The teaching of student responsibility, respect for self, others and property

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Abstract
One of the district-wide goals of the Cedar Falls Community School District during the 1980-81 school year was to "emphasize the importance of teaching student responsibility, respect for self, others and property." The writer was appointed to a district-wide committee charged with the responsibility for identifying a program to achieve that goal. For students, educators, and society the importance of the goal is unchallenged. While much has been written on the topics of student responsibility and student respect, the terms have a vagueness and complexity which seemed to the writer to warrant additional research.
THE TEACHING OF STUDENT RESPONSIBILITY, RESPECT FOR SELF, OTHERS AND PROPERTY

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A Research Paper
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In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts in Education

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by
Mark Douglas Farland
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This Research Paper by Mark Douglas Farland
Entitled: The Teaching of Student Responsibility,
Respect for Self, Others and Property

has been approved as meeting the research paper
requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in
Education.

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One of the district-wide goals of the Cedar Falls Community School District during the 1980-81 school year was to "emphasize the importance of teaching student responsibility, respect for self, others and property." The writer was appointed to a district-wide committee charged with the responsibility for identifying a program to achieve that goal.

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The demands and expectations placed upon education in America are ever-changing. The 1970's and early 1980's have introduced issues such as multi-cultural, non-sexist education; computer literacy; law-related education; global education; and so on. Yet, one goal of American education has remained unaltered through its history. Dewey asserted:

The main purpose of education is to prepare the young for future responsibilities [italics added] and for success in life. . . .Since the subject matter as well as standards of proper conduct are handed down from the past, the attitude [italics
added) of pupils must upon the whole, be one of docility, receptivity, and obedience. (cited in Noll and Kelly, 1970, p. 341)

Recent recommendations made by the Legislature's Excellence in Education Task Force included the following statement:

Efforts need to be made to analyze, understand and develop systems for improving student responsibility and self-discipline [italics added]. Students can learn self-discipline through challenging learning goals, out-of-class assignments and extra-curricular activities. (Urban et al., 1984, p. 3)

A constant, then, from Dewey to the Iowa Task Force appears to be the expectation that education should assist the student in developing responsibility in his/her actions and respect in his/her attitude.

In Foundations of Education in America, edited by Noll and Kelly (1970), a number of early leaders in education and philosophy are cited in support of the importance of educating for student responsibility and respect.

Locke, writing in 1693, said, "Learning must be had, but in the second place, as subservient only to greater qualities. . . gently correct and weed out any
bad inclination and settle in him good habits." (p. 123)

In discussing methods to reform mankind, Webster observed that "The virtues of men are of more consequence to society than their abilities; and for this reason, the heart should be cultivated with more assiduity than the head." (p. 157)

In 1848, Mann asserted, "Moral education is a primal necessity of social existence. . . . Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." (p. 214)

Spencer identified the function of education in this statement: "How to live?—that is the essential question for us. . . . The general problem which comprehends every special problem is—the right ruling of conduct in all directions under all circumstances." (p. 217) This belief was shared by Emerson, who wrote in 1864, "The great object of Education should be commensurate with the object of life. It should be a moral one; . . . to inspire the youthful man with an interest in himself." (p. 228)

In 1897, Dewey expressed a challenge to teachers: "The teacher is engaged, not simply in the training of individuals, but in the formation of the proper social life. Every teacher should realize the dignity of his
calling...the securing of the right social growth." (p. 243)

Certainly the teaching of student responsibility and respect should be viewed as just one phase of a total citizenship program. Remy (1979) suggests that: "Citizenship involves the rights, responsibilities, and tasks associated with governing the various groups to which a person belongs." (p. 62) He identified seven competencies "as a set of flexible tools or guidelines for identifying what constitutes basic preparation for citizenship today." (p. 4) They include acquiring and using information, assessing involvement, making decisions, making judgements, communicating, cooperating with others, and promoting interests.

