

Teachers' Experience in Enhancing Students' Civic Participation in the Sultanate of Oman

Badar Al Kharusi and Bill Atweh
Curtin University of Technology

Civic participation is a main focus of the educational reform plan introduced in the Sultanate of Oman in 1998. This paper reports on a segment of the data from a project that aimed to investigate the implementation of the reform as it relates to the development of civic participation in students. Using the experiences of eight teachers of Social Studies and Life Skills subjects, we explore factors that enhance or inhibit the development of civic participation among their students. The data arose from semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. This investigation shows that recent educational reform does provide varied opportunities to promote civic participation; nevertheless, it raises some difficulties facing teachers to achieve the desired outcomes.

Preparing students to be active members of their society is a core concern for many educational systems around the world. A concern about the steady increase in students' disengagement has become a global concern. Many studies show that an unwillingness to participate in public life is a common phenomenon with young people (Planty, Bozick & Regnier, 2006; Fjeldstad, Mikkelsen, 2003; Haste & Hogan, 2006). This presents new challenges to the role of schools in enhancing students' engagement and their civic participation. In particular, enhancing participation at the national and international level is one of the main goals of the United Nation's decade for human rights education (United Nation, 1997). Similarly, in 1997, the European Union introduced a special program, 'Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights', to increase student participation in public life (Council of Europe). A similar program to was developed by the Australian government in 1997 called 'Discovering Democracy' (Department of Education). Further, educational reform in many nations has drawn attention to the important role of schools in enhancing civic participation among students (Hyman, 2002; Johnson, Johnson-Pynn & Pynn, 2007; Keer, 1999; Tutiaux-Guillon, 2002).

Civic participation is a main focus of the educational reform plan, Basic Education schools¹, introduced in the Sultanate of Oman in 1998. This paper reports on a segment of the data from a project that aimed to investigate the implementation of the reform as it relates to the development of civic participation in students. Using the experiences of eight teachers of Social Studies and Life Skills subjects, we explore factors that enhance or inhibit the development of civic participation among their students. The data arose from semi- structured interviews and classroom observations. This investigation shows that recent educational reform does provide varied opportunities to promote civic participation; nevertheless, it raises some difficulties facing teachers to achieve the desired outcomes.

¹ Basic Education schools and educational reform plan will be used exchangeable to reflect same thing.

1. Schools and Civic Participation

In the educational literature, the concept of civic participation has been used to reflect a range of different understandings. For instance, Adler and Goggin (2005) examine different definitions of this concept, and they suggest that civic participation “describes how an active citizen participates in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community’s future” (p.241). Youniss, Christmas-Best, Diversi, McLaughlin and Silbereisen(2002) state that this concept includes “knowledge of government structure and functions; attitudes towards proper political behaviour; and behaviour itself, such as voting, commitment to society, and, of late a host of actions that comprise participation in civil society” (p.124). For other authors (Dudley & Gitelson, 2002; George & Jon, 1994; Niemi, Hepburn & Chapman, 2000) civic participation may be demonstrated by students’ willingness to vote in their school council elections and their disposition towards different features of civic engagements in their society, such as raising donations and volunteering for social action groups.

Schools have an important responsibility to provide a constructive learning environment to enable students to develop positive experiences and attitudes towards participating in different aspects of civic life (Lopez et al., 2006). In a previous context, Al Kharusi and Atweh (2008) conceptualised the role of schooling and developing civic participation in terms of two interacting dimensions. The first dimension consists of the location of responsibility/action (formal curriculum, extracurricular activities or the learning environment itself), while the second dimension consists of the desired outcomes (student knowledge, skill and disposition). In the following paragraphs we will elaborate on each dimension in turn.

Location of responsibility/action

Formal curricula, extracurricular and the learning environment are three main areas in school life in which students can develop their civic participation. Here we argue that these three areas of the schooling system need to be planned carefully to ensure productive civic participation practices.

Formal Curriculum: Many researchers emphasize the important role of formal curricula to create the required learning environment for promoting a higher level of civic participation among learners (Delli Carpini, 2000; Dobozy, 2004; Walker, 2002; Youniss, McLellan & Yates, 1997). Kerr (2003) indicates the importance of formal curriculum in the United Kingdom ensuring that schools serve this essential purpose in a reliable way. In the same way, McConnell (2007) suggests that American schools should introduce civic education as a core subject in order to overcome the ongoing decline in civic participation among young adults. This view is also supported by Print (2007), who confirms that Australian schools need to place more attention on formal curriculum to deal with negative attitudes amongst students towards engagement in different aspects of civic life.

The curricular focus on developing civic participation can be achieved through both specialised school subjects and a special focus in all subjects. For example, the Educational Reform in Oman identifies two school subjects that have the potential to contribute directly to equipping students with the necessary knowledge and skills for healthy civic life: Social Studies and Life Skills. The compulsory subject of Social Studies is designed to provide students with the essential knowledge about governmental structures and the nature of political, economic and social institutions in society. Life Skills is another important

opportunity to enhance civic participation through the curriculum, focussing on the necessary skills that students need in their daily life and improving students' ability in communications skills. Similarly, the reform plan emphasises the role of other subjects to expand students' knowledge and skills needed for their civic life. This approach to developing citizenship across the curriculum is in harmony with many studies that confirm the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to teaching citizenship education (Avard, 2006; Roth, 1992; Vatter, 1994).

