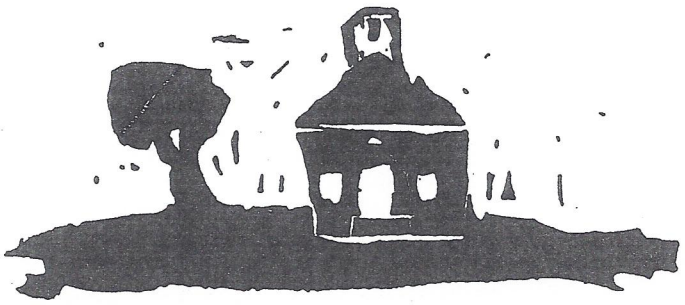

The Little Red School House
"Our Symbol of Democracy"

DEMOCRACY

by

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Foreword by

ELISABETH IRWIN

Democracy

The Little Red School House, "Our Symbol of Democracy"

Foreword

AT A TIME like this when every one is thinking in terms of world problems, it is sometimes hard to keep our minds on the small problems of the day-to-day life of our children. Yet the way that the foundations of democracy are built is by daily habits of recognizing the rights of those who differ from ourselves.

Our school does not believe in propaganda with children. It does, however, believe in helping them to meet problems concerning themselves consciously and realistically. For a teacher whose eyes are open to the many human situations arising in group life, there is ample opportunity to discover and discuss the underlying problems of democracy in children's own terms. Just as our little children often say at home, "We don't learn anything, we just have fun," we would like our older children to feel "We don't learn about democracy, we just learn to get along together."

That the unconscious patterns of early living remain longer than any form of direct teaching is the basis of our school philosophy.

ELISABETH IRWIN

Democracy at Six

WHILE working with young children over a period of several years at the Little Red School House, I have found a growing need for some kind of formulated crystalized attitude on social thinking among these young children. And with the growth of fascism and the terrific attacks on our ideals and institutions and rights, I have felt very strongly that we teachers must lay the groundwork for democracy right here in our primary departments. So in this article I should like to deal with the growth and development of democracy in my classroom, and then show how we may extend concretely our ideas of democracy beyond the classroom. Since today we are rearing and educating our children to live in a democracy, we must make sure that the idea which we are building is a living one to every child.

Of course the approach to this idea with very young children would necessarily and naturally be very different from that used with older children. What I try to do is to orient the six-year-olds in the idea of democracy on their age-level in such manner that it has meaning to them and will bear some relation to their experiences. One does not use the word itself nor does one discuss the clash between fascism and democracy in the world today. But one builds up gradually a cooperative kind of living in the school – a living situation in which sharing is a major social practice. A "give and take" attitude toward all situations is fostered. Each child takes his turn in the routine duties of the classroom, which may be washing paint jars or buying lumber, sweeping the floor or setting the tables. One child helps another in his work. It is a common thing to see Carl helping Joan saw her wood or Peter helping John fold his blanket after a snap. Committees work cooperatively on a

given job. In preparing an assembly program some will be responsible for work on scenery, some on costumes (not necessarily their own), and some may be working on the music.

Justice is meted out to all so far as the teacher is able. All are given equal opportunities in the school situation. Concern and consideration for the welfare of the others in the group is something we strive for. The individual child's ideas and opinions are respects and the child is free to speak his thoughts. Acceptance of responsibility in the group and for the group is fundamental in creating a democratic atmosphere in the class.

I constantly build up an appreciation and respect for workers of all kinds whether they be street cleaners or clerks in a steamship company. Children as a rule have a natural interest in work if adults have not created an antagonism against any special kind of worker. Sometimes one must reassure a parent such as once confided to me that she was upset because her son was friendly with the man at the stable and liked to talk to him. One can only hope that contact with workers and association with people who respect that work will create an attitude with will help children to continue a sympathetic attitude with workers.

Again, the teacher must have a broad understanding outlook which will help each child take his place in this democratic living.

So much for democracy in the classroom.

