

# Part 1: The Context

## Some Terms: Voice, Participation, Representation, Leadership...

Over the years, a number of terms have been used to describe work in the area covered by **Connect** and this book. We have talked of 'student participation', 'representation', 'leadership' and, more recently, 'student voice'. These are not simply neutral or alternative terms, for each conveys a message about how we view young people and their capacities, and how we believe institutions such as schools should respond.

For example, I have been concerned that the dominant language has shifted over the years from 'participation' to 'representation' to 'leadership' and that each shift has

marked a narrowing of concepts and of increasingly élite ideas. To me, ideas of participation are broad and inclusive and specifically need to raise questions of how we work to ensure that all students experience access and success.

The following articles attempt to explore some of these definitional issues. Are we all on the same page? Are we intending different outcomes and hence reading these articles in different ways?

There have similarly been very different program responses within the area, and terms such as 'Student Action Teams', 'Students as

Researchers', 'Community Groups' and 'Student Councils' have been used to describe these. How do all of these fit together?

The first article in this section is a recent attempt to puzzle out connections between some of the initiatives and to 'mind-map' those relationships. Here I am also looking for the consistencies and differences in the underlying ideas.

**Roger Holdsworth, 2005**

## Navigating Student Voice and Beyond

As a lead-up to working with the South Australian Inclusive Student Voice initiative in 2004, I was thinking about the range of examples we include under the title 'student voice'. Despite the title, these weren't all just about 'voice', as some had also to do with student action within communities. And then, as Michael Fielding and Sara Bragg (2003) point out, there are issues to do with 'voice about what?', about who is allowed to speak, about who is listening, and about the spaces that are created for dialogue. And, as a teacher on the day pointed out, about what it is that adults actually hear when young people 'speak'.

I wondered if a map would help us navigate this somewhat complex and diverse terrain. So the diagram (on page 10) is a first attempt to draw such a map. The clear area at the left is relatively known (familiar practices in classrooms and student councils) but, as we move into the grey area on the right, we may be moving off-shore into less charted waters. Here



be unknowns; here be uncertainties. But here be possibilities and excitement!

Now, I'm not sure that I've got this right, or that everything is there yet. Things might be in the wrong place, incomplete, inaccurate. The map needs input from other voyagers to fill out the vague and blank parts and possibly to show some of the monsters to be encountered.

And then on the next two pages I've tried to show this picture in another way, with a grid describing and comparing various aspects of the places on the map. The two can be read together ... and again this grid should be updated and improved.

I'm still wondering if this helps us to see what is possible and what the links are. Any feedback would be gratefully received. Any discoveries of new continents, shoals and reefs would be valuable!

**Roger Holdsworth**

(Ref: Michael Fielding and Sara Bragg (2003) **Students as Researchers: Making a Difference**, Pearson Publishing: Cambridge)

