

## Educating for Social Responsibility

Schools must help students fight their feelings of powerlessness by developing their sense of community and their confidence that they can make a difference in the world.

Today the development of social responsibility is a renewed concern of educators, and this has spawned a number of innovations. At first these efforts developed in isolation. Different movements addressed different aspects of social responsibility—cooperative learning, conflict resolution, multicultural education, moral development, global education, environmental education, community service, and involvement in political and social issues. Now educational experiments are emerging that blend all of these into programs that make social responsibility a core element of the curriculum and school culture. These initiatives are helping students develop basic social skills, a sense of connection with the world around them, and the confidence that they make a difference in the world.

Why the concern? Young people in the United States are expressing a sense of powerlessness to affect constructive social or political change. To the young, the odds of success seem overwhelming, the personal costs high, the disappointments inevitable. The results are seen in their with-

drawal from active participation in our society, their declining voting patterns, and their preoccupation with their individual desires and needs. For example, Jerry Bachman, who has surveyed 17,000 high school seniors each year since 1975, found that since 1978 an average of approximately 45 percent of the students polled chose "mostly agree" or "agree" in response to the

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statement, "I feel I can do very little to change the way the world is today." And approximately 30 percent chose "mostly agree" or "agree" in response to this statement: "When I think about all the terrible things that have been happening, it is hard for me to hold out much hope for the world."<sup>1</sup> Alarmingly, the 18- to 24-year-old voting group is the only category of newly enfranchised voters in our history whose voting patterns have shown a decline since they were enfranchised.<sup>2</sup> These findings point to a fundamental lack of connection and commitment between self and the larger community.

Social responsibility—that is, a personal investment in the well-being of others and of the planet—doesn't just happen. It takes intention, attention, and time. It may even take redesigning schools and classrooms to embrace a culture that values and creates empowerment, cooperation, compassion, and respect.

**Our Relationship with Society**  
The question of what motivates participation is an old one, but researchers who have studied political socializa-

tion, prosocial behavior development, psychosocial development, and moral development give us only glimpses into the development of social responsibility. Their research tells us that children begin constructing their relationship with the political world early in life and that parents, teachers, and other role models are critical for each child's formation of a positive and empowered relationship with society. We also know that the most effective means of helping students develop this relationship is to give them the opportunity to enter and engage the real world around them.<sup>3</sup>

My own research (Berman 1990), on the development of social consciousness confirms this. Each of us develops a relationship to society and to the world. Furthermore, the way we give meaning to this relationship determines the nature of our participation in the world. Like a relationship with another person, our relationship with society includes such powerful factors as interconnection, emotion, influence, and vulnerability.

I use the term *relationship* because people don't make moral decisions in isolation, especially not decisions that relate to larger social and political issues. These decisions emerge directly from people's understanding of the dominant morality in the political culture and from their sense of their personal ability to influence that culture.

Although we all exist in relationship to society, I've come to realize that people seldom talk about the nature of this relationship. But helping young people become socially responsible starts with opening a conversation about this relationship. When it is difficult for people to describe this in words, I've asked them first to *draw* the way they see their own relationship to society. I've collected drawings from elementary school children, from high school and college students, and from adults who represent a wide range of lifestyles and viewpoints. These drawings usually reveal complex feelings towards society—sometimes a rich mosaic of interconnectedness, sometimes the painful expression of alienation and powerlessness, and

sometimes the struggle to reconcile hope and pain. The power of this work has convinced me that we must help students develop a positive relationship with society by promoting a passionate and informed engagement with the world around them.

### **Educating for the Development of Social Consciousness**

Once the conversation has been opened, educating young people for the development of social consciousness means posing a set of questions that emphasizes their social development: What does the way I lead my life mean for the lives of others? What is my hope for the future and my vision of what I would like our world to become? Are my actions consistent with the way I would like the world to be? What can we do *together* as a community, as a society, and as a world community, that will promote our common good and our common wealth? How can I contribute in a meaningful way to creating a more just, peaceful, and ecologically sound world?

In schools and classrooms, this means balancing our emphasis on personal self-realization and personal achievement with an equal focus on social self-realization and collective achievement. But, in teaching for social self-realization, the way we teach and the culture of our classrooms and schools is of even greater importance than what we teach. Teachers must model the values and principles of care, justice, empowerment, community, and social responsibility for their students.

