Citizen co-operation

We cannot rely on politicians to protect our planet, or to build a better society. We need large numbers of confident and co-operative people to put pressure on politicians to make the correct decisions. Such activists can build mature organisations with the resilience needed to win long-term struggles. We can all help, by giving time or money to campaigns to protect the environment, promote racial equality, improve public education, or many others.

The American community groups described by Mary-Beth Rogers' book Cold Anger, always thoroughly and supportively evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of any action they undertake. Rogers contrasts this with her experience in the American Democratic Party, in which we rarely made any kind of thoughtful analysis of our failures, and certainly never worked through with our leaders any kind of understanding of how things might have been handled differently . . . If you challenged the leadership's ability to run the meeting, you had a blood bath. If you admitted any kind of weakness, your cohorts would sprout vulture wings and circle in for the kill.

This atmosphere of conflict and suspicion is common to most political parties. In contrast, the groups Rogers describes create unity, and concern for others' needs. One organiser tells how

Over the years, I've seen people mellow. In the early years it was 'Hey, I want my street fixed first!' Now people wait for communities that need it more.90

This organiser seeks as potential activists balanced people 'who like their families', and have a sense of humour. In emphasizing these qualities, he recognises the value of emotional security which underlies the confidence in human co-operation activists need.
As well as developing in the children of families with responsive parents, this confidence is fostered by schools which help children to learn together co-operatively. One researcher analysed over 600 studies showing that this approach promotes social competence, psychological health, and more positive relationships among the children, including between those of different races.91 A teacher of 8- to 9-year-olds illustrates how the introduction of a daily class meeting helped create a better learning environment. The children and teacher discussed how to penalise those who called out in class without waiting for their turn to speak. Having agreed on two punishments which they later felt caused too much embarrassment, after some weeks the meeting decided to abolish them. Having done so, the problem disappeared. The teacher attributed the improvement in this aspect of the children's behaviour to their increased 'sense of loyalty and concern for each other', arising from the daily discussions.

Involving secondary school students in decision-making also has many benefits. A well-established New York state school involves its students in democratic bodies governing school life, including a weekly meeting of all staff and students. Far from using their input to lower their workload, the students have voted both to increase the minimum number of credits needed for graduation, and to add a requirement for each student to undertake community service. Every time someone has proposed replacing the weekly All School Meeting with a representative forum, the students have voted the proposal down overwhelmingly. Students also run the school's disciplinary board, with

staff support. Parents have often commented on how their child's attitude to education improved enormously after moving to the school, which is now heavily over-subscribed. The children also learn how to resolve conflicts with sensitivity to minority views. All schools should provide these opportunities, which by giving students the relevant skills will make them more likely to take part in civic life as adults.92

Education focused on co-operation can succeed even in the most difficult circumstances. The School for Peace workshops run by the remarkable bicultural village of Neve Shalom/Wahat Al-Salam have fostered understanding and friendship between Palestinian and Jewish adolescents from all over Israel. Having seen the peace and co-operation among the villagers, a young Palestinian man believed that peace could be possible between the Palestinians and the Jews. A Palestinian girl said that despite 'having been taught all my life' that Jews were intolerant oppressors, she realised having seen the Jewish and Palestinian facilitators working together respectfully that her previous view of the Jews was a stereotype based on unfamiliarity.93 The lessons of this unique programme should be applied in other areas of ethnic conflict.

References

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92   Interview with Dave Lehman, principal of the Ithaca Aternative Public High School, Ithaca, New York (Centre for Living Democracy, RR1 Black Fox Road, Brattleboro, VT 05301, USA, n.d., c. 1994); Nathan Teske, Political Activists in America: the Identity Construction Mode of Political Participation (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 140
93   Grace Feuerverger, Oasis of Dreams: Teaching and Learning Peace in a Jewish-Palestinian Village in Israel (RoutledgeFalmer, 2001), 110, 153

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