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During my time as a teacher of English in the UK I began developing my own theory about learning which was at the heart of what I would later term 'Participation'. Secondary schools were inimical places where pupils were herded from one part of the building to another in pursuit of the chopped up logic of a 19th century curriculum. My departmental colleagues and I wanted to make the experience of learning English more meaningful. We would talk about student centred learning and how to make mixed ability education work to the advantage of all pupils. This was the beginning of my understanding of what I would later term 'Participation.' For students to have a meaningful experience where each individual achieved their full potential, they needed to be partners in their own learning. Classroom management was something students could have control of. The only stipulation was that male and female students should work together. This was initially imposed but



later came to be an integral part of the holistic experience. Pupils thrived in an environment where learning, far from being a competition, was, in fact, a co-operative endeavour, one where they could help each other to achieve. I became a facilitator and was a hundred times more useful in that role than as a chalker/talker. In this atmosphere where learning was an exploration, pupils discovered a love of language and literature and their

confidence in their own ability grew by leaps and bounds. I well remember sonnets written by 15 year olds written in perfect iambic pentameter following a Shakespearian rhyming pattern. Our exam results reflected how much more confident these learners were. In point of fact they shot up through the roof.

It is giving young people the opportunity to engage with their own development that is at the heart of participation. Too much of a young person's life is spent in having things done to them rather than in being an active participant. Participation is not about 'giving power to the kids'. It is about giving them responsibility, allowing them to have a voice and to have an active role in the groups and organisations they take part in. When young people in care are given the chance to speak about their own experiences and to use the resulting insights to speak and act on behalf of other young people in care, they become more centred, articulate and confident, acquiring skills that are transferable to other settings.

Gramsci wrote of the potential of workers to be 'organic intellectuals.' Pupils in schools who take part in participation models like Learn to Lead are transformed by the experience of being active in developing the whole school community. Participation places young people at the centre of their own narratives. It values them as citizens not just of tomorrow but of today.

