

DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION IN PRACTICE

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EDITOR'S PREFACE



World events from the 1920's to the 1940's underscored the crucial importance of education so boldly that even the most obtuse must clearly see and understand its relation to the basic concerns and welfare of humanity. Democracy contrasted with other ideologies, we now see, must be the concern of the school and every teacher in it. In totalitarian countries public education as a propaganda arm of government has been explicit. No organized government can afford to neglect the education, and particularly the attitudes, of its oncoming citizens. Democracies as well as dictatorships of whatever sort must recognize and deal with the problem if they expect to control individual and social behavior for the purposes of their own survival.

In this book Miss Schneideman has written a clear-eyed presentation of her own classroom procedures in implementing a democratic way of life—procedures designed to lead to a happy, effective, socialized citizenry which actively accepts and practices the principle of “Live and *help* live.” In the process she presents a clear “frame of reference” or system of values inherent in democratic living. Nor is her presentation a matter of beautiful but abstract statements about the general desirability and value of democracy. The point of view, the techniques, and procedures are clearly and specifically stated, so that the teacher-in-training or the teacher-in-service has a sufficiently definite guide for practical purposes.

A healthy and decent respect for the psychology of learning, particularly in its dynamics of motivation as well as its use in achieving the goals set by democratic values, is refreshingly apparent throughout the book. Through the impact of the personality of the teacher the personalities of children are made or marred. A profound realization of this informs the book throughout.

Not only teachers but also administrators, supervisors, and par-

ents will read the book with profit to themselves and society. In a modern technological civilization the school as merely a literacy school with emphasis only on the "essentials" of the three R's is dangerously obsolete. To function optimally it must be of the warp and woof of the life of the community. Fortunately there is evidence that when so viewed and organized even the learning of the tool subjects is better accomplished than in the traditional setting. The book is, in the editor's judgment, a notable and distinguished addition to the *Education for Living Series* and to the professional literature of education in general.

H. H. REMMERS

PREFACE

About the beginning of the twentieth century, education entered a new era. It began without fanfare and has been gathering momentum until now when, as we approach the halfway mark, new theories are being put into practice throughout the country. In a comparatively short space of time, modern techniques have demonstrated their superiority over traditional methods beyond any doubt in the minds of educators. Many school systems have already adopted these new techniques after a comparative study of results under both systems.

Now teachers are faced with the dilemma of having to use new and unfamiliar techniques without adequate training and preparation. Although there are many books about the theory of modern education, few deal with its practice in the classroom. The present volume, which is an outgrowth of my own experience with new techniques in the intermediate grades, deals almost wholly with the actual practice of democratic education. At a time when almost every school is a laboratory for the study of the mental, physical, and moral growth of pupils, it is my hope that this book may serve as a guide for teachers who are anxious to make the most of their new opportunities, and especially for those who are making the transition from old to new methods.

It is too early to draw any sharp distinction between procedures for older and younger pupils. Moreover, we are not yet ready to reach final conclusions about any particular type of child. Regardless of their qualifications, all pupils must be taught the new techniques at the same time that they are unlearning old-fashioned habits of study. For this reason I have tried here to present to the teacher a broad picture of the new educational scene in the classroom rather than to restrict myself to any one age group. If I have placed emphasis upon the oversized class it is because that is where

theory seems incongruous and democratic practice is most difficult.

Because there has been a great deal of controversy about the new techniques in teaching the skills, I have devoted considerable space to the major tool subjects. This was not necessary in the case of the minor subjects such as nature, science, art, music, etc. which the traditional school also taught informally, and which are discussed, only wherever applicable, in the section about the unit of study.

Teachers sometimes express misgivings about the changing concept in education. Their skepticism may probably be traced to the problems they encounter in reconciling new practices to old conditions. When they have convinced themselves that traditional methods of teaching are obsolete, that former methods of learning are stilted and unnatural, and that new objectives are both noble and intelligent, the chains which bind them to the old will be broken and they will be free to explore the new educational world. They will regard it as a privilege to witness its gradual development from theory to experiment and from experiment to practice. But we are as yet far from the point where we may be dogmatic about our methods or even pleased with our successes. During the second half of this century we shall see far greater strides in both theory and practice. For, as an ever-increasing number of teachers adds their experiences to the rapidly accumulating data, there must come a redefinition of education and a reevaluation of policy.

In preparing to study this movement, we must be aware of its profound underlying meaning—one which reaches far beyond the four walls of a classroom and the restrictions of an outdated curriculum. Actually, the new education will readjust the thinking of Americans so that democracy will become firmly entrenched in their hearts. We who understand and love its ideals cannot but be affected by the tragic happenings elsewhere in the world and we are determined to safeguard our way of life. We have seen foreign ideologies, insidious propaganda, and the most barbarous of wars divide our peace-loving people into bitter factions. Civilization has received a severe setback in our lifetime and every think-

ing person must assume his share of the burden if we are to prevent the spread of intolerance and reaction and if we are to recover the culture which evil forces are destroying.

