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.
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 Hampshire, 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 sliding 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-greencinder 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.

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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 to not 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 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

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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.

George H. Wood is Professor of Education and Coordinator of the Institute for Democracy in Education, 119 McCracken Hall, Ohio University, Athens, OH 45701-2979.
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