Today’s Kids Care About Social Action

There’s no lack of interest in social action among children—it’s teachers who need more skill and experience to help teach kids to become effective citizens.

Barbara A. Lewis

Are today’s youth more interested in video games, loud music, or chlorofluorocarbons (CFC’s)? Certainly at first glance most don’t appear to be overly interested in CFC’s or getting involved in any kind of social action. They “show little grasp of the responsibilities that accompany the freedoms of citizenship, and they find politics and government remote from their lives and concerns.”

Yet an increasing number of young people are rating social action as a priority in their lives. They’re fighting drug abuse and alcoholism, getting involved in recycling efforts, lobbying for clean air, campaigning for representation on local school boards.

My Jackson Elementary 4th-6th students are a case in point. They identified a potentially hazardous waste site just three blocks from the school—a barrel recycling plant with a stockpile of more than 50,000 drums, many of which contained residues of everything from molasses to hazardous chemicals.

These children ignored the advice of state health officials, who told them there was nothing they could do to improve the situation. They were fascinated with this problem—it was not an imaginary situation or a case study in a textbook—it existed in their neighborhood. With astonishing enthusiasm they passed petitions, conducted surveys, wrote resolutions, spoke at meetings throughout the community, and initiated the state’s first hazardous waste fund. They began a two-year odyssey that took them out of the classroom into the community, the city, and finally, into the halls of the state legislature.

Through their participation in Community Problem Solving, these children have since tackled the legislature again and pushed through their own law for a $10,000 “Leaf It To Us Fund” for children to plant over a thousand trees. They’ve also obtained $10,000 through the city government for much needed sidewalk repairs in their neighborhood. They have spoken at the United Nations, have lobbied Congress in Washington, D.C., and have met President George Bush and seen Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. This is pretty hot stuff for kids from the school with the lowest income per capita in the Salt Lake City School District.

Learning How to Participate

These children are not exceptions. Many young people today care about social action—kids like John Clark Hill, a high school student in Homer, Georgia, who pleaded for saving his town’s historic courthouse, which was scheduled for demolition. He gave speeches, created bumper stickers, spoke on the radio, painted signs. Because of his efforts the courthouse was restored instead of destroyed.

One stimulus for social action is coming from the federal government, which recently, for the first time in history, set six goals for education—one of which reads, “All students will be involved in activities that promote and demonstrate good citizenship, community service, and personal responsibility.”

Students at Tenakill School in New Jersey are attempting to amend the U.S. Constitution to include the citizen’s right to clean air, water, and land. And on Earth Day, 1990, thousands of young people who have grown concerned over the future of the planet participated in the activities. The environmental crisis has torn these children away from their video games.

What distinguishes those young people who don’t get involved from those who do? Uninvolved youth often feel powerless to change things. They see themselves as being the receivers rather than the initiators of action, but that doesn’t mean they don’t care.

Young people who get involved in social action have usually learned how to participate through their associations with caring teachers and adults. The adults function as facilitators who cheer the children on, allowing them to make their own decisions.

In a recent survey of over 1,000 15- to 24-year-olds in Rhode Island and Missouri, 42 percent felt that “no one asks young people to get involved or shows them how.” And more interestingly, a whopping 51 percent expressed their support for making community service a requirement for high school graduation.

Facilitating Students’ Social Action

The problem is not a lack of interest among youth, but a lack of skills and
experience among educators. Gaining these skills should become their top priority. But how can teachers teach social involvement when they lack this experience? To begin with, they should know that teaching citizenship involvement does not demand a whole new curriculum. On the contrary, it merely involves extending a subject into real life. To do this, it's helpful to keep four concepts in mind: problem, process, produce, and present.

**Problem.** Traditionally, teachers present the problems to be studied in classrooms. However, if they want to engage students' interest in citizenship participation, they must allow them to identify problems and to carry out their own plans of action. Otherwise, the teacher's projects will likely be received with a mumbled chorus of "boring" from the students.

A teacher can use any topic students have researched to initiate discussions about real problems. If students happen to be studying animals, the teacher might ask, "What kinds of problems do animals cause or have in the community?" Since the students are studying the topic, they will have knowledge to easily brainstorm many different kinds of real problems.

For example, when the children at Jackson Elementary discovered the potentially hazardous waste site and began to study it, the first problem they chose to tackle was how to remove the barrels. When this succeeded, they chose to work to "clean up all hazardous waste sites in Utah."

**Process.** Once again, it has traditionally been teachers who identify the process to accomplish the learning goal. But to increase enthusiasm for citizenship participation, the students should brainstorm what they need to do. For example, after Jackson children had chosen their problem, I helped them sharpen their effective speaking, public relations, and writing skills so that they could create effective products. When they chose to change a state law, I taught them the process of passing a bill.

