

# EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP: THEORY AND TEACHING PRACTICE

## Session 5: Education Engagement and Participation

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### *Guiding Questions:*

- What are forms of political participation that youth can engage in? How might school influence this?
- What are the kinds of participation offered to students in a school environment and which ones are more student-directed?
- Which goals for schooling and associated pedagogies cultivate the social and

### **Cultivating Civic Engagement of Youth**

(excerpt from Torney-Purta & Amadeo, 2011, pp. 186, 192-3, 195-6)

[T]wo handbooks that have a focus on [education for] citizenship define effective experiences for young people as those that lead to positive attitudes toward human rights, engagement in society, and a willingness to participate in a range of activities (including some that might be called conventional politics and others related instead to social movements or groups involved in protecting the environment or volunteering in the community). Electoral participation and political parties receive relatively little attention in these volumes.

Schools are obviously one of those places [for political socialization], and the curriculums and programs provide spaces designated for teaching citizenship topics (Weller 2007). [One researcher, Weller] believes that there is unrealized potential because a classroom subject that could be highly participative, involving and relevant for students, often was not. In some cases, school councils served as regulated spaces, and only sometimes did students believe that their voices were heard. Where area-wide youth parliaments existed, they did provide this opportunity. Many young people were involved outside of school in charity organizations or public campaigns on an issue chosen because of its personal



importance to them; only about a third of these students said that something they had learned in the classroom was useful in these activities. Several young people reported that it was discouraging to be asked for an opinion by an adult decision-maker who then disregarded it while complaining about “youth apathy.”

We argue that efforts should be directed toward approaches other than national campaigns to gain the vote for 16- or 17-year-olds. Even political scientists (who historically have focused on electoral activity) are beginning to recognize that activities within the niches of everyday life are the best culture (in the biological laboratory sense) for growing citizenship among young people. Russell Dalton, well known for his research on Western European political systems, has a recent book titled *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation Is Shaping American Politics* (2008). He argues that among younger generations, the concept of citizen duty (e.g., voting and obeying the law) is being replaced with a concept of engaged citizenship that includes political action to benefit others (not just voting) and places emphasis on political tolerance of groups with different viewpoints and ethnic group attitudes.

*International Education Association/International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (IEA/ICCS)* [ICCS | IEA](#)

In 2016, administered to students 13-14 years old in 21 countries (about 4,000 students per country), including 16 European countries.

Good predictors of students’ civic knowledge and engagement:

In all countries (21) socioeconomic home background

In all countries (21) open classroom climate for discussion of political and social issues

In the majority of countries (19) female students tend to have higher levels of civic knowledge and civic engagement.

Results for this category of questions “How good or bad are these for democracy?”

All adult citizens have the right to elect their political leaders 80% Good --16% Neutral --4% Bad

People are allowed to publicly criticize the government 38% Good --38% Neutral --24% Bad

People are able to protest if they think a law is unfair 63% Good -- 27% Neutral -- 10%

Bad

All ethnic/racial groups in the country have the same rights 65% Good --29% Neutral --6%

Bad

## **Ladder of Children’s Participation**

(excerpt from Organizing Change, 2021)

Hart’s typology of children’s participation is presented as a metaphorical “ladder,” with each ascending rung representing increasing levels of child agency, control, or power. In addition to the eight “rungs” of the ladder represent a continuum of power that ascends from *nonparticipation* (no agency) to *degrees of participation* (increasing levels of agency). It should be noted that Hart’s use of the term “children” encompasses all legal minors from preschool-age children to adolescents.

The eight rungs of Hart’s Ladder of Children’s Participation are:

### **1. Manipulation**

Participation as *manipulation* occurs when children and youth do not understand the issues motivating a participatory process or their role in that process. In Hart’s words:

“Sometimes adults feel that the end justifies the means.... If children have no understanding of the issues and hence do not understand their actions, then this is manipulation. Such manipulation under the guise of participation is hardly an appropriate way to introduce children into democratic political processes.”

Examples include “pre-school children carrying political placards concerning the impact of social policies on children” when those children do not understand the issues or their role in the political process, and asking children “to make drawings of something, such as their ideal playground,” after which “adults collect the drawings and in some hidden manner synthesize the ideas to come up with ‘the children’s design’ for a playground. The process of analysis is not shared with the children and is usually not even made transparent to other adults. The children have no idea how their ideas were used.”

