The learning process in Education for Development involves more than a set of classroom activities and strategies. Taking practical action on global issues is a way for students to extend their knowledge, and practise the skills and attitudes necessary for global citizenship. Too often, teachers feel that taking action on global issues must mean that children attend international conferences or address gatherings of world leaders. In fact, the most exciting and significant action projects are usually ones that children carry out in their own communities.

Action projects can be more than just the culmination of a unit of study. They can serve as the rationale for gaining further knowledge on an issue. They can become the force which impels students to integrate learning from the various subject areas in a meaningful way.

The skills and attitudes required to take constructive action, whether on a local, national, or global level, must be developed over time. They cannot be expected to emerge full-blown in students who have never in the course of their education had the chance to plan and carry out action projects, any more than the skills of reading can be expected to develop in children who have never had the opportunity to read a book.

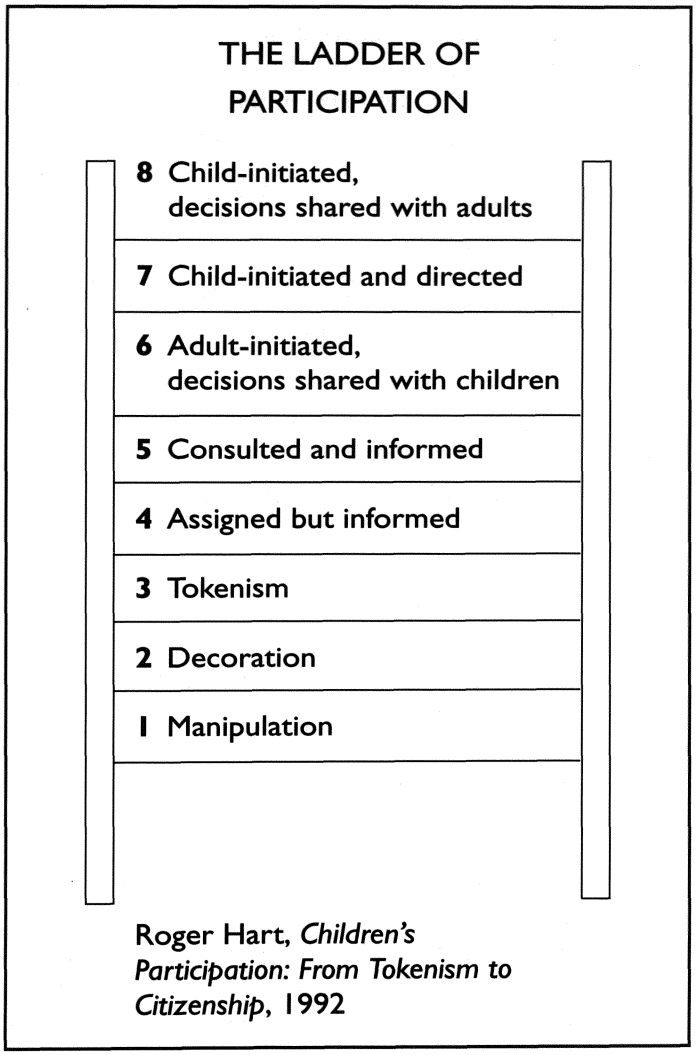
But not all projects are equally effective at extending students' knowledge, skills and attitudes. This is because action projects that are designed by teachers often vary widely in the level of participation they demand from students.

Levels of participation

There are many ways in which children can become involved in working for change, both locally and globally, but not all of these constitute participation in its fullest sense. The **Ladder of participation** diagram (on page 298) illustrates eight levels of participation. The degree of educational value increases as one climbs the rungs of the ladder.

Projects which correspond to the lowest three levels of the ladder cannot be considered truly participatory. **Manipulation** occurs when adults use children to promote a cause that they feel strongly about, but do not help children to understand that cause. When children are used as **Decoration**, they are often asked to dress in a certain way and perform to support an adult agenda, usually with the aim of prompting an emotional response on the part of adult viewers. **Tokenism** describes situations in which children are asked to speak before conferences or groups of elected representatives, but without learning anything substantative about the issue, determining their own position, or consulting with the other children who, it is claimed, they represent.

The next five rungs of the ladder designate increasing levels of real participation, and learning potential. Each may be appropriate for children at various times in the progressive development of their participatory skills.



Roger Hart, *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship*, 1992

Assigned but informed indicates that although the children's participation is decided for them, they understand the aims of the project, who decided that they should be involved, and why. At the level **Consulted and informed**, the project is designed by adults, but children's opinions are taken seriously in any decision-making processes. In projects which are **Adult-initiated, decisions shared with children**, children now have an integral role in making decisions, rather than a consultative status.

