

***Everyone Concerned About Citizenship, Raise Your Hand:***

***Deliberative Democracy with 5 and 6 Year Olds***

During one of the Patchwork School's weekly democratic meetings of 5 and 6 year olds, and their teachers, consensus was reached regarding how a floor chair could be utilized during meeting. As recorded in the decision notebook, "1) We have the option to use the chair if we would like during meeting. 2) If you decide to use a chair during meeting you are agreeing to use it as a tool, not a distraction. 3) If the chair becomes a distraction, it will be put away for the rest of meeting. Addition: Distractions include tipping over, even if it's an accident."

Why is this worthy of noting? One could argue that the topic of chairs becoming a distraction in meeting is completely unimportant in the grand scheme of things. However, I'd like to propose that the topic choice matters very little, since it's the practice of democracy which interests our school. And the reason we are interested? We are concerned about the state of citizenship in our country. We are concerned that children are growing up without a sense of themselves as active participants.

So how does a person become a citizen? Not just a member of this country, but an active participant in the country's affairs? The strategy I am proposing we consider is to have our children grow up knowing all along that they have a right to participate *and* to practice that right.

At Patchwork, we have weekly democratic meetings involving all the children and teachers at the Elementary School. Everyone attending the meeting follows these rules:

- 1) Raise your hand if you want to say something and the chairperson will call on you.*
- 2) Listen to the person talking for the entire time they are talking.*
- 3) Don't leave the meeting until an agreement has been reached.*

One important fact about democratic meetings is that teachers have only as much say as any other person in the room. This is unconventional teacher-student relationship, but works well within the educational framework at Patchwork. Since each person is valued for their contribution to the community, we create a space in which each voice can be heard, from the youngest to the oldest. The equal acknowledgement of each person's contribution to their community builds a framework within which a person sees his or herself as an active participant in the community. This view of oneself is as a citizen.

A citizen is a person who has far more power than just a vote. As evidenced throughout history, as well as in recent months, "...really powerful citizens make power by acting together (*Services are Bad for People*, John McKnight, Organizing Magazine, Spring/Summer 1991)." When citizens take action together, they do so in the spirit of collective self-determination. This means that while individuals view themselves as making a statement such as, "I exist!

Listen to me!” they simultaneously make a statement as a group, collectively saying, “We exist and we are powerful because we know that.” When I act as a citizen, I exercise my right to effect change for more than just myself.

In order to practice true participatory democracy, or as it is sometimes called, *deliberative democracy*, we cannot stop the decision-making process at voting. This is why we are choosing to utilize a discussion-based, consensus model with the children at Patchwork. We are, in effect, saying, each person in this school, regardless of age, is a powerful citizen in our community. Each of us is capable of listening, of speaking and of making a change when it is necessary.

The way that democracy currently works (or doesn't work) in our country, raises an important question about how people are growing up and learning to relate to their rights as a citizen. It seems obvious that all of us *would* be interested in processes that ultimately affect our freedom, resources and livelihoods; but most of us are confused about what we are *supposed* to be interested in. If we spend our whole lives in an educational system which most values ones' ability to provide the answer being asked for, we begin to view the world in a narrow way. If, by the end of our schooling, we are most gifted at satiating an authority figure, it is possible that we become less concerned with what we, as individuals, actually think. This implies a certain disinterest in thought and discourse for the sake of thought and discourse. We become much more interested in just finding out what is the most popular viewpoint, or the most easy, or palatable viewpoint, rather than the one which most accurately reflects the truth. This is precisely what we wish to avoid with the children at Patchwork. We want them to ask, What accurate information is available to me? And then, What do I think? We are encouraging them to make decisions that are influenced by their internal compasses, and to make these decisions together, in community.

It is critical that schools find ways to nurture children to be powerful, action-taking citizens. Children must grow up knowing that they are agents for change in the world, whether inside or outside of school. Teachers then, must also know this to be true, about themselves and about their students. An excellent teacher will hold the space for children to really explore what it means to be a citizen, through active engagement in the community, no matter how trivial the topic.

This particular meeting with 5 and 6 year olds was about a set of blue floor chairs, which easily tip over. The teachers could have quickly instated a “no ifs, ands or buts” rule against using the chairs as a distraction during meetings. And, in doing so, they would have lost the opportunity for participation from all members of the community. From an outsider's perspective it wasn't the most orderly meeting ever attended. People occasionally forgot to raise their hands and there were moments of passionate disagreement. But the purpose of the meeting was achieved; each member of the community really heard each other's ideas and came to an agreeable resolution. Since then the chairs have caused little problem, and any infractions have been handled by the children—not the adults. Power to the people.

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