Chapter 11
Participation, Education, and Democracy: Implications for Environmental Education, Health Education, and Education for Sustainable Development

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11.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on participation in the context of European and Nordic debates about whether education should be understood as an end in itself, as in the humanistic tradition, or instrumentally, to bring about social change. In the case of the latter, environmental education, health education, and education for sustainable development can each be understood as denoting initiatives and efforts that are driven by a shared ideal of improving the world we live in now, and for the future. As such, they are often seen as overruling education in the former, humanistic sense, particularly in relation to its legitimate purposes and modes. Whilst acknowledging this trans-educational function, this chapter sets out to recover the relevance of general education to ‘adjectival educations’ like environmental education, health education, and education for sustainable development, and vice versa, that is, in relation to efforts to educate pupils in a broader, humanistic sense. It asks what, after all, is the aim of our educational efforts, and how are we to assess their success and outcomes, particularly if we are to prevent ‘adjectival educations’ from being reduced to instruments of ideology or policy when the overarching goal is to foster deeper and more meaningful participation in education.

11.2 The Relationship Between Education and Social Objectives

While earlier chapters in this volume have illustrated common agreement that participation has become a buzzword in both education and development studies, recent struggles and debate are characterised by asking ‘where next’ with the term

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(e.g. Jensen 2000b; Hickey and Mohan 2004). Some argue that participation is better replaced by another term. For others, it is a notion that still has relevance and potential. This chapter explores the second position, given that participation remains an important notion to environmental education, health education, and education for sustainable development. Reasons for this include that:

- The concept illustrates an important overlap between how each of these adjectival educations has come to be constituted (e.g. by participatory approaches and goals), as well as in terms of the overlap between their goals and approaches and those of general education in fostering similar objectives.
- While participation is constitutive of the idea of democracy, it can easily be reduced to a token; for example, as a means for legitimating arbitrary power.
- Participation has different conceptualisations and interpretations, in that it can be understood in strong, more radical senses, but also in weaker senses, with quite different implications for education and development.
- In both education and development, the possibilities for and practice of participation pose questions about the efficiency as well as morality of current activities, and it may be advocated as a requirement for either motivational or ethical reasons.

Current educational discourse can give the impression that education and health improvement, environmental protection, and sustainable development are linked together by instrumental relationships and functions. Here, education is perceived as a means rather than an end in itself. However, to separate means and ends can be artificial and fruitless because they are usually entwined, excepting extreme situations for the sake of discussion. Even if different pedagogical methods are sometimes discussed as alternative means to a specific end, e.g. reading skills, mathematical competence, sociological imagination, or democratic attitudes, the preference for some methodologies over others is most often based on the sound assumption that the methods are not means to identical outcomes. In education, means are not neutral tools; they are in themselves alive with experiential and formative consequences that cannot meaningfully be abstracted in their totality from the definition of the outcomes. We might then consider whether a more useful way to talk about means and ends in educational endeavours is as two extremes on a continuum. At one pole, education is interpreted as specialised training with no other aim than being the means to achieving a certain predefined objective (e.g. a profession or craft or skill). An appropriate term for this exercise in instrumentalism could be ‘instruction’ or ‘training’. At the other pole, education is understood as an end in itself. It is combined with certain fundamental values in relation to which this kind of education might be called a ‘means’, but here, this is understood in a more hermeneutic sense, for example, as a ‘precondition’, a ‘dimension of’, or a ‘perspective for’ developing or achieving some overarching goal or other. In this line of thinking, to be ‘educated’ is often interpreted as a precondition for becoming a ‘fulfilled’ self, of being able to actualise one’s potentials in a balanced or harmonious way, and of being able to become an active and integrated member of a modern democratic society.

The practices of most educational programmes and settings within and outside the formal educational system are located somewhere in between the two