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Young Citizens: Partners in Classroom Management

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A cornerstone of our democratic society is citizen participation. Informed and responsible decision making is therefore a critical skill for students to learn. Schools are one place where students can have early and formal experience in responsible parti ipation. Sadly, for many children, it might be the only place, as their home environment may not provide the kind of support and structure that is needed for them to learn how to make wise choices, understand the difference between rights and responsibilities, and explore the relation between one's actions and the consequences that follow.

All too often, classroom management strategies work against the larger purposes of a democratic society. Proponents of popular and frequently used management strategies do not seem to view students as capable of participating in the management of their own classroom learning communities. However, classroom management can help define students as young citizens today—not just as citizens-in-training for some distant tomorrow. Including students as partners in classroom management addresses several educational issues: order in the classroom, the practice of citizenship skills, and effective instruction.

Sharing Power

One can recognize the greater experience, expertise and knowledge of the teacher, yet not sacrifice the dignity or worth of the student. Using students as partners in classroom management is a strategy that develops the ability of each student to assume control over his or her behavior. Essentially, students are viewed as young citizens who must learn to make decisions and accept responsibility for their actions. As Kohn asserts, "The truth is that, if we want children to take responsibility for their own behavior, we must first give them responsibility, and plenty of it. The way a child learns how to make decisions is by making decisions, not by following directions."[1]

Students constantly make decisions outside of school; for example, when selecting television shows, spending allowance money, and choosing friends, but teachers do not usually provide opportunities for students to make meaningful decisions in school. Such seemingly simple activities as children choosing their coat hooks, and then printing their names or painting their identifying pictures over the hooks, can be an important formal experience in making a decision inside the classroom. Such first small steps can lead to more significant and increasingly empowering decisions. Students can eventually develop the confidence and skills to make decisions such as selecting an individual topic of study, deciding whether to produce a report or a skit, evaluating one's own learning success, and deciding what to do with free time earned after completing a class project. Students might even suggest actions to improve the classroom or school.

While including students as partners is gratifying for the students, it can also be very liberating for teachers.[2] The psychological shift from assuming complete control to sharing the responsibility of building a healthy learning environment can be profound. Instead of feeling pressured to constantly control, chaperon, and monitor the students, teachers have the opportunity to interact and genuinely work with students. This partnership, however, does not mean abdicating adult responsibility or teacher guidance; it does not mean shifting the "burden" of discipline to the students. Dictating the new responsibility is different from helping the students to learn gradually to appreciate the challenge of new freedom and responsibility. After all, learning the concept of rights and responsibilities is developed through experience, as well as maturation. Helping students to accept responsibility in the classroom takes time, patience, practice, and experience (on the part of teachers and students). Consequently, easing students from a teacher-dependent relationship to a partnership can be challenging, but it is a challenge worth pursuing.

Building A Teacher-Student Partnership

Classroom meetings are a useful way to introduce students to the ways in which they can learn to effectively participate in classroom management. At the start, the teacher can describe how students will learn to balance enjoying privileges with accepting responsibilities. Then, students should be given opportunities to take small steps, several limited and structured choices for meeting one learning assignment. For example, given a traditional chapter assignment, students might select from structured options such as outlining the chapter, giving an oral report to the teacher, writing a summary (with pictures), or passing a traditional test. Offering such clearly defined choices can help students understand the teacher's expectations and gain the security they need to make intelligent choices. Students of various ages will accept and appreciate this new role of increased responsibility at different stages and at different speeds. Most students will readily accept responsibility once they recognize that the opportunity for assuming more responsibility is authentic and not just another ploy to inspire work. Other students need the security of a more structured environment, but they can still be offered limited choices, with clearly defined tasks, expected outcomes, and assessment.

Peer modeling is one useful way to implement the transition to a teacher-student partnership. For example, a teacher can give one mature and responsible student a choice on how to complete an assignment, or give him or her a choice of assessments. As other students witness how this all works (accepting new privileges and their accompanying responsibilities), the idea of a teacher-student partnership will become more understandable and more inviting. Eventually, all students can be encouraged, gently pushed, and ultimately expected to share responsibility for much of their own learning experience and for contributing to a safe, dynamic, and healthy classroom community.

Expanding the Role of Students

When students are comfortable in their role as management partners, their responsibilities can be expanded into other areas. For example, teachers have long been burdened with excessive record keeping. Students can share in this task by charting their own progress, reporting on their project accomplishments, and being responsible for checking deadlines. Likewise, students can assist in some specific teaching responsibilities. Peer tutoring and peer evaluation can be used to give more-capable students responsibility, to give less-capable learners some one-on-one attention, and to promote a spirit of cooperation in the class.

Finally, students can learn to devise methods of evaluating their own academic performance, for example, through oral reports and project presentations. Giving students the chance to participate in the evaluation process offers them the valuable experience of learning to encounter and subsequently understand their own strengths and weaknesses.

Expanding the Classroom

The teacher can experiment with giving students more space and freedom of movement. Along with responsibilities come rights and privileges. Instead of a classroom where students always sit quietly in rows of desks, the classroom can become a hub of active learning, a resource center, a check-in-point, and a place where the teacher is available if help or direction are needed.