In particular, teachers must help their students understand our global interdependence, give them the experience of community, encourage them to develop basic social skills, provide them with opportunities to make contributions to others, strengthen their group problem-solving and organizational skills, and encourage them to explore the real political world. In the sections that follow, I'll discuss each of these dimensions and close with examples of programs that are trying to incorporate all of them into the lives of schools (see fig. 1).

### **Understanding Our Interdependence**

Teachers must first help students develop an understanding of our social and ecological interdependence. The crises of the last decade—nuclear threat, destruction of the environment, terrorism, hunger and homelessness on a mass scale, and local and international violence—have demonstrated the smallness of our planet and our inextricable connection with others around the globe. There is no getting "away" anymore. We have to understand our interdependence and learn how to get along in an interdependent world.

Some "international studies" high schools already embody this understanding. And a number of movements in education are beginning to develop our knowledge of how to live in an interdependent world. The prominent ones include the global education movement, the environmental education movement, and the multicultural education movement.

There are also some promising new experiments. To help students see problems holistically, Jay Forrester and others at MIT have been working with teachers in Brattleboro, Vermont, to integrate systems dynamics into the curriculum.<sup>4</sup> Systems dynamics promises to help students see problems holistically, understand the workings of whole systems whether they are social, economic, or environmental, and to see the interconnections among these systems.

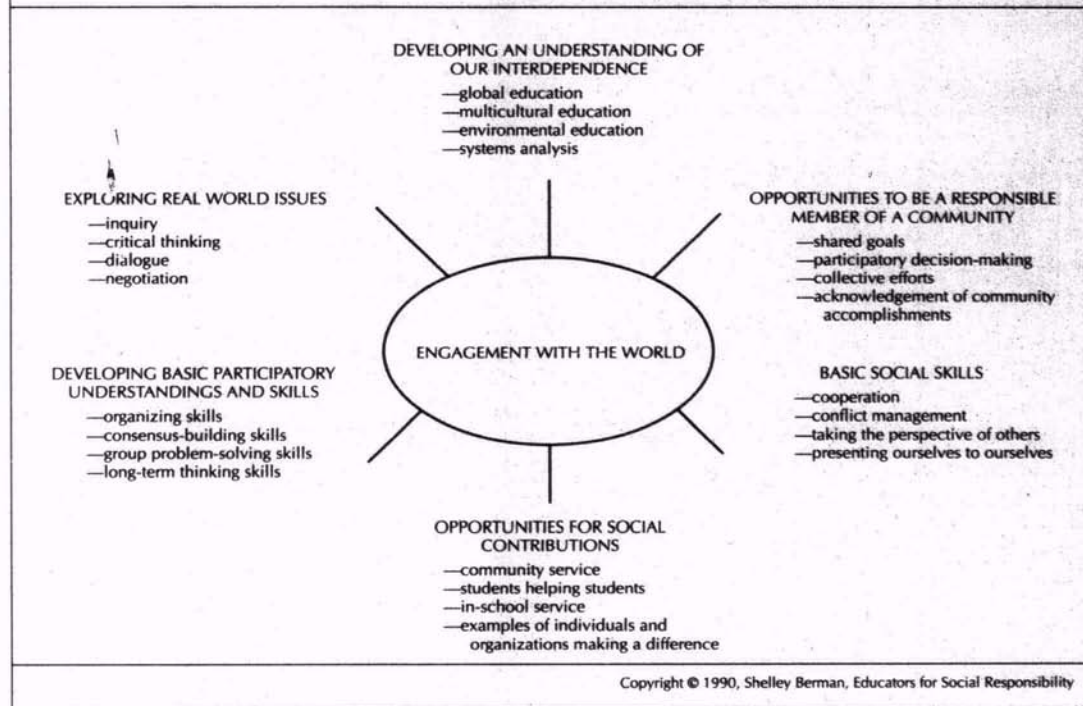
These efforts are vitally important to help students grasp and work with concepts of interdependence. Yet they are often add-ons, imposed on schools that are accountable for a knowledge and skill base that does not give issues of interdependence top priority. If we truly want to develop socially conscious young people, we will have to change our priorities so that basic social skills, appreciation for cultural diversity and ecological balance, and systems analysis are central organizing concepts within the curriculum.

### **Becoming Part of a Community**

Becoming socially conscious means becoming aware of group needs. An individual who develops a "conscious-



Fig. 1. The Development of Social Consciousness



ness of the group” begins to sense the atmosphere that is present in the group, to observe how people’s interactions influence the productivity of the group, and to understand the impact his or her actions have on the group as a whole. Becoming socially responsible means using this consciousness to intervene to improve the group’s ability to live and work together.