The chief purpose of any school should be to fit the child to investigate, understand and extend his experiences in the modern world. To the young child this means a thorough examination of his immediate world – the realistic, concrete aspects of it; to the older child it means an examination of things farther removed and perhaps more abstract, but still things which affect his daily living.

It seems sound and sensible then to approach the young child's education from an environmental, social studies point of view. And that's what we do with the young children in our school – through a series of trips.

There are people who think that six-year-olds live in a vacuum and have no thoughts of the world around them. Some feel that social thinking naturally does not begin or dare not begin until toward the middle of the elementary school age. But six-year-old children are vitally interested in how people live, why they live in the way they do, why some people live in tenements and others live in beautiful new apartments.

Let me repeat that I do not uphold being a propagandist in the classroom. I definitely do not, for instance, believe in sitting down with the children and say that today we are going to discuss strikes. I do, however, believe in allowing a child who has observed a picket in front of a store to discuss this. I shall answer him frankly and, to the best of my ability, honestly, when he asks me why the picket is there. I shall never evade his question, but I shall not "preach a sermon" to him. After all we are by the very execution of the curriculum (studying his environment) exposing the child to the world about him, taking the bad with the good, the unpleasant with the pleasant, the ugly with the beautiful.

In our school the six-year-old explodes his Manhattan and certainly he is bound to raise some of the following questions.

A group of sixes were taken to the barge terminal in the East River near the Battery. It was a sunny, late autumn day and the pier was covered with old, derelict men. Some were drunk, some quite intelligent looking, but all very shabbily dressed. Some were shaving, some washing clothes. There was hardly a young man among them. The children were immediately impressed by the scene and questioned it. Why are all these men here? Why don't they shave at home? And most astounding to me was their question – why are all these men all old men? Did they use to be sailors?

A visit to the New York Central Freight Yard at Seventeenth Street and the North River necessarily took us past the National Biscuit Company. This was at the time of the big strike when there were pickets and mass picket

lines with almost an equal number of policemen standing around. Needless to say, the children questioned me now as to what was going on. Why were people walking with signs? What did the signs say? But, they said, the people have the right to ask for more money. Why were the policemen there?

A little girl was much excited and interested in the elevator strike some time ago. She had to walk up and down stairs and was really affected by the strike. "Jack was a nice elevator boy and we liked him. Why shouldn't he take us up?"

Bob missed school one day during the taxi strike but came the next day explaining in no uncertain terms what he thought of strikes.

In studying about where coal comes from (after a visit to an open pier) the children brought up the question of lives of miners. Some brought pictures of miners, their families, and their homes. They were deeply awed by the hard and dangerous lives these workers live. The truck strike meant that no coal was being taken from the barges. The implications of these experiences cannot escape the child.

Where the sailors sleep has always been a major interest with the children. Why doesn't the captain sleep "down there" with them? Why does the captain have more privileges than the sailors? Why don't the sailors eat with the captain?

Our trip to the Empire State Building never fails to present these questions – Who owns it? Where did the money come from? Who uses it? The hazards involved do not pass unnoticed. There is constant evaluation of workmen – firemen, sandhogs, etc. How very dependent we in Manhattan are on the workers and farmers outside.

So it is with the social thinking of a six-year-old, – curious, interested, and avid for information.

So it is with democracy – not only must we develop it in the classroom, but we must apply it outside the four walls of the room.

MABEL HAWKINS

Democracy at Thirteen

IN the Little Red Schoolhouse the thirteens are the end product of a continuous process of education beginning at four and evolved democratically by the staff.

The boys and girls of thirteen are intensely interested in life around them. They crave action, are attracted to colorful personalities. How can we channel this very live interest into the more real and genuine aspects of contemporary life? Not through books alone, certainly. We must tear down the walls of the classroom and bring the world to them. We must take them out into the world.