The process automatically carries the project straight across the curriculum in a holistic approach to teaching. It may require learning language arts skills in telephoning, speaking, and writing letters and proposals. It involves the students in such experiences as researching, working with agency officials, passing petitions, lobbying, and passing laws and ordinances. It might transfer into science and health with investigations into water pollution or causes of diseases. Math skills come into play when students conduct surveys (statistics), fundraising efforts, and calculate possible profits. Music and art talents are used when the students decide to advertise. The possibilities are endless.

**Produce.** Children can create their own ideas for producing a project. Children at Bellamy Middle School in Chicopee, Massachusetts, read a newspaper article indicating that the city's sludge froze during the winter and couldn't be carted to the dump. The city's proposed solution (product) was to build a $120,000 brick building around the sludge to keep it warm in the winter. The Bellamy students visited the site, surveyed it, and smelled it firsthand. Then they decided to write up a proposal (their product) to build a $400 greenhouse over the sludge. They sent the proposal to city planners. Officials adopted the idea at a savings of $119,500.

**Present.** That's nothing. I answered the phone the other day, and it was the mayor's office asking for Heather. My mouth just fell right open. I've never seen the mayor in person. So Heather casually picks up the phone and says, "Oh, hi, Pete."

Other citizenship products might include speeches, letters-to-editors, surveys, petitions, proposals, proclamations, interviews, participation on local boards and councils, voter registration, campaigning, incorporating, media coverage and advertising, writing proposals, fundraising and applying for grants, lobbying and initiating ordinances and laws.

In most school rooms the Bellamy waste project would have ended with writing proposals. Students might have debated the possible solutions, or compared and analyzed them. While these experiences are highly valuable and should be included to teach appreciation of the democratic process, their applications will probably appear remote and detached. Young people need to learn to contribute, to take that last step of transfer, to see where their ideas connect to real life.
They need to present their products where they can make a difference: at a state agency, community council, business, PTA, legislature. This final step is where students develop the enthusiasm for citizenship responsibility.

No one could expect a child to learn to ride a bike by showing that child a drawing of bicycle parts and by discussing the laws of balance. The child learns by riding the bike.

Adding Suspense to the Curriculum

There are many benefits in teaching citizenship participation.

The most remarkable benefit is that, as students reach outward to solve problems to benefit others, the process internalizes, and they learn to better control their personal lives. This is particularly important for "at risk" students, because they learn firsthand that they can cause things to happen. They don't just have to remain the receivers of action. Self-esteem and personal worth skyrocket as a result of this sense of power.

Citizenship participation adds suspense to the curriculum. No one knows for sure what will happen next. Children anxiously await answers to letters, track legislation. When the Jackson children sat in the Utah Legislature watching the votes for their hazardous waste fund flash on the wall, they exhibited as much enthusiasm as if they had been counting points on the scoreboard at a basketball game.

When learning takes place through participation in the community, students gain an audience beyond the classroom and receive additional reinforcement. They learn from others why skills are important. Mentorships develop between students and community experts. Children at Jackson have developed a personal mentorship with the chairman of the city council by serving on the board. Others have developed mentorship relationships with the assistant to the mayor and the state forester.

Parents also become more involved. They drive their children to give speeches, interviews, community councils. Teachers, community people, and parents all cooperate to facilitate these learning experiences for the students.

No student should have firsthand citizenship experiences as often or as well as possible, preferably ones that allow some personal leadership.

Administrators can help by allowing teachers to explore an open-ended curriculum, on which the teacher's objective is simply, "to allow children to think and to solve a real problem." Teachers won't necessarily know ahead which direction the project will take, because students will determine the direction. The results of the citizenship experience might become the evaluation. What did the students accomplish? Did they clean up a vacant lot? Distribute flyers against drugs? Speak to community groups? Students might also provide a self-evaluation.

In addition to allowing an atmosphere that fosters creative thinking and exploration, administrators might examine district or state policies. Are there any restrictions that would inhibit citizenship experiences? Do policies prevent students from leaving the school except in a bus? Is there district liability coverage for all parents/teachers/volunteers who might transport children into the community in private cars? Do any antiquated rules imprison children inside the red brick walls?

Finally, educators should seize the opportunity to learn citizenship skills and to teach students to participate, because young people today care about their future. As this occurs, the 90s will usher in a renaissance of social action, and children will lead the way to creative solutions to many problems.

Youth will not only become more confident in their own powers, they will create a better future for everyone. Apathy will begin to dry up and blow away in a whirlwind of young citizen responsibility. Lawmakers will find themselves with a whole new constituency. The world will become the classroom.


KAP-Kids Against Pollution. This is a kids' networking group. They are attempting to amend the Constitution and to mandate citizens' rights to clean water, air, land, and to teach environmental education in the schools. Tenafly School, 275 High St., Closter, NJ 07624, 201-768-1322.

Ibid., Fowler, p. 11.


Author's note: If you would like a copy of The Kid's Guide to Social Action (1991), ask your local bookstore, or call the publisher, Free Spirit Publications, Inc. in Minneapolis: 800-735-7323 (735-READ).

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