But on the teachers will fall the greatest responsibility. It is they who must so guide the child that when he becomes an adult he will have the power to rebuild our civilization. Never has a task of such magnitude been thrust upon our profession. We shall not fail for now we have the means at our command—a method of teaching designed to train the future citizen to think and plan for the welfare of society. It is my belief that we have just arrived at the beginning of an educational program which is in keeping with the true spirit of democracy.

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P A R T I



Introduction to Democratic Education

Today we are faced with the pre-eminent fact that, if civilization is to survive, we must cultivate the science of human relationships—the ability of all peoples of all kinds, to live together and work together, in the same world, at peace.

—FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT

Introduction to Democratic Education

Education is the most important factor in the development of a nation. It is the only way to ensure the progress of a people and the well-being of the world. Education is the only way to ensure the progress of a people and the well-being of the world. Education is the only way to ensure the progress of a people and the well-being of the world.

C H A P T E R I

The Philosophy of Democratic Education

DIAGNOSIS

For over 150 years the eyes of the world have been focused upon America. No one believed that the experiment in self-government could be successful. Yet here we are today, just as enthusiastic as were the men of vision who conceived the idea, still holding the reins of this government firmly in our grasp. It is true that we have often blundered and that we are far from the goal we have set ourselves. But it is also true that we have come a long way, that our standard of living is the highest in the world, and that nothing can stop us now from realizing our dream of building a great democracy.

We have advanced steadily through the years, in spite of wars, depressions, and unemployment. Today, however, our progress has been halted, not because we have lost the road, but because we have been forced to take our place in a family of nations whose members have frequently fought each other in the hope of obtaining a greater share of the world's goods. We know now that our peace is dependent upon their peace; that we cannot eat while they starve; that we shall not be permitted to enjoy our liberty while millions bear the yoke of slavery. Whether we like it or not, we shall become involved in every world situation that the future may hold. Turning away will not solve any problem. We must face it, study its causes, and act wisely.

The problem before us today is one of the most serious in our history; it is the question of how to live in a world which is suffering from mental and moral disease. Within a short period we have par-

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ticipated in two wars that have been fought on all the continents and oceans by all races, and that have used the most powerful weapons of destruction. Millions of soldiers have died, civilians have been murdered, entire cities have been devastated, while the culture of centuries was ruthlessly destroyed. Why? When did it begin? How did we let this happen? What can we do? If we find the answers to these questions, we shall be able to prepare for the time when countries far and near will look to us for assistance and guidance.

Many theories for permanent peace and the improvement of world conditions have been advanced by philosophers, economists, statesmen, sociologists, industrialists, clergymen, and others. Each has something to offer, but none strikes at the root of the evil. Now the educator has a plan which embraces all spheres of endeavor and seeks to cure the disease by removing its causes. This will be a slow process, requiring generations to effect—a disease of thousands of years' standing cannot be checked immediately. Yet it offers hope at a time when everything else seems hopeless.

To diagnose the ills of the world, we must search far into the past. Cruelty, aggression, man's inhumanity to man—these are not of our time alone; they have always existed in varying degrees of intensity. But we have grown so accustomed to chaos that we have permitted ourselves to drift from bad to worse, stopping only long enough to administer an anesthetic to dull the pain before continuing. But now we must take an inventory. We must analyze the world scientifically and plan for a future which will remove the source of evil and so make this a safer and happier place in which to live.

Looking back over the centuries, we are struck by one fact, at once amazing and shocking. The masses of people everywhere are victims either of illiteracy or of the wrong kind of education. Even today, when many are graduates of colleges and universities of high repute, that statement is still true. Many who believe themselves well educated have little advantage over their illiterate brothers in that their learning did not teach them to think. This is the

underlying cause of the world's tragedy—a condition where a very few think for the many. As a people we shy away from matters of serious significance. We are absorbed in escapist entertainment such as fanciful movies, inferior literature, and synthetic pleasures. Much of our energy is directed toward the prevention of thought. We disguise our defects in carefully worded explanations; we obscure our social problems in a maze of illusory palliations. We justify our indifference by pleading an inability to cope with controlling forces. Here we have the fundamental reason for Fascism, for poverty, and for war. If as a nation we can surmount our apathy in constructive thinking and recondition the minds of our people, we shall strike at the roots of existing evils and forge ahead to a better life. Only when great numbers of the world's population have been awakened to the point where they are able to reason for themselves will they have the means of changing their lot from that of slavery to one of any height they desire.

THE REMEDY

The new movement in education proposes to introduce a new kind of education into the lives of all Americans of all ages, to prepare them to think for themselves, and to give them a desire to work for the improvement of society and the brotherhood of man. But we cannot embark upon such a venture unless we are willing to change the status quo. All change is a dynamic process, but it is extremely difficult to effect because most persons hesitate to cast aside familiar practices for those which are new and uncertain. They are beset with fears which prevent progress. The present movement in education hopes to remove these fears, and to project the idea of reality and humanity into all of our thinking.

