

Student voice or student action?

Important decisions for our Indianapolis schools and neighborhoods

Summary: In the early 1970s, alternative schools of choice began using the community to teach. Service learning and internships became a part of these programs. Marion County/Indianapolis North Central High School's alternative education program, Learning Unlimited, left open each Friday for students to find places to volunteer and serve. From helping out at the Humane Society, reading to children at a grade school, or entertaining seniors at nursing homes, students helped organizations, groups, and individuals, while learning about society and themselves.

Nationally, some schools are giving students a voice in school matters such as gathering input to help them design school climate, create courses, or even advise lunch menus. Also, many schools, courses, or programs such as IB (International Baccalaureate), encourage or require community service to make classes more relevant and to teach skills and sentiments students cannot learn from books.

Recent programs developed in Australia provide reasons to expand traditional definitions of service learning and the role of students in school governance. Do traditional methods and rationale for shared decision-making and community service actually limit the good these activities can do while also giving students the wrong sense of responsibility and helping? Can moving from student voice to student action inside Indianapolis schools and enabling students to shape their neighborhoods create better education and a more sustainable society?

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“Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity, or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.”

-- Paulo Freire

~ Connect Student Action, Participation, and Community ~

As a supporter of student participation in education, Mr. Holdsworth began his presentation by stating he is particularly concerned with issues surrounding student voice and community service. Why? Modern schooling provides little opportunity for action and experiencing consequences—valuing a more passive role for students. Thus, he is not concerned, as much with what students will become tomorrow, as he is with student action and what they can do today. Students put into passive roles in schools have little opportunity to develop a strong self-concept that comes from a sense of:

- Control (capability, competence, power to change one’s self and the environment)
- Bonding (need to belong, wanted, have needs met)
- Meaning (feel relevant, sense of esteem, able to accomplish tasks)

Can strong self-concepts result from having a say in school and community affairs? First, however, we must ask and attempt to answer two related questions concerning how we frame student participation.

Question 1: Student voice or student action?

He questioned if the current efforts in creating student voice are enough. In most instances, or even when students have a say, they have no or little control over such areas as:

Student Voice

- Who gets involved?
- Who is allowed to speak?
- About what?
- For how long?

Listening

- Who is listening?
- What are they hearing?

Spaces for dialogue

- What action results?
- Who controls them?
- Where are the spaces for dialogue and negotiating?

He portrayed traditional student councils as ineffective, and controlled or micro-managed by the adults. To end these pseudo-student councils, each student must be involved in school governance decisions/negotiations in the following areas:

Student voice or action: Serve the community or shape the community?

- Purpose: Why are we doing/learning this?
- Goals: What do we want to achieve?
- Content: What will we do/learn?
- Methods: How will we do/learn this?
- Assessment: How do we know what we have done/learnt?
- Reporting: How can we show what we have done/learnt?
- Evaluation: How has this approach worked?

Question 2: Serve the community or shape the community?

He emphasized *shaping* the community, not community service or service learning.

He pointed out some student see community service as slavery/bondage issue: Thus they do not want to do community service because it's required.

Even when framing the discussion in the form of volunteering, or as a personal, class, or school project of choice that students want to do, community service/service learning still puts students in the role of servant--It's as though it is not their community; that they are an outsider; they serve it as though they are doing for/providing a service for.

This makes students feel disconnected from their community as opposed to being a part of their own community that they could shape.

Educators need to consider helping students shape their community: Give back, not provide a service.

This shift in perspective gives students a sense that they could go off and take control of/change a community problem.

Student Action Teams as an answer

The idea of Student Action Teams (SAT) was introduced.

“Student Action Teams are about supporting young people to question, construct, and develop the multiple communities in which they live and wish to live.”

-- *Connect*, 2004

SATs involve a group of students who work on a real identified issue of community interest. The students carry out research on the problem and develop solutions--either proposals for others or actions they then take.