There are several things a teacher can do to prepare for this change in the classroom community. Developing a professional and collegial relationship with the school librarian is critical. The librarian can become a team-teacher, which is a respected collegial role that most librarians prefer. The librarian can be kept abreast of student projects and expectations, transforming the library into an auxiliary classroom.

One might be able to identify free rooms (or spaces, like the corner of a cafeteria) at different times of the day, to use as temporary quiet centers or as a location for media presentations for individuals or groups of students. Developing a mutually respectful relationship with the school staff can help in finding such spaces. This additional space can be used for individual students and for small student groups that are preparing class presentations or projects so that they will not disrupt other activities ongoing in the main classroom.

One may have visions of students moving about the school, scattered in every free room and space. Ideally, this can happen, but it does take time and experience for students to learn the responsible role they are expected to assume in such an environment. Learning to accept and practice new rights and responsibilities is a gradual process. In addition, the administration must be aware of and approve of the teacher's carefully articulated rationale and subsequent plans for giving students the opportunity to experience and practice the concept of shared classroom management.

The teacher will also need to carefully determine his or her own boundaries for the students' role in the classroom community, and to clearly communicate these boundaries to the students. Different teachers will accept and tolerate different degrees of student freedom. For example, one teacher may be quite comfortable with students leaving the classroom to work in the hallway, in an adjacent room, or in the library. However, such freedoms could be distracting and create anxiety for another teacher, who would be better off creating ways for students to participate inside the classroom.

Expanding The Teacher's Role

As students practice and gain experience in managing their own academic learning and classroom behavior, they will come to expect to exercise that experience. The pace of such change should be determined by the teacher, and it should not exceed students' ability to handle the new responsibilities. If privileges are abused, a teacher can return for a time to a teacher-directed style of management, but to abandon the goal of a student-teacher partnership would likely be a disappointment to the students.

The rewards of the partnership are self-reinforcing. It opens doors to new possibilities for everyone.

 he role of the teacher changes in proportion to the degree of student involvement. As a partner in learning, the teacher becomes a facilitator, an organizer, and an arranger of the learning environment. The teacher continues to serve as a resource for students, but in the spirit of democracy and diversity, is recognized as one of many sources of information and knowledge. The teacher, along with the students, learns to acknowledge the limitations of one perspective, one source of information, and the self-proclaimed role of "experts."

For the teacher, the traditional role of "expert" changes to having "expertise." This is a subtle but critical change, and can be uncomfortable for some teachers who are used to being the expert; the "sage on the stage." Viewing students as also having s&Mac253;me expertise with regard to how they best like to learn new material and where they might look for information is an inclusive way to approach learning and classroom management. The teacher and students then view knowledge, as well as the traditional rules for how a classroom operates, as open for examination and evaluation.

Above all else, success in creating an effective teacher-student partnership depends on the teacher's emotional balance and capacity for self-control. Teachers must pay attention to their own emotional balance in order to better deal with the needs and demands of many students at one time in one room. Preventing discipline problems and properly reacting to the myriad needs of students requires a educational leader who is emotionally healthy and who is able to demonstrate quiet self-control.

Teachers must also always recognize that students, even as they act or offer protests to the contrary, need order and safety. Students want and expect the teacher to be in charge. One key is for the teacher to demonstrate a respectful and caring attitude toward students, within the context of a safe and structured environment.[3] The "structure" of the classroom need not be confining; it might resemble that of a library or scientific laboratory. But if, with the noise and activity, the classroom begins to resemble a circus, then something is wrong. If students are heard asking other students to be quiet or demanding that peers quit misbehaving, the teacher has let the students down.

Creating a classroom community with students is a developmental process; a decision making and problem solving process. Ultimately, problems can be prevented by proactive, not reactive, thinking. Teachers tend to be harsh self-critics. When mistakes are made, a teacher must reflect and move on with the understanding that learning has taken place. Being reactive is sometimes necessary. However, if a teacher is very well prepared emotionally, and has prepared students for the responsibilities of each day's lesson, the need for reactive discipline should become less frequent.

Students will not be idle, bored, or confused—they will be busy working on their chosen assignments and projects.

Conclusion

As students gradually learn to play an authentic part in their own learning, they should develop a commitment to both their individual success and that of the larger classroom community. Citizenship education thus occurs when a teacher works with students as partners in developing a positive learning community (in contrast to imposing a system to control them). The result can be a win-win situation: the teacher gradually lets go of some care-taking responsibilities and spends more energy on teaching, and students are empowered by new responsibilities and freedoms. Students can do more than just talk about democracy—they can make informed and responsible decisions that translate into learning and living a democracy.

Notes

1. Alfie Kohn, "Choices for Children: Why and How to Let Students Decide," *Phi Delta Kappan* 75, no. 1 (1993): 8–20.

2. John M. Hail, "Take a Break: A Token Economy in the Sixth Grade" *Middle Level Learning* 64, no. 3 (May/June 2000), in press.

3. Gloria Alter, "The Emergence of a Diverse, Caring Community: Next Steps in Responsive Curriculum Design for Elementary Social Studies," *Social Studies & the Young Learner* 10, no. 1 (1997): 6–9.

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