The teachers who are pioneers in this movement will have to contend with enormous obstacles. The struggle will demand super-human efforts, with little immediate reward. But they must face their work with a willingness of spirit, a broadness of vision, and, above all, a tenacity of purpose. They must look into their own hearts to find out whether they are ready to undertake the task,

and to learn whether their own thinking needs clarification, and their prejudices cleansing. Only then will they, as teachers, be ready to tackle the job of guiding the thinking of others. Teachers of this generation and the generations that follow have it in their power to reorient the thinking of school children into broader channels. Only when these children become adults, trained to think and act in the interest of society, can the harvest be reaped.

Henry Wallace has called this the century of the common man. Mr. Wallace was speaking of all the little people throughout the world—the Chinese coolie and the American sharecropper, the Russian peasant and the Welsh miner. He would elevate the lowliest peoples to a position of respect and honor where they will enjoy the fruits of their labor and live in contentment, without deprivation and degradation. This is not much to ask, but it is everything to the person who hasn't it. We in America come nearest to its realization. Hence we must deduce that its hope of fulfillment lies in a democracy rather than in a totalitarian country ruled either by a king or by a dictator.

Believing that a democracy has more to offer the individual than other forms of government, the teacher can resolve her problem into the single question: How can she prepare her pupils to become citizens of a democracy? Every dictator expends unlimited amounts of money and energy on training the youth of his country in the ideology of his regime. These young men and women, convinced of the righteousness of their cause, become blind supporters and ardent defenders of his commands. This is the course which America, too, must follow if our youth are to be educated for loyalty to our way of life. They must learn the benefits they will enjoy and the responsibilities they must face as adults. They must understand our ideals and be eager to fight to preserve them.

There is no doubt that the majority of teachers have made a great effort to instill patriotism in their pupils. Lessons of every type, formal and informal, planned and spontaneous, are part of the daily program of every good teacher. Why, then, must she change her methods? How do we know that the new school will produce better

results than the old? Before we can answer these questions we must examine traditional methods, understand the aims of the modern system, and decide which is the better suited to our peculiar needs.

ORIGIN OF TRADITIONAL METHODS

Our educational system borrowed its philosophy many years ago from Germany, a country ranking high in literacy. Just as the Prussian government has always been militaristic, so its schools have always been dominated by rigid discipline directed at training for implicit obedience. The instructor pours out information which the pupil memorizes; the latter either passes or fails an examination based upon that knowledge. These methods are excellent for their purpose. Education for life under a dictator places emphasis on the skills or tools of learning, on vocational study, and on physical development. But this cannot be regarded as education in the true sense of the word. It is merely mental and physical training to meet the needs of totalitarianism; it falls far short of the needs of a democracy.

American education, patterned after these military methods, has produced a conflict in the lives of the people. Trained to follow blindly, they are expected to think independently. Accustomed to commands, they are willing captives of any convincing talker. Their chains are not irksome because they are unaware of them. How can persons trained autocratically be expected to live democratically? What they hear, what they read, what they see—these are what they believe. Hence they make fine material for a dictator to mold according to his ideology. The rise in delinquency is ample proof of this weakness in the present policy of training our youth, and its alarming rate of increase may be attributed in great part to the anti-democratic propaganda which has been disseminated since the beginning of the Fascist movement. We cannot condemn children for following blindly their self-appointed leaders. They were taught in the classroom to obey without question. This system of education must be discarded if we are to resolve the conflict between militarism and democracy.

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So radical an upheaval cannot be effected by halfway measures. Only a drastic change in the fundamental philosophy of education can bring it about. The new school has set itself a bold ideal—democratic education for the future citizens of America. This comprises two interdependent and essential forms of learning: education for the improvement of the individual and education for the improvement of our democratic society. The individual benefits or suffers from social conditions and society benefits or suffers from the acts of the individual.

A SPECIALIZED TRAINING

Because the school of the future will be built upon the principles of a free society, a highly specialized training will be required for its citizens. The old method is simple by comparison—the teacher commands and the pupils, old and young, bright and dull, follow. The new methods call for a more intricate procedure. They involve training for independent study, for living together in harmony, for critical thinking, and for democratic behavior. All these forms of learning will be practiced in the classroom under an enlightened teacher who, through careful study of democratic ideals and a philosophy of education which hopes to preserve those ideals, will rise above the obstacles of the transitional period and progress toward creative teaching.

INDEPENDENCE OF STUDY

Everyone will agree that the school has an obligation to the pupil. That obligation can best be discharged by freeing the child from his teachers so that he will know how to pursue his search for knowledge independently. That is, in itself, a radical departure from a method which limits the pupil to a study of the tools of learning. The new education will place the tools at his disposal, teach him how and when to use them, provide opportunities for their application, and permit him to grow as fast and as much as he desires. This, however, discharges only a small part of the school's obligation to the pupil.