SAT Principles are:

- An active role for the young people as part of their community
- Young people as community investigators
- Young people doing something that makes a difference or brings about change
- Programs that involve learning and meet academic goals

The “3-Way Test of Value” is used to determine the usefulness of a proposal.

- Value to the participants: student choice; active commitment; makes sense to them
- Community Value: active; hands-on; audience beyond the classroom; seen to be of value by the community
- Academic Value: involves learning; meets or exceeds mandated curriculum goals; shared knowledge of what these goals are

Mr. Holdsworth also discussed the progression of student participation:

1. Teacher-Centered Learning: teacher action and provision of information
2. Student-Centered Learning: student investigation and discovery of information
3. Active Student Participation: productive outcomes and learning by students

To give a student council/government power, he encourages the creation of Student Action Teams formed out of issues/concerns from council (and/or class discussions) whose members would go about dealing with the idea, problem, etc.

Previous Australian Student Action Team proposals and actions have involved community and traffic safety, the environment, police relations, truancy, inter-generational conflict/dialogue, bullying, and personal values/relationships initiatives.

Action as a way of building a strong self-concept

What is obvious is: The basis of the Student Action Teams concept is action, not passivity. It is through involvement in these SAT activities that students get to do, get to act. In doing and acting, students learn about themselves: theorizing, testing, succeeding/failing, learning, adjusting, acquiring self-knowledge and confidence along the way in order to gain the sense of Control, Bonding, and Meaning, according to Holdsworth, that is needed to build a strong self-concept--all in efforts, not just for themselves, but for others and the community.

~ Relevance and Application ~

“I'm not saying ‘achievement’ in the sense that people tend to read achievement as high test scores. That's not what I am talking about. I'm not talking about what students know, but what they can do with what they are learning. If students aren't doing anything with what they are learning, other than take a test, how can you say their learning anything? That has to be the ultimate goal of education.

Giving students an opportunity to look at important issues, make decisions, critically analyze their environments, help others in the neighborhood; if that's not happening, I really don't care what the diploma says. If students come away from a class not having learned to do some basic things like think, problem solve, make decisions, and work together, or change their community for the better, then I don't care how high they score on standardized tests.”

-- Prof. Gloria Ladson-Billings

The shift from voice to action, from service to shaping

Is this all about attitude?

Yes! As is argued in this report's understanding of the relevance and application of information presented at IDEC by Foley, Hill, Huber, Bertolini, Roberts, and Burton and Smith, many urban minorities and working-class youth who traditionally do not do well in school, and who may be rebellious, confrontational, resistant or oppositional in attitude due to an assimilationist, colonizing, and undemocratic climate in urban schools, would be empowered by the new and sharper attitude implied in the shift from voice to action, and from service-oriented to change-oriented school/community activities.

This "attitude adjustment" would attract students to a school where their voice is heard and where they are seen as an asset in shaping the community, and not as something that needs to be repressed or removed from classrooms and the school.

Is this all about power?

Yes. This is a political issue. Taking power away from urban schools and sharing it with urban students is threatening to some teachers and administrators because they have little say in school affairs themselves. They feel powerless in the bureaucracy of large urban school systems (Loflin, 2004). Nonetheless, taking power away from educators to define "service" (as in service learning or community service) and sharing power with students so as to re-define service as changing or shaping the student's community is necessary if schools are to reach all students.

"Children learn how to make good decisions by making decisions, not by following directions."
-- Alfie Kohn via National Youth Rights Association

Giving students "permission" to act on their voices as change and shaping agents could be difficult because the status quo will see the students as "troublemakers." It will be ironic if by simply re-defining service as change or shaping, a school's more difficult students, who have labeled troublemakers by school staff, become gadflies, shapers, and agents of change for a better world.

With over 150 years of public education, the current low graduation rates of urban school districts prove the adults cannot solve the problem alone (Holzman, 2006). When the Student Action Teams concept is taken seriously, all students will be able to share power and help make sure their school works for them, and has teachers and curricula equal to the best in the world.

