A conference on participatory planning in education was held in January of this year sponsored by the Country Educational Planning Programme of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Reporting and interpreting a wide range of country experience, the complete papers to this conference will be published in July, from which the following paper by Kjell Eide is drawn, with the authorization of the author and of OECD.

In practice, most innovations introduced into organized processes and operations imply a shift in the goal structure governing them. Quite often such a shift can be obtained only through a change in the existing power structure, which must precede or accompany the innovation.

In principle, an innovation can imply benefits shared among all those involved in a process or an operation, and all those concerned by its outcomes. However, experience tells us that this is very rarely the case as witnessed by the current debate on the consequences of economic growth and technological development. Innovations in education in recent years are even more illuminating on this point. They are nearly always accompanied by shifts in the emphasis on various educational objectives, and by more or less subtle changes in the educational power structure.

This situation explains, at least partly, the current tendency to look primarily at the power structure as a means of achieving innovations, in the educational system as well as in other sectors. The current concerns for participation in the decision-making processes may be viewed in this context. The meaning of participation, then, obviously depends on what innovations or what shifts in objectives are aimed at.
What is participation?

It may be assumed that participation means a share, in some form, in decision-making. It may also be claimed that all those influenced by decisions should have a share in them, on the grounds that decisions should be based on full knowledge of their consequences, and that this is best ensured by bringing into decision-making all those influenced by such consequences. One may also claim that as a political principle everyone should have a certain amount of control over his life situation.

Such broad principles sometimes lead to meaningless statements of policy, such as ‘maximum participation for all concerned’. Clearly, if decision-making power was a free good such statements might make sense. As it is, decision-making power certainly has to be rationed, and its distribution among groups and individuals is the essence of politics. Furthermore, the sheer number of those concerned will in many cases make direct participation impossible. At most, one can achieve a substitute for participation through representatives of interested groups.

To take the educational system as an example, we have the groups directly involved: educational policy-makers, administrators, teachers and other employed personnel, students and pupils. In addition, we have other groups more or less concerned with what the educational system produces: parents, employers, professional associations, ideological organizations, politicians in general, etc. Clearly, participation of all those concerned would mean most of the population, and many in more than one capacity. In addition, it would be fully justified to include future generations.

A representation system is obviously needed. Participation in the form of election and possible rejection of representatives is in any case a necessary element in a democratic decision-making process.

However, as a means of securing the individual a reasonable chance of controlling his own fate, intermittent voting on representatives is a rather meagre offer. In the kind of hierarchical decision-making structure which characterizes most of our societal systems, the opportunity of being vaguely represented at some level high up in the hierarchy does not provide individuals with much feeling of control. The inherent rules of the hierarchy itself seem to absorb most effects of such representation, as seen from the point of view of the individuals represented. Clearly, participation must have a meaning beyond this.

The local sphere of activity in which the individual pupil, student,