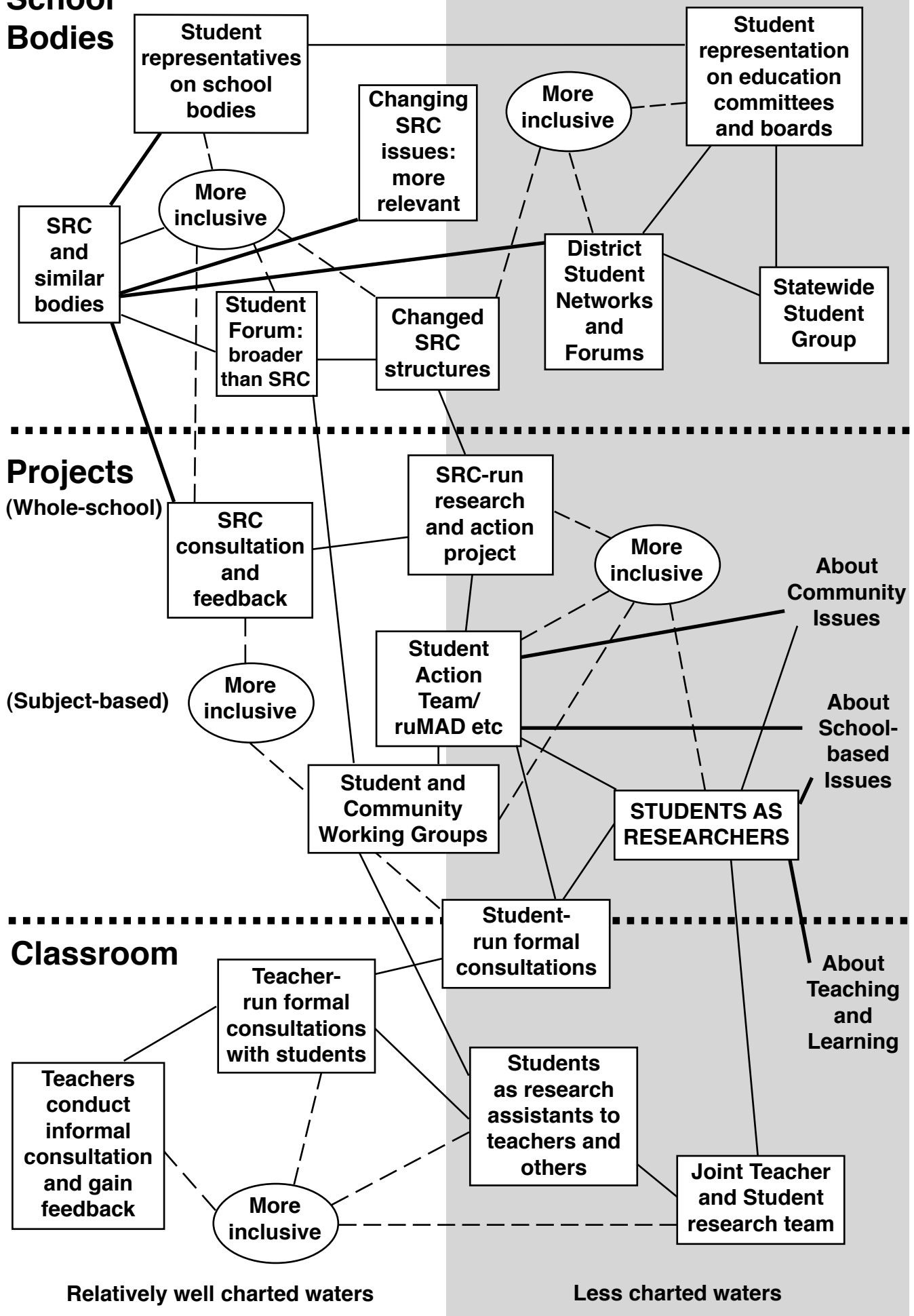
# Towards a 'Student Voice

	<b>Approach</b>	<b>About</b>	<b>Initiation</b>	<b>Teacher role</b>
<b>Students as source of information</b>	Teachers gain normal feedback from students while teaching	Classroom issues inc. understanding, approaches etc	Teachers	Ask questions, consider results
<b>Students as source of information</b>	<b>Teachers</b> carry out specific and extra consultations with students	Various classroom or school-level issues but mainly curriculum-based; student satisfaction etc	Teachers	Decide on issues, structure and administer surveys etc
<b>Students as source of information</b>	<b>Students</b> carry out specific consultations with students for teachers	(As above) Various but mainly curriculum-based; student satisfaction etc	Teachers	Decide on issues, structure and supervise approaches
<b>Students as Researchers - in school</b>	Students <b>define</b> and gather information about school practices	Various school-based issues including satisfaction, curriculum issues, school structures etc	Students with or without teacher input	Support, guide, train, provide skills and advice
<b>Students as Researchers – outside school</b>	Students define and gather information about community	Local or wider social and community issues of interest	Students with community input	Support, guide, train etc; provide class time?
<b>Research and Action</b>	Students define an issue, research it and propose and/or take action	School and/or community issues including health, environment, safety, peace, jobs etc	Students with support	As above: support, advise; provide skill training and time
<b>Student-teacher research collaboration</b>	Joint teacher-student approaches to research and action	Shared issues of concern: school and/or community issues	Students or teachers or others	Co-researcher - but also support and advise and teach
<b>Formal student organisation</b>	SRC or similar body (Student Council)	Consideration of issues raised by students	Student body	Assist and advise; skill training; advocate
<b>Other student organisations</b>	Student forums	Broader structures for more inclusive student decision-making	Students and others	Assist and advise; co-workers on specific issues
<b>Formal representation in decision-making</b>	Student representation on school committees and councils	Participation in whole school decision-making	School	Co-members of committees, but also support; skill training
<b>Networking outside school</b>	Inter-school student networks for discussion or action	Discussion of a range of issues – either school or community based; training	Students	Transport, assist, advise; offer training activities
<b>Formal representation at district, region, state</b>	Representation of students within District and State structures	Participation in decision-making or advice on a range of issues of specific interest to bodies	System – sometimes student demand/request	Transport, support, advise; some training and advocacy

# and Beyond' Typology

<b>Student role</b>	<b>Methods</b>	<b>Space for listening</b>	<b>Outcomes and Action</b>	
Give responses	Questioning in class; looking at student assessments	Classroom; teachers' own private space	Improved teacher practice: transmission, teaching etc	<b>Students as source of information</b>