Child-initiated and directed projects are infrequently seen, because few adults are willing to relinquish complete control to children. Because of the lack of adult involvement, such projects often fail to become a true community concern, remaining somewhat marginalised. Projects which are **Child-initiated, decisions shared with adults**, however, involve adults as facilitators for the goals of the children, directing them to needed resources, providing support in developing necessary skills, and helping them to evaluate. This type of relationship enhances learning for the children, builds a sense of community ownership of the project, and provides adults with the opportunity to learn from the enthusiasm and creativity of the children.

Planning and implementing an action project

For teachers or youth group leaders undertaking an action project with young people, the guidelines suggested below will help to maximise the development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes essential to global citizenship. (These guidelines are adapted from material taken from *Taking Part*, Educators for Social Responsibility, 1987.)

IDENTIFY AN ISSUE AND CLARIFY AIMS

Sometimes a significant issue will emerge from classroom work. At other times, an issue will arise spontaneously – and unexpectedly – from an event in the community, nation, or the wider world. Young people can be encouraged to clarify their aims, and to make them as concrete as possible. It is often best for them to work for change in their own community, rather than to focus on issues that are ocurring in places where they can have little impact.

BRAINSTORM POSSIBLE COURSES OF ACTION

Students should be encouraged to think creatively and divergently about possible ways of achieving their aims. No suggestion should be criticised, as ideas that might at first seem unrealistic often inspire fresh ideas that turn out to be practical.

WAYS OF TAKING ACTION

- Writing letters to elected representatives to express a point of view on a local or global issue;
- Volunteering to work for an organisation that deals with an issue of concern;
- Fund-raising for organisations that are working for environmental quality, social and economic justice, conflict resolution;
- Becoming involved in neighbourhood clean-up projects;
- Writing letters to the editor of the school or local newspaper;
- Participating in voter registration drives, and campaigns to encourage people to vote.

IDENTIFY ANY OBSTACLES TO THESE COURSES OF ACTION

After brainstorming, students can begin to think more realistically about their suggestions. They should discuss any obstacles that would prevent them from carrying out a particular course of action, and consider what resources would be available to them to help them overcome those challenges. An obstacle need not be a reason for abandoning a possible project, as it may be a source of valuable learning experiences. But some types of obstacles – excess cost, distance, physical danger – can become reasons to eliminate certain options for action.

MORE WAYS OF TAKING ACTION

- Carrying out research or conducting local surveys on issues of concern;
- Presenting the results of such research or surveys at school assemblies, community group meetings, or town council meetings;
- Boycotting products that are environmentally unsound, or that are produced under circumstances that violate human rights;
- Inviting speakers to present opposing perspectives on a controversial issue;
- Persuading family members to adopt more environmentally sound practices in the home.

SELECT A PROJECT

After some possible courses of action have been eliminated as impractical, students select one which they feel will best meet their goals. The group can consider whether the project addresses an immediate, short-term problem or a more underlying, long-term problem. Either type of project can provide opportunities for learning, and in some cases, a short-term response may be the only one which is practical. It is important, however, for the children to learn to distinguish between solutions which deal with symptoms of a problem as opposed to ones which deal with the root causes.

IDENTIFY KEY PEOPLE, RESOURCES, AND SKILLS NEEDED

Students should spend some time thinking about the key people they will need to consider in carrying out the plan. Which people are in a decision-making capacity with regard to the issues selected – representatives, local business people, school officials, or members of community groups? What resistance to change might they have, and how might students enlist their interest and support?

Who will be affected by the project – other children, parents, residents of a particular neighbourhood, local businesses, or certain disempowered groups? What role will they have in the planning and evaluation process?

What resources – money, equipment, or consumable supplies – will the project require? Will these be borrowed or donated? Will the students have to fundraise? If so, how?

Will the project require students to develop new skills – writing business letters, speaking in public, conducting interviews or surveys? Who can be called upon to teach these skills?

DRAW UP A DETAILED PLAN

It is often helpful to think of the plan as a time line (see page 266). This helps young people see the sequence of steps necessary to achieve the goal. It can also be helpful to examine the plan with a futures tree (see page 292), in order to evaluate its possible effects.

If the project is a complex one, it may be helpful to have the class divide into smaller teams to work on different tasks.

CARRY OUT THE PLAN

The teacher's role during this phase is to trust the students to manage the project with as little interference as possible, allowing them to develop a sense of empowerment and responsibility. The teacher can act as a

facilitator, pointing out actions that are working effectively, drawing links between the project and material covered in class, helping students anticipate unexpected consequences, and serving as a resource person.

A record of the project should be kept – diaries, journals, drawings, photographs, audiotapes, or videotapes. These can serve not only as a basis for reflection and evaluation, but as a way of communicating about the project to the school, the community, and the media.

