

## Democracy Must be Experienced to be Learned!

by **David Rovner**

There is much talk these days about the importance of teaching values (democracy, peace, good citizenship, non-violence, responsibility) in our public schools. It appears that newspaper columnists, teachers' unions, public organizations and other civic minded people have suddenly come to realize that our youth is growing up ignorant of, and uncommitted to, the great principles upon which our nation is based.

Although I fully agree that the problem exists, I am afraid that the proposed cure – more classes on democracy or on peace or on being a good citizen or on being responsible – is not better than the disease. Why is it that people persist in thinking that the solution to real-life problems is talking about them? Does anyone really believe that subjecting children to yet another course will achieve really meaningful goals? We can't even get our kids to read or write or do arithmetic properly, despite endless hours of classroom effort. Are we going to make them into the defenders of peace, freedom and democracy, and responsible by adjusting the curriculum once more?

People don't learn values through teaching in classrooms. The very idea of "instructing" children in any set of values at school is off-base. At best, children view such teaching as boring and irrelevant; at worst, they treat it as obnoxious preaching.

The simple fact is that children are not committed to peace, or democratic principles, or political freedom or the Declaration of Independence, or behaving as responsible people because they themselves do not experience any of these lofty matters in their everyday lives, and in particular in their schools. Children do not have rights in school, they do not participate in meaningful decision-making at school (even where the decisions directly affect their own lives) nor do they have the freedom of self determination in schools (virtually all schools choose in fact to deny that students are capable of deciding and personal responsible for their acts – "success breeds success" is the password today – freedom of choice, freedom of action, freedom to bear the results of action – these are the three freedoms that constitute personal responsibility). In fact, the schools are models of autocracy -

sometimes benevolent, sometimes cruel, but always in direct

conflict with the principles on which our country is based.

How hollow have all these great civics and history lessons sounded this past year in schools, when the 54th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence was celebrated in classroom after classroom, to a captive audience of students to whom much of that very the Declaration of Independence DOES NOT APPLY !

The way ethical values are transmitted to children is THROUGH EVERYDAY ACTION, on the part of adult role models and ON THE PART OF CHILDREN. This is why the family is the epicenter of moral education.

Moral education belongs in the home. To be sure, it does. But does that exclude it from schools?

It sure does not exclude moral education from schools' control and authority ! !

The way to ensure that people of any age will be deeply committed to the democratic Way is to make them FULL PARTICIPANTS IN IT (provide real-life experiences: making choices significant to their lives, exercising judgment in consequential matters such as school rules and discipline, choosing between alternative courses of action, and evaluating and discussing the outcomes of these choices) LET US MAKE OUR SCHOOLS DEMOCRATIC, let us give our children FREEDOM OF CHOICE and THE BASIC RIGHTS OF CITIZENSHIP in their schools, and they will have no problem understanding what is TOLERANCE, RESPECT TOWARD PEOPLE, SELF-AWARENESS and RESPONSIBILITY.

(you are invited to visit a democratic school:

<http://www.sudval.org/>, and a network of democratic schools: <http://www.sern.org/>)

DEMOCRACY MUST BE EXPERIENCED TO BE LEARNED ! !

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