and school exhibited several common characteristics that can guide us as we work to teach for democracy.

Schools and Classrooms as Communities

We take for granted that our schools are communities, when, in fact, they are merely institutions that can become communities only when we work at it. But, with proper attention to all the individuals within the school, we can create an experience for students that demonstrates what it means to be a compassionate, involved citizen. For it is only within a community, not an institution, that we learn how to hold fast to such principles as working for the common good, empathy, equity, and self-respect.

I investigated techniques of community building in each school I visited. At Harlem's Central Park East Secondary School, every student is attached to an advisor. Fifteen students are assigned to a teacher/advisor for two years. These advisors become the point of contact for students and parents with the school. Each group of students meets in advisory for more than three hours a week to discuss academics and personal problems, plan social gatherings (each advisory takes a yearly trip to a college outside of the city), write in their journals, and sometimes just study. Each advisor looks after his or her students for two years, filling out progress reports, meeting with parents, and just being there when a youngster needs a shoulder to cry on.

Thayer Junior/Senior High School in Winchester, New Hampshire, has a similar advisory system. Each teacher (including the principal) meets with seven to ten students at the start of each school day, just to check in. Then, once a month, individual meetings of an hour or longer are scheduled to discuss school and personal issues. Throughout their Thayer careers, students will have only two advisors in six years—one for the two years of junior high, one for the four years of high school. The purpose of advisory at Thayer is the same as Central Park



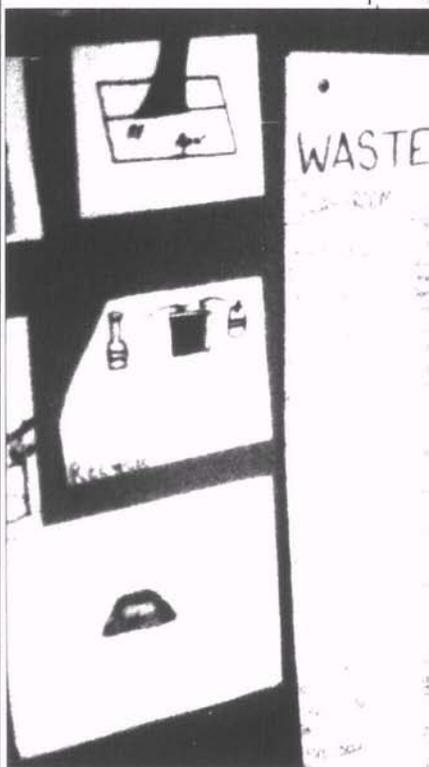
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East's: to connect every young person with the school.

At Chauncey Elementary in Ohio, students develop a sense of community through their Primary Forum. Every Monday morning the 1st and 2nd grade students and teachers gather in the multipurpose room just to celebrate being together. The session begins with a presentation—maybe someone's grandparent has been on a trip, or a visitor has biked around the country, or a student has made a discovery. Teachers take the time to deal with students' concerns and needs: how to solve shoving on the slide, how to get more paper towels for the restroom, or how to find a new best friend for someone whose neighbor moved away. Before they depart, all participants sing a rousing *Happy Birthday* for all who have birthdays that week, and other triumphs are duly noted and cheered. Then out the door go 70 or so smiling children, hand in hand, ready to face the world with their friends.

Children at Chauncey also spend two years with the same teacher, to make sure that every child has the time to connect with the classroom, feel a part of all that goes on, and have the time it takes to succeed in school. Hubbard Woods School in Winnetka, Illinois, uses similar strategies. There, multi-aged classrooms, teachers staying with kids for several years, and the pairing of older children with younger members of the school community for support and guidance—these are the norm, not the exception. Further, at both schools (and at Central Park East and Thayer) there is no ability grouping or tracking. Children learn in mixed, cooperative groups.

In their efforts to create a genuine community, each of these schools makes the time and space for every child to find a meaningful role in the classroom and school. To build community among young people and adults of differing personal histories, these schools discover ways to create a common history for them in the school—Central Park East's and Thayer's advisories, Chauncey's Primary Forum, and the multi-aged and heterogeneous groups in Hubbard Woods.



And, as one student at Central Park East put it, it works: "Our school, we think of it as our community. We know we need to work together. Even if we don't like one another we get over that because we want to work together."

Purposeful School Work

The moment you step into these schools, you know something special is going on. The first clues are visual. It might be that the halls are full of student projects and art work. Or the absence of posted rules carefully spelling out what one can or cannot do. Or brightly painted murals where one would usually see drab, industrial-strength-green cinder block. Then there are the materials—not textbooks—that spill out of



Schools that educate for democracy help students acquire skills by doing things that really matter. Here, a student participates in a school recycling project.

every corner of the building. Primary classrooms are brimming with children's books, blocks, string, cardboard scraps, plants, animals, rocks, paints, and assorted theater props. For older children, there is hands-on equipment—tape recorders, cameras, science apparatus, good novels, charts and graphs, and objects of art.

Walk down the hall and notice the physical set-up of these rooms. It's hard to find one with the desks all lined up in straight rows, presided over by a lecturer and a chalkboard full of notes. Instead, desks, or just as likely tables, are arranged in small groups throughout the room. Teachers and students have created work spaces for different tasks: an easy chair

or two for reading, a table with materials for writing, a darkroom built in a spare corner, or just plain open space for gathering as a group.