During the past fall the thirteens took a trip through Central New Jersey. They visited two very different sections, one a fertile farming region, the other desolate pine barrens, - a land of forgotten towns and depleted resources. A partial list of places visited gives some idea of the wealth of experience:

Walker Gordon Rotolactor and Dairy
U.S. Resettlement Colony at Jersey Homesteads
Civilian Conservation Camp
Cranberry Bogs
Potato farms
Forgotten Towns

All of this within fifty miles of metropolitan New York. They saw the striking contrast of fertile lands a few miles from sandy barrens; of a decaying backwoods town an hour's drive from a New Deal cooperative community. The children talked to rich farmers and poor, to CCC boys, to migratory workers and their bosses, to a small town editor and a country agent.

Less spectacular but equally important trips are taken throughout the year to supplement whatever is being studied at the moment; visits to the Stock Exchange, a foun-

dry, an auto assembly line. The children discuss their trips afterwards, make plays for radio scripts, and share their experiences with the whole school at assembly. Murals are painted on classroom walls.

During the course of the year the thirteens study the Negro and the immigrant in order to broaden their understanding of minority groups. Here again, actual contact with the outside world goes hand in hand with books. The children take trips to the Shomburg collection of books and manuscripts on Negro history at the 135th Street Public Library in Harlem. Here, in the most complete library of its type, the children carry on research. Not a small part of this experience is working with Negro librarians. They also visit other Harlem community centers. Into the classroom come visitors. A social worker tells about Harlem conditions. A Negro writer reads excerpts from a novel on Harlem life and the children give criticisms and suggestions. Such natural, living experiences give flesh and blood to social studies. To the white child in the class comes understanding and appreciation of another race. To the Negro child comes a strength derived from being rooted in a rich racial culture.

In New York the study of the immigrant is simple. Sometimes the children investigate their family histories. At other times they make a first-hand study of some group. One year the class concentrated on the Puerto Ricans in New York. The children visited grocery stories, music shops, settlement houses, libraries. They met people, interviewed them on many phases of their lives, and assembled data.

The critical intelligence of the thirteens is fostered partly through historical research. During the course of the year the children make at least two individual research studies. They go to source material wherever available. The reports are read to the class and criticized. Always the first question is: what were your sources? Are they first-hand or secondary material? How reliable is the author? They learn that you cannot believe a thing just because some book says it. One striking illustration of this occurs when they

compare the conventional textbook account of the Reconstruction Period with source material and the recent careful studies by Du Bois, Aptheker and Allen.

The thirteens develop a critical attitude toward the radio, the movie and the newspaper. They put on several evening movie programs for the entire school and for parents, featuring such films as *The River, The Plow that Broke the Plains, People of the Cumberland* and *The Covered Wagon*. In choosing these films they developed and clarified their own standards of judgment.

During one whole semester the group put on a weekly radio broadcast at assembly, running the gamut from *Professor Quiz* to *The March of Time*. Script writing became part of the class work. The group visited the N.B.C. studios and saw several broadcasts of the splendid American School of the Air.

Needless to say, this critical thinking must involve complete freedom of speech in the classroom. The child is not told what to think but rather is challenged to think straight. An atmosphere of informality and friendliness is established, so that every child will feel that his honest opinion is welcomed and respected.

Their critical thinking is focused on the great movements of the American people toward the good life, such as the Jeffersonian and the Jacksonian upsurge, the drive for emancipation of Negroes, women, and labor. Heroic leaders have left a record of their lives as a symbol of this struggle. The best insurance against fascism is a generation of children who have made this tradition a living part of themselves. To adolescents the story of this struggle for the American dream is especially fascinating, and gives purpose and direction to life at a time when the adult is emerging from the child. The thirteens spend much time learning about Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, John Brown, Lucretia Mott, Harriet Tubman, Susan B. Anthony, Gene Debs and others.

