

REVIVING STUDENT PARTICIPATION

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—In Florida, 7th and 8th grade students work with vocational school students, building contractors, and teachers to construct a solar powered classroom that they researched and designed on their own.¹

—Primary school children in New York help set school policy on the length of their lunch hour and the prevention of playground fights.²

—In California, high school students serve as advisors in the selection of their textbooks and their own principal.³

—Sixth graders in Kansas run the school store, monitoring and ordering inventory, keeping the account books, running advertising campaigns, and working as clerks.⁴

**Students who
help make
plans and decisions in school
will be better
citizens in
society.**

Today's students are involved in a growing trend in American education—student participation. Educational literature associates this trend with the way decisions are reached in a school or classroom and how decision making is used as an educational experience. The barometers of student participation include how decisions about school policies and rules are made and enforced, how conflicts are settled, how decisions about curriculum and student progress are made, and who has a voice in these decisions (DeCecco and Richards, 1974; Garner and Acklen, 1979; Grambs, Carr, and Fitch, 1970; and Lesser, 1978). Many educators argue that if students are to become personally and socially responsible adults, they must be given opportunities to assume responsibility as students. They see student participation in school or classroom decision making as the most effective way to provide those opportunities.

Student participation in decision making is not a new or unusual idea. Its basis can be seen in the progressive education movement of the 1920s and many of its principles have been part of the educational literature for over 70 years (Dewey, 1902; Katz, 1971; and Kenworthy, 1978). It is only recently, however, that student participation has become a fairly

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widespread focus for educational improvement, possibly related to the "open classroom/alternative school" movement of the last two decades (Epstein, 1979; and Grambs, 1978).

The educational rationale for student participation is founded in studies related to political socialization; it is an extension of a "practice makes perfect" approach to learning (Almond and Verba, 1963; Hess and Torney, 1967; and Jennings and Niemi, 1974). The assumption behind this rationale is straightforward: if children are given the chance to make decisions and be contributing participants in school society, they will, through practice and reinforcement, grow up to be better decision makers and more effective participants in American society.

The four examples of student participation cited earlier reflect this theory. In each instance, youngsters assumed responsibility and learned many different skills. Aside from the basic skills necessary for building a classroom, running a store, or serving as an advisor, these students learned skills of effective participation: how to work cooperatively, make judgments, build consensus, negotiate, and plan strategies. Moreover, they learned these skills in a genuine way—by actually using them on a regular basis.

Do these experiments in student participation make a difference? Will these youngsters grow up to be more effective participants in American so-

ciety because of the skills they have learned and the way they have learned them?

There are no definite answers. Most studies on the long-term effects of student participation are still in process. However, researchers have looked at the short-term effects (Ehman, n.d.; Epstein, 1979; McPartland and others, 1971; and Massialas, 1975). Their studies show that student participation does seem to have immediate payoffs.

For example, findings indicate that children who have experiences in a school where they participate in making decisions are more likely to be informed about how decisions are reached and alternative ways of reaching them. They are also more likely to be motivated to make decisions both in and out of school. They share the responsibility for and gain experience in making decisions, rules, and standards. They learn the value and skills of weighing opinions, negotiating, and dissenting.

Moreover, participation in making decisions fosters self-confidence in students. Children see that their actions matter, that their opinions count, and that they really have an effect on the formulation of decisions and rules. In short, they learn to be effective in their world and they enjoy their effectiveness.

Researchers currently working in citizenship education are nearly unanimous in advocating student participation and its benefits. However, student participation as defined by these experts does not necessarily involve an unstructured, open, and free environment. Contrary to what many practitioners believe, the advocates of student participation emphasize the importance of orderliness, responsibility, and considerations of individual development. These authors stress the discipline that participation requires of students as well as the extra work it means for teachers. They point out that to make the most of the experience, teachers must provide students with an adequate framework and teach them the knowledge and skills needed for effective participation. For their part, students must be willing not only to learn the requisite skills and knowledge but also to cope with the frustrations inherent in cooperative decision making. Most importantly, both

students and teachers must agree to live with the outcomes—particularly the ones they may disagree with—that result from cooperative decision making and student participation. As most researchers see it, student participation is a way of preparing for and practicing citizen participation in

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the real world. And all agree that the real world is not unstructured, open, and free, nor always to one's liking (Garner and Acklen, 1979; Grambs and others, 1970; Simpson, 1971; and Tapp, 1976).

Fortunately for practitioners, much of the literature on student participation has gone beyond research and theory and has included concrete recommendations. For those who want to institute student participation activities in their classrooms or schools, there are four general recommendations:

1. Allow open discussion and opportunity for dissent.
2. Allow and encourage youngsters to take initiative in defining and carrying out their own learning experiences.
3. Allow and encourage students to participate in making decisions about things that affect them.
4. Relate learning experiences closely to the real world.

In spite of the support and encouragement coming from researchers and theorists, a good many practitioners remain reluctant to experiment with student participation. They may feel that recommendations coming from research and theory, no matter how concrete, are not useful. They may object to giving up any of the controls or decisions that have historically been made by adults because they believe students are neither mature nor motivated enough to par-

ticipate meaningfully or responsibly in open discussions or real decision making. They may even object to student participation as an intrusion on their own educational objectives.

Overcoming suspicion of theoretical or research recommendations is difficult but theorists, who have to some degree brought it on themselves, are aware of the problem and are attempting to make their work more relevant and concrete. As for the other objections to instituting student participation activities, one need only point to the successes at all levels and in all kinds of situations. Staff of the Knowledge Interpretation Project for Citizenship Education at Research for Better Schools, Inc.,⁵ spent a year collecting examples of successful practices in citizenship education. In the course of reviewing hundreds of student participation activities, the following trends became apparent:

—There is tremendous interest in student participation, exhibited equally by practitioners and theoreticians.

—Practitioners at all levels, from teachers and guidance counselors to principals and supervisors, share this interest and are anxious to institute student participation activities in their schools and classrooms.

—Many of these practitioners already have translated theory into useful, effective, learning experiences for their students.

—Students at all grade levels can and do engage in student participation activities.

—Student participation learning experiences are appropriate in nearly every subject area; they also can be used across subjects and even beyond the school in the home and community.

These trends suggest that student participation may well be the major thrust in citizenship education for the 1980s. The large number and wide variety of student participation practices submitted to and reviewed by the Knowledge Interpretation Project show that this thrust has already become part of educators' thinking and children's schooling. It is an old idea in citizenship education that is generating new interest and activity among educators because it is an idea that can go beyond theory. It puts citizenship education into practice for the benefit of teachers and students alike.

¹ The Solar Pioneers; contact Bill Hammond, Barbara Hamilton, or Ruth Ann Hortman, Lee County School Board, 2055 Central Avenue, Ft. Myers, Fla. 33901.

² The Cottage Lane School Program; contact Peggy Cole, Bank Street College of Education, 610 West 112th Street, New York, N.Y.

³ Open Road; contact Felicity Harley, 1226 State Street, Santa Barbara, Calif. 93101.

⁴ Contact Vinita Hoffman, 223 West 14th Street, Hutchinson, Kan. 67501.

⁵ Funds for this program were provided by the National Institute of Education; information about the products of the program, *Words Into Action: A Classroom Guide to Children's Citizenship Education and Words Into Action: A Home and Community Guide to Children's Citizenship Education*, can be obtained from the Knowledge Interpretation Project, Research for Better Schools, Inc., 444 North Third Street, Philadelphia, Pa. 19123.

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