



# Social Studies Explorations

– A Professional Journey



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## Social Participation as Democratic Practice

### Guiding Question:

Submitted by Patricia Shields-Ramsay

What does it take to motivate and engage students as active citizens within a democracy?

### Abstract:

In the new Social Studies program, social participation for democratic practice requires a focus on what active and engaged citizenship can mean for K-12 students. When students become aware of and develop connections between political and social processes and their own lives, they develop a capacity to act meaningfully for change, a commitment to their communities, and the ability to participate as informed, responsible citizens.

While we often say that we value a democratic society, how are we, as Social Studies teachers, addressing this? At the heart of the new Alberta Social Studies Program of Studies, lie the core concepts of citizenship and identity. The program's expectations are to "... develop the key values and attitudes, knowledge and understanding, and skills and processes necessary for students to become active and responsible citizens, engaged in the democratic process and aware of their capacity to effect change in their communities, society and world."<sup>(1)</sup>

The news media often target areas that our students "don't know" about their country, government and history. Even if students could recite an impressive body of factual knowledge to effectively fulfill our mandate of educating students for active citizenship, educators would still face challenges. Encouraging our students to make an active commitment to the betterment of our society seems to imply making a commitment to democracy itself. This, in turn, means intentionally nurturing, in our youth, the skills to participate individually, as well as collectively, in democratic processes and institutions.

When exploring the meanings of social participation, citizenship, identity and democracy, students come to deeper understandings about these components from multi-faceted perspectives. For learners of all ages, this begins with uncovering personal understandings and

experiences. The process is both extended and authenticated by exploring ways in which their sense of belonging shapes their commitment to others, to their communities, and to different facets of society and the world. Encouraging students to dialogue with others about their commonalities and areas of uniqueness, their histories and backgrounds, and their shared or differing understandings of citizenship and democracy will span knowledge/understandings, values/attitudes and skills/processes, as directed by the Program of Studies.

The process of social participation means that students are not only engaged in knowing, but also engaged in doing. Social participation involves commitment to personal citizenship and democracy. As students gain more and more experience within the classroom context, extended understandings develop.

The following general principles can guide classroom practices and encourage

students to deepen their experiences with citizenship and democracy.

**Provide students with opportunities to explore deeper issues addressed in current affairs, social dilemmas, and controversial issues within their own communities.**

Involving students in local issues and social problems can motivate and encourage them to develop a commitment to become involved. Students are often motivated by a sense of injustice or unfairness, and introducing them to controversial issues from an early age can generate a sense of responsibility to take some form of action. The Social Studies Program of Studies states that controversial issues are "... important in preparing students to participate responsibly in a democratic and pluralistic society."<sup>(2)</sup> The exploration of social problems and controversial issues can also build the foundation for students to make more extensive connections with their overall learning.

**Engage students in authentic projects and experiences.**

When students have the opportunity to become involved in projects that have a "real" effect on some aspect of their lives or the lives of others, they learn that social participation can have influence and bring about positive change. A classroom or school-based "student government" can have real power to affect change. A community-based project can have significant impact. Letters that

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address multiple perspectives and points of view in response to the media can be shared directly with the intended audience. When students have positive experiences formulating and articulating their ideas, they are encouraged to see the value of being involved citizens. They develop a capacity for social participation.

### **Connect understandings of the political process to understandings of belonging and communities.**

Students need to develop a sense of “connectedness” to their communities as well as to political processes in a democracy. Knowledge and understandings associated with political process are essential to engagement and action, which usually begins, and is most meaningful, in students’ local contexts. *The Heart of the Matter*, a resource focused on character and citizenship education in Alberta schools, makes the point that although many character education programs develop values, citizenship education encourages students to act on those values.

Encourage students to ask and explore questions like, “What does government have to do with me?” and “What could happen in my life if we didn’t have the political processes that we do?” Provide them with opportunities to explore and critically analyze the multiple perspectives that individuals bring to the political process and the power of an individual’s sense of belonging and affiliations on one’s political and social actions.