### **2. Decoration**

Participation as *decoration* occurs when children and youth are put on public display during an event, performance, or other activity organized for a specific purpose, but they do not understand the meaning or intent of their involvement.

Examples include “those frequent occasions when children are given T-shirts related to some cause and may sing or dance at an event in such dress, but have little idea of what it is all about and no say in the organizing of the occasion. The young people are there because of the refreshments, or some interesting performance, rather than the cause. The reason this is described as one rung up from ‘manipulation’ is that adults do not pretend that the cause is inspired by children. They simply use the children to bolster their cause in a relatively indirect way.”

### **3. Tokenism**

Participation as *tokenism* occurs in “those instances in which children are apparently given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about the subject or the style of communicating it, and little or no opportunity to formulate their own opinions.”

Examples include “how children are sometimes used on conference panels. Articulate, charming children are selected by adults to sit on a panel with little or no substantive preparation on the subject and no consultation with their peers who, it is implied, they represent. If no explanation is given to the audience or to the children of how they were selected, and which children’s perspectives they represent, this is usually sufficient indication that a project is not truly an example of participation.”

### **4. Assigned but Informed**

Participation that is *assigned but informed* occurs when the children and youth (1) “understand the intentions of the project,” (2) “know who made the decisions concerning their involvement and why,” (3) “have a meaningful (rather than ‘decorative’) role,” and (4) “volunteer for the project after the project was made clear to them.”

Hart describes, as an example, a World Summit for Children held at the United Nations Headquarters. It was “an extremely large event with great logistical complexity” and “it would have been difficult to involve young people genuinely in the planning of such an event,” according to Hart. However, “a child was assigned to each of the 71 world leaders.

As ‘pages,’ these children became experts on the United Nations building and the event, and were able to play the important role of ushering the Presidents and Prime Ministers to the right places at the right times.” In this case, the children’s role was both functional and symbolic, and “the children’s roles as pages were important and were clear to all.”

## **5. Consulted and Informed**

Participation that constitutes *consulted and informed* occurs when children act as “consultants for adults in a manner which has great integrity. The project is designed and run by adults, but children understand the process and their opinions are treated seriously.”

One example Hart describes is of an adult-led survey of youth perceptions in which the youth are informed about the purpose of the survey, consulted about appropriate questions before it’s developed, and given an opportunity to provide feedback on the final survey before it is administered.

## **6. Adult-Initiated, Shared Decisions with Children**

Participation that constitutes *adult-initiated, shared decisions with children* occurs when adults initiate participatory projects, but they share decision-making authority or management with children.

One example Hart describes is a youth newspaper. In this case, the newspaper may be an adult-initiated project, but children can manage every aspect of the operation—from reporting, writing, and editing to advertising, printing, and distribution—with only guidance and technical assistance from adults.

## **7. Child-Initiated and Directed**

Participation that is *child-initiated and directed* occurs when children and youth conceptualize and carry out complex projects by working cooperatively in small or large groups. While adults may observe and assist the children, they do not interfere with the process or play a directive or managerial role.

Hart notes that it’s difficult “to find examples of child-initiated community projects. A primary reason for this is that adults are usually not good at responding to young people’s own initiatives. Even in those instances where adults leave children alone to design and

paint a wall mural or their own recreation room, it seems hard for them not to play a directing role.”

## **8. Child-Initiated, Shared Decisions with Adults**

Participation that constitutes *child-initiated, shared decisions with adults* occurs when children—though primarily teenage youth in this case—share decision-making authority, management, or power with adult partners and allies.

Examples would include students partnering with adults to raise funding, develop and run a school program, or lead a community campaign. A major advantage of this form of youth participation is that it can empower young people to have a significant impact on policies, decisions, or outcomes that were traditionally under the exclusive control and direction of adults, such as legislative or political processes.

Hart notes, however, that examples of this form of child and youth participation are rare: “The reason, I believe, is not the absence of a desire to be useful on the part of teenagers. It is rather the absence of caring adults attuned to the particular interests of young people. We need people who are able to respond to the subtle indicators of energy and compassion in teenagers.”