As above inc. completing surveys, participation in focus groups, interviews	Various consultation methods: surveys, interviews, focus groups etc	During the process; perhaps also reported formally at staff and other meetings	Input to teacher and school decision-making	<b>Students as source of information</b>
Research assistant - conduct surveys etc; provide responses; advise on analysis	As above	Staff and other meetings, as well as one-to-one reports	Input to teacher decision-making; some student skills	<b>Students as source of information</b>
Decide on topic, structure and conduct research; analyse; contribute responses	Range: surveys, interviews, focus groups, observation etc	Created spaces for presentation of outcomes at meetings or personally	Ask others for action and change; input to teacher decision-making; some student skills	<b>Students as Researchers - in school</b>
As above	As above	Spaces created within research: school/community	Ask others for action and change; input to community decisions	<b>Students as Researchers – outside school</b>
As above; decide on and implement action	As above; also development of an action component	Forced consideration through and within action proposals	School or community change; skills	<b>Research and Action</b>
Co-researcher and co-activist	As above	As above, plus shared space and shared consideration	School or community change; skills; connectedness	<b>Student-teacher research collaboration</b>
Gain and consider input from other students – represent	Range of relatively formal meeting procedures	SRC meeting – presentation of student 'demands'	Representation of student views – action by others	<b>Formal student organisation</b>
Gain and consider and act on input from other students – represent	Range of meeting and action procedures – more likely more informal	Own sub-structures but also some student co-ordination group?	Direct impact on areas of interest; representation of student views to others	<b>Other student organisations</b>
Represent student views; share in delegated decision-making	Range of relatively formal meeting procedures	Meetings of the bodies	School decision making	<b>Formal representation in decision-making</b>
Run meetings and networks; share information and some decisions	Range of meetings and links (inc virtual); training days	Created events at district, regional, state etc; internal to SRCs etc	Support and training; impact on broader issues; representation of views; skills	<b>Networking outside school</b>
Represent student views on committees; sometimes share in decision-making	Range of relatively formal meeting procedures	Committee meetings – sometimes direct access to individuals	Advice through to shared system decision-making	<b>Formal representation at district, region, state</b>

# School Bodies



Relatively well charted waters

Less charted waters

Originally from *Connect* 148, August 2004

# STUDENT PARTICIPATION

## What Do We Mean?

In education, the word 'participation' has been used in various ways. For example, it can mean 'being there' (as in *participation or retention rates*); it can mean 'taking part' (as in *doing activities over which students may have no say*); it can mean 'having a say' (*students speaking out about issues*). All these are important, but we mean much more than these definitions when we talk of 'student participation' in primary and secondary schools.