Developing a “consciousness of the group” is a skill that can be nurtured only through experience. But the style of instruction in most classrooms is either individualistic or competitive, and consequently, children do not have occasion to develop this skill. Cooperative learning techniques help, as you might expect, but the best way to teach this consciousness is to create classrooms and schools that function as caring communities.

The term *community* is often used very loosely; but when I ask people in my workshops to think about community in their own lives, a rich definition emerges: a community is a group of

people who acknowledge their interconnectedness, have a sense of their common purpose, respect their differences, share in group decision making as well as in responsibility for the actions of the group, and support each other’s growth.

With time, diligent effort, and new forms of shared leadership, classrooms and schools can be this kind of community. Creating a caring community in a classroom or school calls for developing a shared set of values or goals and establishing structures that allow students and faculty to participate in decision making. It also means providing “community time” for faculty to think and work together and for students to participate in community decision making and in collective efforts that contribute to the school or make a difference in the world.

A sense of community requires affirmation. Community building means finding ways in which the community can affirm its members and acknowledge its own accomplishments. In a

community, people become rich resources to each other. Communities need stories, heroes and heroines, rituals, and celebrations. These are the oil that makes a community function smoothly. They demonstrate that its members are valued and that people care about each other and about the group as a whole.

Out of the experience of community, young people not only become conscious of group needs and group process, but they begin to understand the meaning of the common good, to appreciate that their efforts do make a difference, and to develop a sense of relatedness to the larger human community.

### **Developing Basic Social Skills**

Community building and developing a sense of social responsibility demand basic social skills such as communication, cooperation, conflict management, and perspective taking. Like competency skills in reading, writing,

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and mathematics, social skills take direct instruction. In the past 10 years, we have learned a great deal about communication and cooperation skills. The work in cooperative learning, for example, has been quite effective in helping young people learn cooperation skills.<sup>5</sup> More recently, efforts such as "Resolving Conflict Creatively Program," sponsored by New York City and Educators for Social Responsibility, (Roderick 1988) are improving students' conflict resolution skills. Three effective resources for these purposes are William Kreidler's (1984) book for elementary schools *Creative Conflict Resolution*, the Community Board Program's (1988) secondary curriculum *Conflict Resolution: A Secondary School Curriculum*, and ESR's K-12 curriculum *Perspectives* (Berman 1983).

Perspective taking, embodied in many conflict resolution strategies, is a skill in its own right. To develop social consciousness, we must be able to step out of our own perspectives to fully grasp the concerns and interests of those with whom we live. But we must also be capable of looking at our own perspectives from another's vantage point. Only by presenting ourselves to ourselves can we reevaluate our opinions and beliefs.

Taking the position of another and developing reflectiveness are difficult

tasks that compel us to live with ambiguity and to be continually open to change. Two useful strategies that can help students learn to take another's perspective and to reflect on their own thinking are role playing and journal writing. Martin Hoffman's (1984a,b) inductive discipline—directing a child's attention to the feelings of another—is another strategy. At the secondary level, Peter Elbow (1986) and ESR have developed a particularly powerful tool called methodological belief (Berman 1987). In this exercise, students go beyond "understanding" a perspective to fully entering the perspective so that they may find some truth in it of which they were not aware.

Teachers who create environments that model social skills will succeed in teaching them. We cannot ask students to take the perspective of others when we fail to hear their perspectives or encourage them to resolve their differences when we are not able to resolve differences among ourselves.

### Opportunities for Social Contribution

A fourth step in nurturing social responsibility—giving students the opportunity to contribute to the lives of others and to the improvement of the world around them—should be deeply embedded in curriculum from the early elementary grades on. Community service efforts build self-esteem and allow students to experience themselves as part of the larger network of people who are helping to create a better world.

The form community service takes matters less than whether children see it as important and choose it for themselves. The opportunities and designs are endless. Whether it is having students help each other or having students participate in their local community, students need instruction and coaching from adults. Sadly, in today's society, these are new skills for many. Young people need to learn how best to help others, how to be patient, and how to tolerate the slow pace of change.

It is also important for teachers to tell young people about the success

stories of others, students who have reclaimed forests, cleaned up rivers, improved their school environment, helped the homeless.<sup>6</sup> They need to hear about the Mother Teresas and the Martin Luther Kings, of course, but also about the people who live down the street who are doing what they can to improve the neighborhood and about the many organizations that make a difference in our communities. We must put students in touch with these people and organizations so that they can see how deeply people care about their world and how worthwhile it is to participate in creating change.