Then notice the kids. Moments after you enter the school, they want you to know this is a special place. One child takes you by the hand to show you her painting on the wall. Another offers to read to you from his journal. A high school boy, decked out in a T-shirt proclaiming his favorite heavy-metal band, shares with you an interview he's just finished with an 80-year-old bluegrass musician. First graders offer to read you a book, and they bring their favorite, the one they just wrote and illustrated. A shy 16-year-old explains her science project which in-

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volves an inventory of plant and animal species in the forest next to the school. Her not-so-shy friend then proceeds to whisk you out the door so you can see for yourself the rare specimen they found the day before.

Observe the work going on. Seldom is it quiet, and it's not often teacher-centered either. Children are doing things, not just watching someone else. Learning is not a spectator sport in these schools. You will find class meetings going on, with kids planning the next class project or working out class rules. They are more likely to be working in groups than alone, collaborating to solve a difficult math problem or gathering historical information for a presentation. They are busy writing as they produce their own books, newsletters and newspapers, or videotapes. Or they are very carefully putting the finishing touches on a display of what they have learned about houses, trees, the solar system, Steinbeck, geometric equations, or the Constitution.

The best-known example of this type of work goes on in Eliot Wigginton's high school classroom in Rabun Gap, Georgia. It is here that for nearly 25 years students have turned out the *Foxfire* books and magazines. These books (and now videos, radio programs, and musical recordings) are more than a collection of interviews with Appalachian elders. They are ways of helping students acquire a wide variety of academic skills doing something that really matters—creating a product that will entertain and enlighten thousands of people. "What we do has to be good," asserts one of Wig's students, "because people count on us to get it right."

This ethos of excellence also permeates Bill Elasky's 6th grade classroom in Amesville, Ohio. Three years ago a chemical spill in a local creek launched Bill's kids into becoming experts in water quality testing. Seizing on the moment, Bill and his students met with environmental experts, researched and purchased a chemical testing kit, and sampled all the tributaries to the local watershed. Their classroom became one of the more trusted sources of tests for private



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wells, and they began producing radio public service announcements on how to maintain safe water supplies. Not to be outdone, students in subsequent years produced a book on the way people use math in their daily lives (complete with interviews, charts, tables, and photographs all done by kids) and built a nature study area for use by all students in the district. These projects cover subject matter in a much more powerful way than any textbook ever has.

Rather than just cover material, these projects help kids see that what they do does matter. For example, the students in Richard Cargill's English class at Willow Brook High School in Villa Park, Illinois, built on the environmental issues raised in his class by convincing local grocery stores to go back to using paper bags rather than the new plastic variety. They also exposed the illegal draining of a nearby wetland and persuaded the school to build a nature area rather than drain land for another athletic field. As Bill Elasky says, "I want kids to see that they can make a difference now, not just in some far off future."

Can there be any doubt that this is where the tools of democratic citizenship are developed?

Connections to the Outside

Schools with a civic mission open their doors to the world around them. This is how they keep the school community from closing in on itself and how they show their young people the needs and possibilities that will confront them when they leave school.

At Fratney Elementary in Milwaukee, to organize the curriculum, teachers use schoolwide themes that connect the school to its neighborhood. For example, the school year opened with a study of the school's "Riverwest Neighborhood." Students conducted scientific studies of the river, studied the arts from various community museums and artisans, interviewed local residents, and read books from the local library about the area. Throughout the year, students' thematic work was based on the experiences of the residents of this integrated neighborhood of African-, Hispanic-, and Oriental-Americans.

Marcia Burchby, who teaches with Bill Elasky in rural Amesville, Ohio, finds the source of much of her 1st grade curriculum in the world around her school. Stop by the school any Thursday and her room will be empty. You'll find Marcia and her 6-year-olds wandering through town surveying housing types, hunting dinosaur bones, or following a creek to its origin while making an inventory of local wildflowers. Starting from these local origins the curriculum reaches out to the world beyond Amesville, but it is always grounded in the daily experience of the students.

Beyond using the world outside the school as a curricular resource, students at Central Park East provide services to that world: every student spends one morning a week in a community service project. You'll find these young people writing for community newspapers, conducting tours of local museums, assisting in daycare centers, and attending to patients in hospitals or residents of nursing homes. The point of these experiences is not to provide job skills but, as one

of the community service coordinators puts it, to "show our kids that they can contribute now. And they are all capable of understanding the difference they can make."

In both learning from and working in their own communities, young people take the first step toward productive, engaged democratic citizenship. When their work begins in a genuine and secure community, when the skills they gain empower them to make a difference, the final and logical step is to make sure the walls of the school are porous enough to allow for a genuine engagement with the world in which our children live. To be a site of democratic education is to be a school where the community genuinely is the classroom.

Reclaiming the Democratic Vision

These are just a few examples of what the best of our schools are doing to nurture and develop the attributes of



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democratic citizenship in our future neighbors. These schools are laboratories where democracy is experienced, not museums where it is just observed. I am happy to report that these kids do just fine on standardized tests of achievement. But more important, the young people in these schools will leave knowing what it takes to be an engaged, democratic citizen. They will have the ability to use academic skills to make a difference in the world, a sense

of the importance and value of their contribution to their community; a commitment to fundamental democratic values such as equity, justice, and cooperation; and the self-confidence tempered with empathy that it takes to act on behalf of the common good.

The schools I have described are public schools in ordinary circumstances. They suffer from the same funding and political problems every American school has. However, what they do have that makes them extraordinary is a vision—a vision that is clear in everyone's mind and that guides virtually everything that goes on in the school, a vision of students as citizens. It is a vision we need to reclaim and proclaim if we are ever to teach for and reach democracy. □

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