We mean: **an active role for students in decisions about, and implementation of, education policies and practices, and of the key issues that determine the nature of the world in which they live.**

This implies that participation must value the contribution that students make, meet genuine needs (ie be about real things), have an impact or consequence that extends beyond the participants (ie outside the classroom), be challenging to participants, and provide the opportunity for planning, acting and reflecting.

Another way of saying that is to see that student participation must involve activities that are valuable and make sense in three ways:

- a) **to the participants:** students are working on issues they choose, that make sense to them, and which they value;
- b) **to the community:** the community sees the issues as valuable ones to be worked on, and in which students can add something of value to that community;
- c) **academically:** the participation meets the academic or curriculum goals that schools are required to achieve.

These principles then provide an essential checklist by which we can determine whether a particular proposal is of worth. Is it driven by student choice and enthusiasm? Does it produce something of real value to the community? Does it meet the learning goals of the school or the subject?

### Arenas of Student Participation

There are three major **arenas** in which we must see student participation developing. The existence of participation in **all** these arenas is important and complementary. The absence of active participation in any one of these arenas weakens student participation across the whole school:

#### a) in student-run organisations:

This involves students in Student Representative Councils (SRCs), Junior School Councils (JSCs) and so on, where students can discuss, debate and decide their position on issues facing them.

#### b) in school governance:

This involves students, either directly or through representatives, in participation in school decision making. This might occur through students taking part in committees eg School Council, Curriculum Committee, Regional Board and so on.

#### c) in curriculum decision-making and action:

This involves students in decision-making and action through classroom learning partnerships, and through specific 'student participation' projects or approaches. Curriculum negotiation is basic to all such approaches and can occur at all levels (though it has often been spelled out most coherently in senior school curriculum).

There are long lists of practical examples in all these areas. The next pages deal with each of these areas in turn and raise some issues to be considered. But there are many more ideas and issues that need consideration.

It is important that documentation and sharing of practical initiatives in both primary and secondary education continues to occur. The national newsletter, **Connect**, has provided a means for this to happen for over 25 years.

*Roger Holdsworth*

### Some Issues:

- Participation is a 'doing' word: an approach, not a noun. You cannot 'do' student participation. Nor is it something that has been 'done' or 'tried'. It is a way of relating between students and others; a way of bringing students into partnership in education.
- Who gets to participate? We need to be wary of approaches that encourage or allow **some** students to be active participants while excluding others. The most valuable forms of participation are those which are **inclusive** - and those which specifically aim to include students who have been marginalised and excluded by other educational approaches.

# Student Organisations

Many schools now have some form of student organisation - and these have recently developed most rapidly in primary schools. While these Student Councils have traditionally been seen as having limited or token functions (fund-raising and the organisation of social activities in many cases), schools that are serious about supporting student participation continue to discover ways to extend the role of student organisations so they are a vital part of the school's overall decision-making structure.

## What do they do? What can they do?

These student organisations enable students to meet and discuss, debate and decide on issues of importance to them. The sorts of issues that Student Councils consider are:

- fund-raising for school or community concerns;
- organisation of student social activities;
- school rules, including issues about uniforms;
- school (and related) facilities;
- environmental issues in the school and community;
- advocacy: representing students eg considering and 'taking up' others' complaints and concerns;
- curriculum (teaching and learning, subjects, timetable, assessment and so on);
- community development and action.

Schools that are **serious** about student participation encourage and support Student Councils to work on all these issues - and more. Student Councils that seriously want to be part of a school's decision-making **never** say: "That's something we couldn't be involved in."