Those competencies appear throughout the literature on educating for citizenship, also termed "Responsibility Education." Wharton (1977) defines that as the "process whereby the students have an enriched experience in the learning of how to become responsible citizens in our democratic society. . . while attending school." (p. 2)

The competencies are also clearly essential to what Jay (1977) believes is a major theme of Responsibility Education: "To assist students in the acquisition of skills to think rationally on issues
pertaining to Personal Decision-Making and Moral Education is a central theme for Responsibility Education programs in all schools." (p. 10)

Three beliefs emerge as common threads in the works of those who write about Responsibility Education. The first is that both long-term and short-term benefits accrue from educating for citizenship.

Wharton (1977) spoke to both in identifying the purpose of what he called the fourth "R" (Responsibility Education) to include "improving the quality of life within the schools and other social institutions." (p. 2) In 1978 The Journal of School Health stated, "How students feel about themselves directly affects their success in school and success in school directly affects how students feel about themselves." (cited in Crisci, 1981, p. 132) Jay (1977) too, spoke to the need "for enhancing the learner's self-respect, self-esteem, and self-actualization." (p. 10) D'Amico (1980) expanded this thought, asserting that "participation in making decisions fosters self-confidence in students. Children see that their actions matter, that their opinions count, and that they really have an effect." (p. 45) D'Amico continued by saying that if children were given the opportunity to make decisions and be
contributing participants in school society, they would "through practice and reinforcement, grow up to be better decision-makers and more effective participants in American society." (p. 44) Others (Hess and Torney, 1967 and Nelson, 1980) have indicated that children who have experience in a school where they participate in making decisions are more likely to be informed about how decisions are reached and alternative ways of reaching them. Butts (1980) contended "the goal of civic education for American schools is to deal with all students in such a way as to motivate them and enable them to play their parts as informed, responsible, committed, and effective members of a modern democratic political system." (p. 7) Jay (1977) too, described responsible decision-making as "the foundation and assurance of freedom." (p. 10)

It seems clear that the short- and long-term benefits garnered through the teaching of student responsibility, respect, and decision-making reach far beyond the student, to include the school, the community, and society as a whole. By developing student responsibility and decision-making, young people should begin to understand their duties, rights, and responsibilities, as well.

A second belief prominent in the literature was
that the teaching of student responsibility is "interdisciplinary" in nature and must involve community resources as well, offering a challenge and an opportunity for educators, families, and communities to work together.

As Butts (1980) stated, civic education for the schools will include not only curriculum, classroom teaching, and learning, but "will embrace the whole school system, its organization and administration, its activities, and governance, its climate and hidden curriculum and its relation to the community and other agencies concerned with civic education." (p. 7) Eaton (1977) suggested the holding of a "community" meeting (students and administrators) to establish the rules for the school year. He believed also in the importance of a "community" meeting between principal and teachers as well---leading to a "revitalization of commitment and values." (p. 8) D'Amico (1980) asserted that trends suggest student participation may well be the major thrust in citizenship education for the 1980's and 90's. He stated that 1) students at all grade levels can and do engage in student participation activities, and 2) student participation learning experiences are appropriate in nearly every subject area and even beyond the school, in the home and
community. Burke concurred, saying that "responsibility education places special emphasis on interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and in general, integrated approaches to knowledge and learning." (cited in Wharton, 1977, p. 2) Crisci (1981), in discussing character education, described a need for involving family, teacher, student, and school administrators. Wharton (1977) expanded this thought stating that responsibility education required community involvement---"the schools, business, labor, government, and all citizenry." (p. 2) Jay, (1977) offered perhaps the greatest challenge to educators when he suggested that the schools must recognize that their community of learners and their world are ever changing. In calling "the bureaucratically controlled school and teacher-dominated classroom largely inconsistent with the development of personal decision-making and moral education" (p. 11), Jay underscored the fact that educators must 1) relate personal decision-making to the entire school curriculum and 2) involve the school administration, parents, and members of the community in the goals of the program.