### Developing Basic Participatory Understandings and Skills

Social studies programs do a fairly good job of acquainting students with our political institutions and our history. Yet the age we live in demands a broader and bolder set of citizenship skills. We are faced with enormous long-term problems that demand complicated solutions and ongoing attention. At the same time, politics has become more vicious, confrontational, and oppositional, and interest groups have become more uncompromising. Young people often withdraw from this frustrating and contentious environment.

If we are to build a renewed sense of direction and purpose in the United States and encourage young people to enter the political arena, we have to give them the skills to address our most complex problems, especially how to replace the politics of confrontation and opposition with the politics of reconciliation and dialogue.

To effectively participate in the political arena, young people need to learn several skills that are, at best, included only indirectly in the curriculum. They need to learn *organizational skills* so that they can work well in groups and in organizations. They must learn *consensus building skills* so that they can transform oppositional debates into productive dialogues. *Group problem-solving skills* will help them draw upon the group's diverse resources and talents to come



up with constructive solutions to complex problems. And *long-term thinking skills* will help them evaluate the impact of potential solutions upon future generations. Equally applicable to family, work, and neighborhood issues, these skills build personal as well as political efficacy; they will enable young people to feel competent as they enter the social and political arena.

I am not suggesting we turn out political organizers; I am suggesting we show young people that their actions and choices are social and political statements—their daily actions are creating the world as it is and as it will be. They can come to understand that we make dramatic differences—in our relationships with friends, in our work, in raising children, in our role as consumers—not by the political positions we espouse but by how we live, by the consciousness and integrity we bring to our actions and the care we take with others.

### Exploring Real-World Issues

The final strategy for nurturing the development of social consciousness and social responsibility may be the most obvious—to help students enter the dialogue about the real world issues that concern them.

Examining the social and political impact of our actions should not simply be relegated to the social studies department. Science classes can investigate the links between science, technology, and society. Mathematics classes can examine how numbers are used in our political process to persuade or deceive. English classes can focus on conflict in literature and the literature of social change. Business classes can focus on the larger social and ethical questions raised by business practices. Art classes can study the use of visual images in creating propaganda. Even at an elementary level there are appropriate strategies for engaging children in meaningful conversations about social and political issues.<sup>7</sup>

Learning about and discussing social and political issues as well as the social and political implications of our

actions should be an integral part of school life. Our goal must never be to indoctrinate or enlist students in our own causes. We must instead help them think critically and creatively about these issues and empower them to take action to influence events.

Too often when discussing controversial issues, teachers simply present students with the depressing evidence of the problems we face. Students see only the critical nature of our problems and the political conflict and stalemate that prevent us from solving these problems. Then they feel despair rather than empowerment.

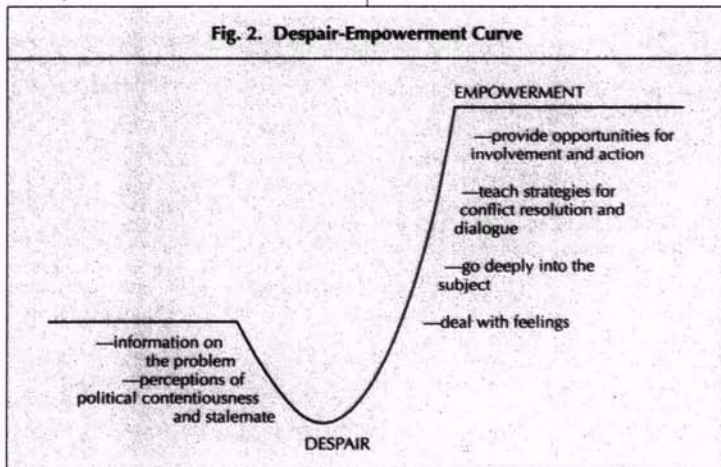
But there are ways to teach that empower students. We can listen to young people's feelings and concerns about the world and acknowledge their feelings as expressions of how much they care. We can deal with issues in depth so that young people can fully understand the problems and their potential solutions. We can help them search for the underlying sources so that their solutions treat the causes rather than simply the symptoms. We can present young people with multiple perspectives on problems and teach them how conflict resolution strategies can be applied to

depolarize conflicts and promote dialogue. Finally, we can give them opportunities for involvement and action.<sup>8</sup> Teaching about contemporary issues is demanding but also extraordinarily rewarding when students realize that they do make a difference (see fig. 2).