They have begun to utilize national holidays for calling attention to the true American tradition. The thirteens gave

an assembly program this year in which remembrance of Lincoln took on a deeper meaning than mere flag-waving. In this program they dramatically fused a modern dance to *How Long Brethren*, excerpts from a Lincoln-Douglas debate, *The Emancipation Proclamation,* selections from Walt Whitman and a poetic narrative by a member of the class.

The magazine *Our Voice* is a laboratory for democracy. It is the most important group project of the thirteens. More than two hundred copies of each issue are mimeographed. All the work except cutting the stencil is done by the children. There is an unwritten constitution to be followed, and sometimes changed. Power resides in the entire class and every important decision that involves a basic change must be discussed and passed upon by the class. Duties of officers and committees are carefully defined.

Many problems come up. What is to be the policy of the magazine? Is it to "give the public what it wants," to attract readers by cross-word puzzles and riddles? Is it to make a profit? What is to be the stand, if any, on political questions? The group must decide.

The group must also evaluate the work of its staff. A leader is criticized for doing all the work himself. Editors are taken to task for neglecting their duties, for acting dictatorially. The irresponsible child is made to see that his behavior is harmful to the whole group. Out of struggles and crises, mistakes and self-criticism, comes a firm unity of group purpose.

Our Voice is not, of course, the only phase of classroom democracy. Space forbids saying much more about the subject. It is wrong to think that in a democratic class, the teacher abdicates and contents himself with counting votes. He must always remain the leader and the guide. The children must be given as much choice as is consistent with healthy growth, and those realms of choice must be defined. Adolescents will respect a teacher who frankly says, "In this you may choose for yourselves, but in that you may not."

NORMAN STUDER

Our Traditions

SCHOOLS are very often moulded and predetermined by their traditions, some good, some outgrown, some bad – but all of them powerful in holding new life within certain limits and pushing it toward certain expectations. A new school, such as ours, is concerned with building up traditions which will help and not hinder us as the years pass. Many of the agonies endured during our first and second years have disappeared as we have established routines which make for comfortable and amiable group-living between adults and children, young children and older children, between teachers and parents.

After six-years, one of our most cherished traditions is the co-operative relationship which have always existed between the parents of the children and the school. This has never been in terms of "You do this and I will do that." It is a growing, changing thing which carries with it the sharing of responsibilities for the welfare of the children. School is no longer a place where teachers worry about the children and parents keep out. It is six hours of a child's life, five days a week. What happens here and what happens at home concerns both parents and teachers alike.

Another cherished tradition is that the school is part of the community. Into the class-room come the community problems, the enthusiasms, the strifes, the interests, the humors, voiced, interpreted, dramatized in a six-year-old, ten-year-old, twelve-year-old way.

Minetta stream flooding a street, the Washington Square Art Show, the tugboat strike, the George Washington Bridge, the Sunway funnies, the Lone Ranger, strikes and pickets, lost radium – all of these and many more appear in the discussions, the art, the writing of the children. The school cannot close its door behind these children as they

enter and say "Page 248. We will talk about this today." We are concerned with our own folk-ways and customs. We are concerned with our own history in the making.

A third most cherished tradition is that we are a co-operative, democratic group. To be this takes time and the way is not always clear. A group, whether of adults or of children, is often clumsy and slow in working out its destiny. However, a plan made democratically, an enterprise functioning co-operatively, wherein each makes his contribution and shares in the group responsibilities, - these are experiences having to do with a way of life which touches our most profound beliefs in democratic living. This is as important as anything a school can give children and adults.

Our faith in a world democracy which was so triumphantly celebrated twenty-years ago finds itself baffled and thwarted by the world of today. Children are fearful, panicky, boastful, thwarted and confused too. It is important that while they are in school they shall have the opportunity to make satisfactory friendships, share in group plans and enterprises, make their individual contributions to the group's efforts and work side by side with many people of different personalities, different races, different creeds. And at the same time it is important that they shall have time and opportunity for contemplation and for the creative urge for the sake of which we want to be free. If a school can give children these things, is it educating them to function in and to make a democratic world.

RHODA HARRIS

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