Student Councils often approach these issues in three ways: in some cases, they **do** things themselves (eg organising activities) - but these are often relatively limited or trivial things; in other cases, they **ask** others to do things (eg they approach the Principal) - but this strongly limits the effectiveness of the Council, and leaves the final decision and action to someone else; or thirdly, they **share** the decision-making with others (eg on a school committee) and participate in suggesting and deciding about the approaches and in implementing solutions.

(For more details on these, see *Connect* 116, April 1999, p 22)

## Who?

Who gets to be on a Student Council? Some schools are now concerned that such groups only involve a small number of students - the ones who love meetings, or are popular, or can make good speeches. They are trying to invent new types of Student Councils, or Forums, or broader structures that can involve more students in different ways. For example, some schools are developing many different groups - task committees, action groups, peer support groups and so on - with students elected, or volunteering from different parts of the school. The 'traditional' Student Council then might be an executive or coordinating committee run by students. This way, more students can participate; this way, different students can take action and have their voices heard.

These arrangements are also influenced by some simple but difficult decisions: When does the Student Council meet - at lunchtime, or as part of the curriculum? Who is elected - the 'dags' or a variety of students representative of interests of the student body? How does the election procedure influence or limit who gets elected (eg if people have to make speeches, do only the already confident students get elected)?

## Credit

If participation in decision-making is an important learning activity within a school, how do schools recognise and credit students' Council and other participation as part of the school's curriculum? This could also provide some **time** for students to carry out this work. Schools have considered ways of incorporating Student Council work as a subject, or as part of the work requirements (through subject or work/task substitution). This means that students have to negotiate ways of showing what they are learning when they are on a Student Council.

## Training and Networking

Student Councils also need time to develop as a group and to increase their skills. It is important to make regular time to meet, to include some training days or camps, and to network with other Student Councils.

## Some Issues:

- Who gets to participate on Student Councils? Is there only one form of participation possible - a form that continues to favour those students who are already succeeding?
- A constant issue is that of the support that students provide for a Student Council. It has generally been discovered that when a Student Council listens seriously to students, works on their issues, reports back, and involves other students (instead of just doing things **for** them), they get strong support from other students. Time is needed within home-groups or classes for such discussions.

# Students as Part of School Decision-Making Bodies

Student participation also means representation within the broader decision-making structure of the school, on the School Council and on various committees and working parties that make decisions and recommendations on policies and programs.

These councils and committees are at the core of school decision making. They deal with issues of whole school governance: finances, curriculum, welfare, facilities and so on. As noted opposite, if students are to do anything other than ask others for change, or act on less important matters, they need to be sharing in these decisions, as partners in the operation of the school.

## Understanding School Structures

Many students, even those on school committees, will need to develop their understanding of how decisions are made in a school. What are the structures that exist?

A useful exercise for a Student Council is to research how decisions are made. Draw up a 'decision-making' map of the school. Ask: What are the committees, who is on them, what do they deal with, who do they report to? Are students already represented on these bodies? (Do they want to be?)

## Connecting School and Student Councils

The ways in which schools connect Student Councils into the broader school decision-making, so that student concerns and views are heard, can assist all students to have greater participation in the real decisions of a school, and can support the Student Council to grapple with significant (rather than trivial) concerns.

It is, for example, possible that the Student Council can 'mirror' the school committees (on which students are represented) with student advisory groups – where the representatives can raise issues and obtain student perspectives and advice for their work.

These structural matters raise further issues for representatives; reporting back and seeking direction from other students through the Student Council and then through discussion at home group or sub-school levels becomes important for all students' development and learning.

In all these areas, students are regarded as having valuable perspectives, information and skills to contribute to the school's decision making. Student views are taken seriously, and students are supported in developing democratic structures that ensure the views of **all** students are represented. Students learn democracy by doing democracy.