EVALUATE

Whether an action project has a definite end, or becomes an on-going activity, students need to take the time to evaluate. This will help them consolidate their learning, and prepare them to take more effective action in the future. They could consider:

- What was successful about the project? Did it achieve its goals? Did it create any lasting changes?
- Was anything about the project unsuccessful? Did it inadvertently create new problems? Were any failures experienced due to inadequate planning, or to factors beyond the group's control?
- If you were to repeat this project, what would you do differently?
- How effectively did the group work together? Did everyone have a sense of participation? Were decisions and responsibilities truly shared by the group?

In Switzerland, nine-year-olds prepare an assembly for the whole school on the importance of recycling. They provide each classroom with boxes to collect recyclable materials. Once a week, they take the contents of the boxes to a nearby recycling centre.

In Brazil, teenaged girls who once made their living on the streets produce dramas about AIDS, drug abuse, housing and unemployment. They perform in locations where they can reach other girls at risk. They write and distribute a pamphlet on AIDS prevention to distribute to girls who are forced to support themselves by prostitution.

In Norway, children around the country write letters expressing their hopes and concerns about the environment. From these, a 'Children's Appeal to World Leaders' is drawn up. Ten young people aged 12 to 15 present this appeal in a public Children's Hearing to top government leaders. The young people are working on making the hearing an annual event.

Handling controversial issues

Controversy is inevitable in dealing with global issues, and may arise during the course of an action project. Controversy in the classroom can be looked upon as a problem to be avoided, or as an opportunity for communication, insight, and change. The guidelines below suggest ways in which discussion of controversial issues can be made less threatening, and more educational.

- Create a safe classroom environment. Students need to feel that it is acceptable to examine problems for which there are no easy solutions, and that everyone's perspective will be respected.
- Correct misinformation in an age-appropriate way, and find out what students need to know to more fully understand the issue. Help them do research, write or talk to persons involved in the issue, invite speakers to the class, conduct surveys, or hold debates.
- Be prepared to support students for whom controversial issues may raise strong feelings. Allow them to express their emotions in an appropriate way. Reassure them that many adults care about and are working on these issues, even if they do not always agree on solutions.
- Decide whether it is appropriate to state a personal position. The teacher's primary focus should be on helping students develop their own response to the issue, not finding 'right' or 'wrong' answers. This may involve looking at many points of view, including those that differ from the teacher's. If a teacher decides it is appropriate to express a personal position, she should make it clear to the students that it is an opinion, not a fact or an absolute truth.
- The raising of controversial issues in the classroom may prompt criticism that a particular set of values is being promoted. It can be helpful to remember that all education has to do with the transmission of certain values, and can never be an entirely neutral, value-free process. Education that aims to encourage attitudes of global citizenship must deal explicitly with questions of values.
- Focus on problem-solving. Once students have explored a range of opinions on an issue, help them determine if there is something constructive they can do about the problem, in their own locality. This will encourage a sense of personal empowerment, rather than discouragement or despair.

In the Czech Republic, young people from 500 schools do practical research on air pollution, including determining the ozone concentration in the ground layer of the atmosphere. Their collected results will be published and used for further environmental research.

In India, a group of street children aged ten to 17 open a restaurant in a bus terminal. They learn the skills of cooking, looking after customers, and book-keeping. Their work ensures that they eat nutritious meals every day. And they donate food they prepare to other local street children.

In Colombia, classes of secondary school students work in low-income neighbourhoods, educating families about hygiene, basic health care, sanitation, and the need for immunisation against common diseases.

In Sri Lanka, children of all ages work in a plant nursery, caring for tree seedlings. When the seedlings are large enough, the children help to plant them on a previously deforested hilltop near their village.

Other issues to consider

For some teachers, involving students in action projects will represent a departure from the familiar curriculum. They enter an area of education in which the outcomes cannot always be foreseen. Teachers need to be aware of the kinds of issues which action projects may raise, and to be prepared to handle them. Some of the kinds of questions or concerns which could arise are discussed below.

HOW CAN THE CONCERNS OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS BE DEALT WITH?

Informing administrators in advance of plans to carry out an action project can forestall potential objections. Try to use administrators as resource people, and incorporate their suggestions whenever possible. Be clear with administrators about the educational aims of the project, and the ways in which it fits in with the goals of the school or youth group. Emphasise the fact that a variety of possible projects will be brainstormed by the students and that a predetermined point of view on the issue in question will not be imposed on the group. Make administrators aware of how parents will be kept informed of the project. A supportive administration can be of

enormous benefit, as some action projects will require trips off the school grounds, and adjustments to daily schedules.

WHAT CAN BE DONE IF SOME PARENTS OBJECT TO THE PROJECT?

Projects should be planned with respect for issues which may be sensitive among the parents. Boycotting a local business, for example, can be disastrous if some of the students' parents are employed there.