America: Practicing what it preaches

Popularized by the rise democratic governments in the former Soviet Union and South Africa, and the events surrounding the failed democracy movement in China, citizens around the world are more than ever looking to democratic ideals and democratic governments to replace non-elected ones. This is illustrated by the pro-democracy movement in Myanmar (Burma), the drafting of a constitution in Afghanistan and Iraq. Articles in the newspaper such as, "Bush to pressure Cuba for democratic reforms," "Bush calls for democracy in the Middle East," and "Bush urges democracy in African nations," provide evidence of recognition of and respect for self-determination (Loflin, 2004).

“True democracy does not use education to move the worker-citizen from unskilled to skilled. Instead, democracy relies on education to position every citizen to govern. This project of democratic education can be carried out only by educators with the critical commitment to act on behalf of freedom and social justice that serve as a model for their students to discover their own personal power, social transformative potential, and spirit of hope.”

-- from the ideas of Antonia Darnier (1997)

Every major U.S. war has brought or made possible social changes. Our women’s right to vote came after WW I. The seeds of the Civil Rights movement were planted during WW II and the Korean War. Vietnam influenced the lowering of the national voting age to 18 and pushed the Civil Rights Movement to fruition.

What changes will the war in Iraq bring to in American society?

Although there is a strong debate over the reasons and purposes of the war, one could argue that due to the many who see the conflict as one of democratization, questions such as, “How democratic is American society?” or “How can we improve American democracy?” will soon be asked.

It will be hard for the women and men who fought in the Middle East to accept a vote counting system that may be manipulated, a two party system where the parties are so similar nothing really changes, various social justice issues that our democracy can’t seem to affect, or how some Americans are left out due to democracy itself (See, “Democracy as Paradigm for Colonization,” Evans, 2006).

In other words, our Iraq war veterans will not be able tolerate a constitutional democracy that is less than the system they were “selling” to the Iraqis. To the extent they were trying to win the hearts and minds of Iraqis--and especially the Iraqi youth-- concerning the spirit and empowering qualities of democratic self-determination, how could they deny the same and more for their neighbors and children?

“What happens in the public school classroom, not Cuba or Iraq, will in the final analysis, reveal how deep are the roots of our democratic commitment.”

-- paraphrased from H. G. Hullfish

It will be hard for U.S. soldiers to return to America and not hear the voices of public school students who are beginning to want a say in classroom, school, learning, and community decisions that direct and indirectly affect them. To say that we want democracy in African nations or China, and not provide our own children and youth the opportunity to practice this form of community, is the worst form of hypocrisy--and image we cannot afford to present to the world.

“We need to treat students like citizens now, not citizens in the future.”

-- Sheldon Berman, Superintendent of Hudson (NY) Public Schools

The Student Action Teams concept fits perfectly under the umbrella of self-determination: Involved in the responsibility that is freedom--a freedom that is reflected in the opportunity provided by the Student Action Teams to speak, decide, and take action.

It is time to push international ideas about student voices in urban public school districts?

The idea of Student Action Teams proves it is time to push for many of the proven ideas and programs that IDEC member schools and organizations have been practicing, researching, and promoting for over 40 years.

- American urban communities need to know that democratic education is not new.
- They need to know the advantages of democratic schools over the present rigid, one-size-fits-all, authoritarian, curriculum-centered urban public schools.
- The community needs to know students want a say. When they realize this, they will support the students. Right now few know about student voice efforts.
- And, when students create democratic schools and go about their “democratic” efforts inside the schools to have a say in school governance (how, when, where, and with whom they learn)--supporting their uniqueness to self-actualization--they need to know the community is behind them, supporting their efforts.
- Today’s children and youth are very sophisticated. They pay attention to what the adults are doing and fussing over. It is obvious to them: They know America must teach democracy by doing it, and the place to learn and practice it is in their schools.

This is not an adult problem that information and education won’t cure. *It is time to push IDEC ideas in urban public school districts.*

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