## Networking

There remain larger issues that influence and constrain school decision making. If students are to participate fully as partners in education, they also need to be represented where those issues are considered: on Regional Boards, on Departmental Committees and so on. In turn, this implies opportunities for student representatives to meet and discuss these issues with other students – and not just those from their own school.

## Supporting Students on Committees

When students are on school and other committees, they frequently need support to ensure they understand proceedings and are able to have their voices heard. These committees may have to re-consider their procedures, pausing for informal discussion, appointing 'mentors' to brief and advise students and so on. (They may find that such processes assist all members to be more effective.)

(For more details, see *Connect* 116, April 1999, p 10)

## Some Issues:

- Who gets to represent students? Again, how do we ensure that there is diversity in representation on decision-making bodies?
- What sort of training is needed for student representatives? Whose responsibility is this?
- Are student representatives taken seriously? It is suggested that there should be at least two students on each body, to provide mutual support. No student should be there alone.
- What support is there for student networking to deal with the 'bigger issues'? Whose responsibility is this?
- How do representatives balance the needs for confidentiality and for consultation?

# Students Deciding About and Implementing Curriculum

The curriculum - the teaching and learning that occurs in a school - is at the centre of what schools do. If we are to talk seriously about student participation, the role of students in the classroom and in their learning must also demonstrate participatory principles.

That means two things: first, that students should be partners in decisions about and implementation of the curriculum (ie some form of curriculum **negotiation** should occur); secondly, that the way teaching and learning occurs should have students as active participants and include **real and valued learning activities**.

## Negotiation

Even within centrally determined curriculum, schools have discovered and developed opportunities for negotiation of **learning methods**; in other less constrained courses, the curriculum partnerships between teachers and students have involved joint responsibility for **setting goals**, canvassing **needs and background**, **identifying appropriate content**, devising **learning methods** and putting appropriate collaborative **assessment and evaluation** measures in place.

*(For a discussion of some schools' approaches to curriculum negotiation, see **Connect** 105, June 1997 and **Connect** 124-125, August-October 2000.)*

## Roles of Value

It is important that curriculum activities themselves are also characterised by active student participation. These need to acknowledge that students have valuable skills, and can do useful and valued things while they learn. They place students in **roles of value** in their school and in their community. These activities are valued by the participants (ie based on student choice and decision), valued by the community (with an audience and purpose beyond the teacher/classroom), and valued in terms of learning and the mandated curriculum.

## Curriculum Projects

Extensive examples of student participation are seen in the wide range of curriculum projects that have been developed within Australian primary and secondary schools. These can be:

- **community development projects in which students create resources and services of value to their communities.**

Examples of these projects have included:

- \* **cross-age tutoring** in which students teach other students either within the school, or within neighbouring schools or community facilities (eg child care centres);
  - \* **media productions** where students have produced community newspapers (some multilingual) and directories, books of oral histories, or radio and television programs;
  - \* **job creation**: through forms of enterprise education.
- **community research and action projects in which students investigate and act on issues facing their community.**

Examples of these projects have included:

- \* student **research** initiatives on topics such as youth homelessness, community safety, irrigation methods etc, in which they write reports and / or propose or organise community action;
- \* students' **environmental** studies and reports;
- \* students working as **evaluators** - of health projects, curriculum and so on.

*(For a larger list of possible projects and approaches, see **Connect** 116, April 1999, pp 6-9)*

Some of these examples might be discrete 'projects' while others might be on-going approaches that characterise how a class goes about its learning.

## Some Issues:

- Who gets to negotiate curriculum and to participate in real and valued learning? For example, there has been a tendency to select the 'best' students to be tutors (or the ones who will 'represent the school' best), thereby perpetuating existing inequities and being self-defeating.
- The identification of real, purposeful and valued community-based learning requires schools to reconsider their relationship with their community. There is no shortage of important things that students can do, through which schools are able to meet (or exceed) their learning goals. How schools organise to enable this to happen becomes the important issue.