## **Pedagogies of Schooling for Active Citizenship and Political Participation**

(excerpt from Tibbitts, 2017)

*Didactic methodologies.* This teaching and learning process is one oriented towards the delivery of content to learners. It can intersect with schools and other environments influenced by a ‘traditional’ culture of education in which there is distance between the educator and the learners, where memorization and rote learning is routine, and where learners are not given opportunities to influence their own learning, for example, through open discussion. Critical reflection, even in relation to the learning process, is not encouraged. An example is introducing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and asking learners to memorize its content, without any preceding or ensuing activities that involve critique or application to social realities. Such methodologies reflect the “banking” approach...Due to the lack of participation and critical reflection, this approach can be seen as one of (attempted) socialization.

*Participatory/interactive methodologies* are ...a means of motivating and engaging learners

in the learning process. Such methodologies are applied instrumentally with the purpose of learners better understanding human rights content and applying these values to issues at hand. Participatory methodologies ...result in engagement in the actual teaching and learning practices but are not actually intended to foster agency in the learner. Critical reflection on human rights values and standards and social problems may be addressed, but more as an analytical exercise, perhaps one aimed towards values clarification.

*Empowerment methodologies* are oriented towards the cultivation of agency in learners, through specific capacities such as leadership development. These various roads to empowerment are in relation to topics and issues of personal interest to the learner. What distinguishes empowerment methodologies from solely participatory ones is that empowerment methodologies explicitly see the learning process as instrumental for individuals having increased capacities to influence their environment. Having the opportunity to develop concrete skills, such as developing organizational or leadership skills, can also be considered a form of “instrumental empowerment” (Ross et al, 2011).

At the same time, empowerment is a multifaceted and nuanced concept that is difficult to define in concrete and observable terms. Knowledge itself can be a form of empowerment, for example, learning about the law and how to use it to protect one’s rights. Reflecting and recognizing that one’s personal values are consistent with those contained in international human rights standards or that one’s personal experiences of discrimination are shared by others, can also be empowering.

*Transformative methodologies* encompass and extend methodologies of instrumental empowerment. Both sets of methodologies are intended to cultivate agency in the learner. However transformative methodologies are different in two respects. The first is that the agency of the learner is cultivated with the explicit aim of social transformation through political action. HRE that prepares learners to organize human rights awareness-raising or campaigning can be associated with transformative methodologies, though this can still be considered a form of instrumental empowerment.

The second way in which transformative methodologies are different than empowerment methodologies is that they can also explicitly foster personal transformation, aligned with the concept of “intrinsic empowerment” (Ross et al, 2011). Transformative and emancipatory learning approaches, drawing from critical pedagogy, invite a critical reflection on power and oppression in one’s local environment, usually as part of a close



community of learners. Any subsequent reshaping of one's understanding of the world can result in taking actions to combat one's own oppression in one's family and immediate environment, consistent with wider processes of (privately experienced) social change in a society. When organized on a widespread basis with and for persons belonging to oppressed groups, such personal transformations are the basis of human rights activism.

The specific methodologies of transformative and emancipatory learning are associated with critical pedagogy and Paulo Freire (1968, 1973). The human rights education literature is strongly associated with critical pedagogy, which encourages learners to think critically on their situation, recognize connections between their individual problems and the social contexts in which they live and to take action against oppression.

### **Reconceptualists and Post-Reconceptualist Thinking in Education**

As alternatives to traditional approaches to schooling and curriculum development, which focused on the technology of learning and preparation for the work force, two curriculum approaches have emerged.

One is the *reconceptualists*. This group includes educational philosophers and theorists John Dewey, William Pinar, Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux and Michael Apple, among others. These “critical theorists” consider the role of schooling for the improvement of society, emphasizing the psychological and social development of the human being.

Reconceptualists are focused on society and social issues such as emancipation and freedom from power structures. A reconceptualist sees education as both an academic and political phenomenon: working to “suppress, or to liberate” (Pinar, 1978b, p. 210) (Godden, 2014).

The post-reconceptualists are less focused on society and more so on the full development of individuals. Post-reconceptualists include theorists such as Maxine Greene, Elliot Eisner and bell hooks, and incorporate post-colonial, post-structural perspectives. There is a focus on race identities, inter-sectionality, gender/sexualities and culture.





## References

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