Building Student Leadership

Summary: Building student leadership is a goal most teachers have, as it enhances student's lives both inside and outside the classroom. In an article for *Education Week: Teacher*, veteran teacher and author Larry Ferlazzo discusses research-based best practices for helping students realize their potential as leaders.

Practical Applications

The article explains several best practices teachers can employ, including:

- Develop student "power" or agency – there are several ways to make students feel more empowered about their own learning, including:
    - Use differentiation strategies that let students choose how to learn in a way that aligns with their interests and needs
    - Teach students *how* to learn by putting the onus on them; this means not always giving them the answer but instead having students derive the answers, identify patterns, categorize information, etc.
    - Build students' "relational power" by using cooperative learning and having a participatory democracy (letting students have a say in how the class is run) when appropriate. Teachers might even consider letting students take a stab at grading their own work (with the teacher having final say, of course)
- "Explore the stories of leaders" – research has shown that when students read and discuss stories (fiction or nonfiction) about people who demonstrate leadership traits, their own empathy and leadership behavior increases
- Teach others – give students opportunities to move into teaching roles, which forces them to practice leadership skills as well as perform a high-order learning task. There are many 'student-as-teacher' types of strategies a teacher can use, including having small groups teach other small groups, Jigsaw activities, etc. The author says that during cooperative learning activities, he tries to "identify unofficial 'leaders' for each group and have a private conversation before the lesson and 'de-briefings' afterward with them."
- Take action on community issues – this means helping students find an issue that is relevant to them and then using it at as learning opportunity (the author gives a personal example of his students interviewing community members to identify key issues such as a lack of jobs, and then came up with an action plan that involved convening a gathering at the school to discuss job training programs).

Conclusion and Citation

Student leadership is something that has to be cultivated deliberately. If done well, students will not only enhance their academic performance, but will be set up to succeed in other areas of life as well.

Ferlazzo, L. "Cultivating Student Leadership." *Education Week: Teacher* (Feb. 2012), http://bit.ly/GVU2W7 (subscription only).