### Experiments in Social Responsibility

A number of schools and school districts have initiated comprehensive schoolwide and districtwide initiatives to educate for social responsibility. These efforts embody varying aspects of the six dimensions I have outlined above. For example, Tom Lickona (1984) has been working with a number of elementary schools on comprehensive programs in character development. The key elements of these programs are moral discussion, cooperative learning, participatory decision making in both the classroom and school, community building, and providing caring roles beyond the classroom through cross-age tutoring, service to the school, and service to the wider community. Both the classroom and the schoolwide strategies

Fig. 2. Despair-Empowerment Curve





serve to build a cohesive and supportive atmosphere that nurtures moral growth and social competence.

A second example, the Child Development Project, promotes prosocial behaviors such as helpfulness, fairness, and responsibility by integrating five elements into the regular academic curriculum of three San Ramon elementary schools. These five elements include: (1) teaching cooperation, (2) promoting helping skills, (3) providing positive role models both fictional and real, (4) enhancing students' ability to understand another's feelings, customs, and the like, and (5) developing self-control and internalizing core helping values through "positive discipline." The project documented increases in students' helping behaviors, cooperation, and ability to deal with conflicts (see article by Schaps and Solomon, p. 38).

Finally, the Educating for Living in a Nuclear Age Project (ELNA) (see article by Richard Sagor, p. 77) is a collaborative effort of 12 school districts in the Boston area and five school districts in Portland, Oregon, to make social responsibility a core element of the curriculum. The project's four major objectives are to help students: (1) understand the nature of social and ecological interdependence through global education, multicultural education, and environmental education; (2) develop cooperation and conflict resolution skills; (3) understand current social and political issues by integrating real-world issues throughout the curriculum; and (4) develop the confidence that they can make a difference through participatory decision making, community building, and community service. The project engages teams of teachers in participating school districts to create programs and initiatives that promote social responsibility. Although it is in its initial phases, the project has produced a model curriculum assessment on issues related to social responsibility and has initiated programs in environmental education, global telecommunications, student leadership development, and conflict resolution.

Each of these efforts is experimenting with long-term, comprehensive change. As they evolve, they will offer us models of what we can do and provide experience, research, and support materials to make it easier for other schools and districts to initiate successful programs.

### Social Vision and Education

As educators, we must inspire young people to hold a positive vision of the future—to believe that we can do better, live better, be kinder, and be fairer. Students need our help if they are to develop confidence to participate in creating a more peaceful, just, and ecologically sound world. This challenge raises questions about what we teach, how we teach, and how our schools are structured. It demands that we find ways to balance personal competence with social skills and social responsibility.

In spite of its challenges, this effort can renew our sense of purpose and meaning as educators. Most teachers enter the profession because they care about children and care about the world. Teaching is our vehicle for making a difference in the world. This vision offers all of us an occasion for seeing our work as part of the world we hope to create. □

<sup>1</sup>L. D. Johnston, J. G. Bachman, and P. M. O'Malley (Project Directors), (1975–1989). The "Monitoring the Future Study," Institute for Social Research, The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.

<sup>2</sup>Data are from the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, 421 New Jersey Ave., S.E., Washington, DC 20003.

<sup>3</sup>For a list of some of the leading research articles and books in the area of social responsibility, write to ESR at Sheldon Berman's address, below.

<sup>4</sup>See the *Battleboro Bulletin. The Newsletter of the Systems Thinking National Education Project Network*, edited by Peter Büttner, South St., RD 2, Box 9, West Battleboro, VT 05301.

<sup>5</sup>See *Educational Leadership*, December 1989/January 1990 issue for its articles on cooperative learning.

<sup>6</sup>Two excellent resources on participation and community service are ESR's curriculum guides *Taking Part* for elementary

school students and *Making History* for secondary school students. These are available from ESR at Sheldon Berman's address, below.

<sup>7</sup>Write to ESR for Susan Jones's "10 Point Model for Teaching Controversial Issues."

<sup>8</sup>For more details on teaching about controversial issues see: S. Berman, "Thinking in Context: Teaching for Open-mindedness and Critical Understanding," in *Developing Minds: A Resource Book for Teaching Thinking*, 2nd ed., edited by A. Costa, Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1990.

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- Sheldon Berman** is President, Educators for Social Responsibility, 23 Garden St., Cambridge, MA 02138.

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