

Educate Together and School Democracy – Student Participation

Dr Mary Nugent and Caroline Mooney, July 2008

“Isn’t the whole of their Schooling a lesson in living under a dictatorship? (Clarke, 2002).

The democratic principle of the Educate Together ethos should ensure that the above quotation is not the experience of students in an Educate Together learning environment. This principle ensures all members of the school community will be meaningfully involved in the establishment and ongoing management of the school.

Vision:

“You have to be the change you want to see in the world.” “To safeguard democracy the people must have a keen sense of independence, self-respect, and their oneness.” “The spirit of democracy cannot be imposed from without. It has to come from within. In true democracy every man and woman is taught to think for himself or herself.” Mahatma Gandhi.

The European Council appreciates the importance of democracy in schools and this has led to the adoption of The European Charter for Democratic Schools without Violence. This charter stipulates; schools should have “a democratically elected decision-making body composed of representatives of students, teachers, parents and other members of the school community where appropriate.” Democratic learning, being closely connected with the democratic life of those who provide the teaching means it is crucial that schools establish a “shared leadership” approach which encourages the active participation of teachers also.

What is School Democracy?

There are two fundamental aspects to school democracy, democratic management and active participation. Democracy in schools implies that students be given the opportunity of playing an active role within their learning environment. To be truly democratic schools must make room for student participation.

Democracy in schools doesn't aim to make students "educational products" but people enlightened by knowledge and whose learning environment encourages solidarity and initiative-taking. Students who experience how the democratic process works at school will become the democratic citizen of tomorrow. Student participation promotes the values and principles of democratic citizenship.

"Democratic Citizenship" is a skill that everyone needs. It shows us how to resolve disputes in a friendly and fair way, how to negotiate and find common ground, and how to make sure that our rights are respected. A democratic citizen knows about the ground rules of the society they live in and the personal responsibilities they need to respect.

"Only through direct participation can children develop a genuine appreciation of democracy and a sense of their own competence and responsibility to participate (Hart, 1997:3).

"A participative culture in which students genuinely share in the vision, development and review of the school community is central, not incidental to effective citizenship education." (Potter, 2003).

The democratic school enables the fulfilment of article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child; that every child should have the right to express an opinion, and to have that opinion taken into account, in any matter or procedure affecting the child.

Research concludes that increased student participation in schools results in increased motivation (Potter, 2002:207) and reduced exclusion. (Davies, 1998).

For participation to occur, teaching pedagogy must allow students to be active learners, taking responsibility for their own learning, rather than being passive recipients. (Jerome et al, 2003).

Educate Together Second Level School communities propose the following characteristics which take note of the above findings such as:

- A fully inclusive Ethical Education curriculum, which permeates the life of the school and to which students from all cultural backgrounds have equal access.

- Meaningful participation on the part of students in decision-making in the school.
- Development of critical thinking and learning skills, and a strong focus on students taking responsibility for their own learning.
- Differentiated teaching and learning methodologies as the norm, allowing all students to achieve their full potential within mixed ability groups.
- Language, learning and other support provided within the mainstream classroom whenever possible.
- A range of accreditation options, ensuring that different types of achievement and excellence (academic, social etc.) are valued.
- An integrated approach to subject areas where possible with an emphasis on project work, thematic learning and skills development.
- A positive approach to team and co-teaching.
- An ethical approach to decision-making within the school which reflects good environmental and human rights practice.

Student participation must not be understood just as participation in student councils but in its broader sense of participation in learning, curriculum topics, using interactive methods, planning and implementing projects, awareness-raising campaigning and voluntary activities in the community. To be effective student participation must link curriculum and governance approaches. “An analogy with the stability of a ‘tripod’ in which the legs are:

- Student representation on school decision-making bodies
- Student run organisational structures
- Participatory approaches within the curriculum and classroom.”

(Roger Holdsworth, 33 Curriculum approaches: enhancing effective student participation).

“The principles and values of pupil voice and participation must be threaded through the daily interactions and communications of school life and reflect a coherent and widely supported set of values and principles.”(Ruddock 2003:33).

Democracy is fundamental to an Educate Together School where the community strive to live out the motto of **‘Learn Together to Live Together’** and where the ethos through the Ethical Education curriculum permeates the daily life of the school.

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