A third major belief, cited frequently in the literature, dealt with both the role of the teacher and role of the student in teaching and learning student
responsibility and respect for self and others. These areas appear to be the most important for the successful application of Responsibility Education within the classroom. Certainly the interaction that exists between teacher and student is critical in its importance. It is all but impossible to foster personal decision-making in an atmosphere where students do not have feelings of confidence and trust for the teacher, and teacher a respect for the pupils. Therefore, to establish these feelings within the classroom is essential.

Patrick (1980) wrote that as educators, we must stress "both the rights and responsibilities [italics added] of citizenship." (p. 36) He stated that educators should teach students to analyze and appraise the importance of suspending judgment, of entertaining alternatives, and of respecting differences. At the same time, he believed they must teach young people that at some point one must make a choice and assume the consequences of a decision. Wharton (1977) too, in discussing responsibility education, maintained "that with rights come responsibility and with freedom comes accountability." (p. 5) D'Amico (1980) also emphasized that "most importantly, both students and teachers must agree to live with the outcomes that result from
cooperative decision-making and student participation." (p. 45) Dagget and Marrazo (1983) also offered a challenge to both students and teachers. For students: to achieve understanding of the nature of responsibility and the implications of their personal decisions and actions. For teachers: to respect student's value systems, and help students to clarify their value systems.

Of substantial value are specific guidelines offered to enhance the quality of the interaction of teachers and students, and to increase opportunities for student participation. D'Amico (1980) provided these recommendations:

1. Allow open discussion and opportunity for dissent.

2. Allow and encourage students to participate in making decisions about things that affect them.

3. Allow and encourage youngsters to take initiative in defining and carrying out their own learning experiences. (p. 45)

Jay (1977) offered similar guidelines for the teacher in his article on personal decision-making:

1. Provide opportunities for learners to defend personal beliefs, attitudes, and values.
2. Structure activities which require decision-making on the part of students.

3. Emphasize that many questions do not have right or wrong solutions. (p. 11)

Daggett and Marrazo (1983) in discussing the decision-making process, identified the following three steps:

1. Teach students to identify the situation and pose "decision-questions" to themselves.
2. Identify the relevant facts.
3. Determine and consider their respective probable consequences. (p. 145)

It is not surprising that many of the principles of citizenship and responsibility have their roots deep in America’s history, tied closely to beliefs important to our Founding Fathers. Patrick (1980) restates these principles when he challenges educators in teaching citizenship to 1) develop respect for majority rule and minority rights, and 2) develop open-mindedness and the ability to take a stand. (p. 36)

Writing two decades ago, Hess and Torney (1965) stated, "The public school is the most important instrument of political socialization in the United States." (p. 200) More recently, Wharton (1977) reaffirmed the importance of teaching about rights and responsibilities when he said, "The public school
presumably is the one institution that can change individuals in such a way as to reform all other institutions." (p. 4) The implications that these statements hold for public education are tremendous. Certainly they lend contemporary credibility to the observation by Horace Mann in 1848: "Education has never yet been brought to bear with one hundredth part of its potential force, upon the natures of children, and, through them, upon the character of men, and of the race." (Cited in Noll and Kelly, 1970, p. 214)

Recently a Blue Ribbon Task Force on Educational Excellence established by the National Education Association, examined education in the year 2001. In response to the task force's final report, An Open Letter to America on Schools, Students, and Tommorrow (October 1984), the National Education Association Board of Directors developed a plan to meet the challenges for education. One of the nine basic principles identified in that plan was to make students active participants in learning, to make students both questioners and explorers.

The challenges of teaching student responsibility and respect have been a part of education's past, its present, and will surely be important in its future. Responsibility education may require a restructuring of
education and a redefining of its purpose; at the very least it requires a change in thinking by some educators.

Responsibility education includes not only the teaching of attitudes which help to develop a sense of responsibility, but also, the teaching of competencies and the knowledge needed to act responsibly.

To achieve the goal of student responsibility requires a partnership between the schools and community. Its success could lead to improving the quality of education within the schools and subsequently improving the quality of life in our society. To have an educated society and not have a responsible society would be but half a victory. It is our responsibility!
Reference List