### **Provide opportunities for dialogue.**

Conversations, discussions, debates and interviews are all strategies that can be used to encourage students to engage in dialogue with others who have varying perspectives and understandings. Provide students with opportunities to interact with role models by inviting individuals who are involved with political and social processes, both formally and informally, into the classroom. Continue to incorporate cooperative learning opportunities and group projects into students’ learning. When students are encouraged to engage in social participation that is connected and collaborative, they will understand that the most effective form of

social participation occurs as a collective endeavour.

### **Teach skills directly.**

Social participation can take a variety of forms. The new Social Studies Program of Studies specifies outcomes, at each grade level, for social participation that range from contributing to their families, classrooms and schools to the broader communities. When linking these social participation skills to the development of decision-making, problem solving and research skills, students explore content and issues through the application of effecting change. Role plays, “what if...” or imaginary scenarios, and mini-workshops focused on specific research and inquiry skills enhance students’ learning and deepen their understandings. Providing opportunities to apply those skills in their classroom, school and community will add greater authenticity.

### *Footnotes:*

- (1) Alberta Education Social Studies Program of Study, 2005, page 1.
- (2) Alberta Education Social Studies Program of Study, 2005, page 6.

## Annotated Resources, Web Sites, Books, etc.

### **Annotated Resources, Web Sites, Books, Etc.**

*The Heart of the Matter*, Alberta Education. This resource provides schools and jurisdictions with a sample framework and varied strategies for developing and supporting a culture of character and citizenship. The framework encourages individual schools to assess and put action plans in place that focus on character and citizenship education. It also looks at how character and citizenship education can be supported by administrators, school staff, parents, students, school jurisdictions and the larger community.

### *Building Local Communities Through Local Government.*

Alberta Municipal Affairs and Housing, Edmonton, AB, 2008. This resource encourages interest in local affairs and issues and a willingness to contribute opinions, time and energy toward making the municipality a better place to live and work. The resources include a comprehensive teaching and learning resource, a student website, a double-sided poster and trading cards, all developed to support Alberta Grade 6 Social Studies. *The Building Communities through Local Government* website provides students with the opportunity to explore different aspects of municipal government. At the heart of this resource are approaches, strategies and tools that encourage citizen involvement and participation – with students, teachers, municipal officials, and community members.

*Take Action! A Guide to Active Citizenship.* Marc and Craig Keilburger (Gage Learning, 2002) offers ideas for Division I & II learners.

*Take More Action.* Marc and Craig Kielburer and Deepa Shankaran (Nelson, 2004) provides insightful local and global opportunities for Division III & IV students.

*Teaching Democracy: What Schools Need to Do.* Joseph Kahne and Joel Westheimer. Phi Delta Kappa, September 2003: pp. 34-67.

<http://democraticdialogue.com/DDpdfs/TeachingDemocracyPDK.pdf> This article describes principles and actions that can guide the development of democratic citizens in schools.

[www.historica.ca](http://www.historica.ca) The Historica website provides many opportunities for students to explore perspectives related to citizenship, the development of the Canadian democracy and social action, both past and present. The Voices link on the Historica site, at <http://www.historica.ca/voices/index.do> provides a unit, *Getting the Vote*, that focuses on the issue of youth voting in Canada and a second unit, *Governance in Canada*, that examines the political process after the ballots have been counted.

[www.elections.ca](http://www.elections.ca) The Elections Canada website provides general resources regarding elections and resources for students and teachers, including games and activities.

### **Biography**

Patricia Shields-Ramsay is a former classroom teacher and currently works as an independent consultant with InPraxis Group Inc. She has authored numerous resources for teachers and students, including Thomson Nelson and Duval’s Grade 3 and Grade 5 Social Studies textbooks and a new support resource for Grade 6 Social Studies produced by Alberta Municipal Affairs and Housing, *Building Communities Through Local Government*. She also contributed to *The Heart of the Matter* and developed the professional development support materials for the resource. She has presented workshops and sessions at conferences and conventions throughout North America. She can be reached at [pshieldsramsay@inpraxis.org](mailto:pshieldsramsay@inpraxis.org).