Informing parents in advance of the project, and keeping them informed about its progress is the best way to prevent objections. Parents may worry that the project is taking time away from students' basic school work. Ensure that they understand the types of skills which are being developed by the project. If necessary, plan a parent meeting, or a regular newsletter about the project, produced by the students, to keep them informed.

Actively involving parents in the project is an excellent way of letting them see for themselves what their children are learning. Parents may have skills or resources they can share with the group. They may be able to help with transportation, accompanying children on house-to-house surveys, or supervising small group work.

In Uganda, a group of primary school children work to clean and fence the local well, which has become contaminated from use by livestock. They create dramatic presentations to educate adults and younger children about the risks of water-borne diseases.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, children aged ten to 13 produce a radio programme for their peers. Working with adult editors, they design segments that address the special needs of children in war zones. The programme provides educational material for children who no longer have a school to go to.

In the United Kingdom, a class of seven-year-olds review library books, examining them for racist and sexist text and illustrations. They write letters to publishers suggesting changes to books they find unacceptable. They rewrite and illustrate library books for younger children.

In Java, a group of Scouts constructs pipelines leading to four different villages. The pipes provide safe, clean drinking water for the people of the villages. The water is also used for irrigating crops.

IS MEDIA COVERAGE OF CHILDREN'S ACTION PROJECTS APPROPRIATE?

An interesting action project will often attract the attention of newspaper and television reporters. Media involvement can help educate the community, mobilise others to become involved, and teach students how news is created.

Contact with the media should not be used as a reward for the brightest, most articulate, or most photogenic students. If only a few students can appear in a photograph or on a television programme, let the class determine the criteria for selecting who will appear.

Media producers may have different aims in reporting on the project than the class does! They may want an entertaining story, when the class wants to emphasise the seriousness of an issue. Inform representatives of the media as to the purposes of the project *before* filming or interviewing, and ask to read or view any reports before they are published or broadcast.

HOW CAN CHILDREN BE HELPED TO DEAL WITH THEIR FEELINGS IF AN ACTION PROJECT FAILS?

Teachers can help students avoid action projects that 'fail' by encouraging realistic expectations of what can be achieved. Students should not expect, for example, that a letter to the town council will bring about overnight change on a multi-faceted development issue!

Some projects which are apparent 'failures' may only be undergoing temporary setbacks. Much can be learned from such projects, and from the challenge of having to adapt a plan to unforeseen circumstances.

But not all action projects will ultimately achieve their aims. Despite careful planning, projects can be influenced by events beyond the control of the students.

If this happens, allow time for students to express their feelings – anger, resentment, sadness, disappointment, frustration. Then encourage them to discuss the reasons for the difficulties encountered, distinguishing between those which were due to outside events and those which might have been prevented.

Focus on any positive outcomes of the project. What did they learn that they did not know before? What things can they do that they did not know how to do before? What new ideas and insights could they bring to their next action project? Record these ideas for future reference.

In Peru, a group of urban street workers in their teens set up an organisation that provides a forum for street children to express their needs to international agencies. They provide financial and emergency assistance to their members, and survey their local areas on issues such as health, education, work, recreation, and children's hopes for the future.

In the United States, six teenagers make a video on unequal funding for schools in their city. The video compares the lives and hopes of two students, one who attends a well-equipped middle class school, and one who attends a working class school with few resources and poorly trained teachers. The teenagers screen the video with parent groups, and on national television, sparking debate on ways to reform the school funding process.

In Belgium, a group of children draws up a petition against the manufacture and sale of war toys. They circulate it in a number of communities and collect signatures. They then draw up a proposal for a law to ban the advertising and sale of war toys, and meet with elected representatives to urge its passage.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE IF THE CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION EXPANDS BEYOND THE ORIGINAL PROJECT PLAN?

A project which is 'too successful' can be problematic for some teachers! Children who set up a thriving recycling project in their classroom may want to extend it to the whole school. Students who volunteer to spend a set number of hours working in a programme for children with disabilities may be reluctant to break off relationships they have formed, and wish to continue their involvement.

Some projects may be continued after school, or incorporated into the work of youth groups or clubs. Interested parents or community groups may wish to become involved and can take over from teachers much of the responsibility for supervising the project. In some cases, it may be possible to negotiate with school administrators for secondary school students to receive academic credit for community participation.

Whenever possible within the time constraints of the curriculum, longer-term project commitments should be encouraged. Inviting other classes in the school to collaborate can both expand the project, and relieve the time demands on one class. The project can be integrated into other subject areas which are being taught, so as to ease concerns about time being taken away

from the curriculum. Children running the recycling project could practise mathematical skills by weighing and measuring the scrap materials they collect each week, for example; students working with disabled children could use their experiences as the basis for writing assignments. In other words, a whole school approach to action projects can expand their educational potential.