

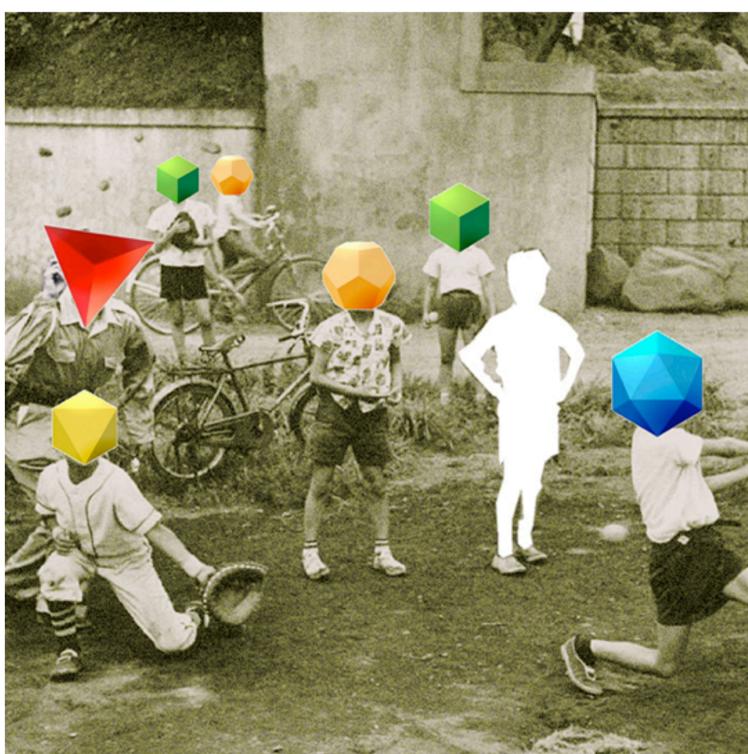


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## Encouraging participation of youth and children at schools

Education has undergone tremendous changes throughout time. It used to be that the teacher was viewed as an absolute authority who had all the knowledge, and a student's role was simply to passively receive this information. This meant there was a clear power imbalance between teachers and students, with the latter having little control over what they learned and how they did so. Nowadays, a push has been made for this relationship to prioritize a more equal distribution of power so that students have a voice in their learning, making it more relevant to their learning goals and therefore making them more likely to engage with the material and topics. However, youth continue to report that they do not view schools as spaces where they can actively engage in decision making. It is therefore key to revisit the topic of child and youth participation in schools.

Although the view of children as passive entities has shifted in favor of one in which they are active participants in not just their own lives, but that of those around them and their broader societal contexts, they continue to report limited participation in their everyday settings. This is particularly true for schools, in which they report limited opportunities to participate except for on peripheral issues, and that schools continue to operate under a hierarchical model, where their voices are seldom heard. Participation has broadly been defined as an ongoing process of engaging in respectful conversations between children and adults where children can understand how their voices and that of the adults interplay and impact their lives. These conversations should respect the dignity and contributions of the children, considering their experiences and points of view as valuable.



This topic is particularly important given the increasing importance respecting diversity has been recognized to have in order to maintain a safe, affirming and inclusive learning environment. This respect entails recognition that each student has different needs, and, in order to better tend to those needs, teachers must be open to listening to them and consider them valid. It also entails self awareness from the teacher with regards to where their biases, prejudices and areas where they may need further training lie. These biases can impact not only the relationship between teachers and students, but also the relationship a student has with the content they interact with. It is well known that a student's emotions can greatly impact their learning. If a student thinks their views are not being considered, this may put them in a negative state of mind and might make it less likely they will engage with the material; Stress and relaxation have been shown to have opposite but powerful effects on the brain's ability to process and retain information.

It is therefore part of a teacher's job to ensure the experience is positive by creating activities that enable students to make use of their strengths in order to be successful. This entails maintaining a flexible approach to our classes; we may select an approach to class that doesn't align with a student's strengths and if we refuse to make concessions and adapt, the student may become discouraged if they are unable to meet demands that ill align with these strengths.

It also entails working to ensure that our students feel safe, acknowledged and feel a sense of belonging throughout the learning experience. Sometimes a simple lack of awareness about our everyday assumptions can impact these efforts to create a positive learning environment. One instance of this is when we neglect to question the material we present in classrooms. For example, it is possible that when we give examples in a class exercise, we refer to experiences we believe to be universal, when they may indeed not be. We might talk about going out to the movie theater on the weekend with parents, only to find that the students we are addressing come from a single parent family household who live in a rural area with limited funds to engage with this sort of activity. Presenting students with only material with a heterosexual, traditional view of family, can also be problematic to students who come from a household with a different structure, as they may be unable to relate to such notions.

Teachers should also view maintaining student's motivation as key to their role, which requires open communication through which students are able to share what their interests and priorities are. Students often ask themselves about the relevance of what they are doing (for themselves and their interests) and the benefits it may bring in the short (what gains it brings them at a personal level intellectually, for example) and long term (whether it presents an advantage for them in the future). It is therefore important for teachers to keep their voices in mind when designing courses and materials.

In order for teachers to maintain a more participatory approach to their teaching, they must surrender the idea that we "know better". This means being willing and open to listening to multiple perspectives at once, including that of the institution and their peers, but also, that which pertains to the needs of their students and their families. It also means that it is important to reflect on their everyday work, and the strengths and weaknesses they hold, be willing to admit they exist and be ready to tackle them.

Some things to consider when trying to ensure children and youth's participation are the obstacles that need tackling; this includes the sameness of following a set routine, the fact that younger children are often not awarded opportunities to share their views, the paternalistic views of teachers and administrators with regards to children and youth, etc. Students are also not always awarded with enough information about school matters to even feel like they have a say in them. This lack of communication contributes to youth feeling discouraged, frustrated or even afraid to share any criticism with regards to policies or rules.

In order for participation of youth and children to be encouraged, some recommendations can be considered:

- School administrators and teachers should create a space in which children have the opportunity to become engaged in important conversations regarding their everyday lives at school. This can include something like a school council, however, care should be taken to ensure the council represents the interests of all students, not just a select few, and that they can function effectively on a p
- Students should be allowed to have multiple different channels with which to communicate their needs- this could include suggestions boxes and online discussion boards. The possibility of setting a class aside to discuss issues they deem important should also be considered.
- Children should be given the opportunity to participate without extrinsic pressure, therefore their participation should be voluntary and they should be awarded the choice on whether or not to participate.
- An effort should be made to include youth and children in the development of school rules and policy, and these should be communicated well through all actors in the school.
- Teachers should maintain flexibility when designing and implementing the school curriculum, to allow for student's suggestions and creativity.
- Teachers should prioritize developing rapport with their students, and creating a safe and comfortable learning environment, by maintaining a non judgemental, reflexible attitude.