Extracurricular: Extracurricular activities in school can provide students with a positive environment and better opportunities for encouraging their involvement in schools and communities. This vision is in harmony with many studies that identify the vital role of extracurricular activities in providing a positive context for teaching civic education and enhancing civic participation practices (Handle, 2002; Perliger, Canetti-Nisim & Pedahzur, 2006; Pitiyanuwat & Sujiva, 2001; Torney-Purta, 2002; Torney-Purta & Richardson, 2002). Fredricks and Eccles (2006) found that students involved in extracurricular activities are more likely to engage in out of school civic life. Several authors have pointed out the important role of activities such as student government, academic clubs, sports and school ground tidiness in enabling students to participate in activities for the common good (Billig, 2000, Dávila & Mora, 2007; Meisel, 2007; Morgan & Streb, 2001; Walker, 2002; Youniss & McLellan, 1997). In order to create a rich, flexible and attractive learning environment, Basic Education in Oman gives special attention to the extra-curriculum. Many committees and clubs have been established to encourage students to participate actively in the school system. The “*Educational Activities Guidance*” published by the Ministry of Education (2003) lists more than twenty types of activities planned to enrich the learning environment and to provide a wider space for students to express their interests and strengthen their learning experiences.

Learning environment: Finally, constructing and maintaining a positive learning environment at the classroom level is another key approach to developing civic participation within a learners' community. It is felt that educators should encourage openness in the classroom environment, so students can express their ideas, opinions and dispositions in a free atmosphere (Campbell, 2005; Homana, Barber & Torney-Purta, 2005; Torney-Purta, Amadeo & Pilotti, 2004). The Omani reform places a priority on pedagogies that enhance a positive classroom environment that is consistent with civic participation. Teachers are encouraged to abandon using traditional approaches to teaching based on memorising and drills and practicing which has dominated the schooling system in Oman. Teachers are encouraged to design learning environments that are more child centred, such as co-operation learning, peer work, field work, inquiry, active dialogue and discussions. This focus is parallel to evidence from previous studies which indicate that classroom characteristics could play a crucial role in advancing students' civic development. Homana, Barber and Torney-Purta (2005) argue that the school and classroom climate is an “often neglected dimension of civic learning” (p.1).

Desired outcomes

Developing civic participation consists of developing the knowledge, skills and disposition required for active citizen participation. While many authors in the literature have focused on some of the components of this triad, few elucidate them explicitly. Torney-Purta and Lopez (2004) propose detailed proposals to develop different components of citizenship education from kindergarten to grade 12. They describe how schools might develop knowledge, skills and dispositions in order to encourage citizens' active engagement in their society. Kirlin

(2007) presents an alternative model for teaching civic education. This model aims at “combining knowledge and interest, intentionally developing civic skills and providing myriad opportunities to learn collective decision making skills and values” (p.34).

Knowledge: Civic knowledge is a prerequisite for enabling informed, engaged and active citizens. Undoubtedly, students need to learn about government structures and the characteristics of civic life in the society. Furthermore, learners should be informed about the nature of political, economic and social institutions in their society. They need to be aware about their home country’s history, constitution, legal system, and their rights and responsibilities. Also they need to learn about Non Government Organisations (NGOs) and their role to enrich civic development of any society and to be aware of the different current affairs in their communities.

Civic knowledge enables individuals to make their decisions based on valid and sufficient information linked to their societies’ practices and belief systems. Also, the global dimension of civic knowledge is very important. In her argument about the role of civic education, Branson (1998) affirms the importance of this global view in our increasingly interconnected world. Learners need to be aware of the relationships which drive different nations to cooperate and interact on global issues. Undoubtedly, there is room for an increased focus on this aspect of citizenship education in the literature and in school practices.

Skills: Civic skills are the second component regarding the role of education in enabling civic participation. They relate to the individual’s ability to take action in different local or global contexts, based on their civic knowledge discussed above. Kirlin (2007) defines civic skills as a set of capacities “required to act politically and participate in one’s community” (p.5). The author categorizes civic skills into four themes: communication, organizational, collective decision making and critical thinking. Similarly, Patric (2002) identifies other civic skills related to the core issues of general education in the United States of America. He states that cognitive skills and participatory skills are the main requirements of developing active citizenship. In the cognitive skills area, students need to learn how to “identify, describe, organize, interpret, explain and evaluate information and ideas in order to make sense of their political and civic experiences” (p.8). He argues that these skills are essential to enable students to defend their positions, to think critically, and to constructively regard different components of civic life. Also, good citizen need to develop the skills of working individually or with others to enhance the welfare of the community.

Disposition: Finally, civic disposition is a fundamental factor in civic participation. Branson and Quigley (1998) explain that civic disposition refers to the citizen’s commitment to ensure the welfare and common good of their society. Similarly, Vontz, Metcalf and Patrick (2000) identify civic disposition as those “traits of public and private characters that enable one to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship” (p.25). According to these researchers, civic participation practices should be organised to develop values such as independence, respecting the opinions and rights of others, a commitment to participating in public events, an interest in helping to solve community problems, and being thoughtful about public issues.

This paper will report on each of the above dimensions of civic participation based on the experience of eight teachers who are teaching Social Studies and Life Skills subjects at Basic Education schools in Oman. However, prior to an analysis of the data, perhaps it is useful to outline the overall context of the study by discussing the educational development of recent reforms in Oman.

2. The context of Oman

The educational system in Oman has undergone significant changes over the last few decades. In 1970, only 909 students had the chance to study in only three schools across the whole country. Since that time, the educational system has expanded dramatically pursuant to political development, and to a significant increase in government investment in educational infrastructure. In 1998, Oman started an ambitious plan to improve the quality of education. To begin with, this plan took place in only 17 schools called Basic Education schools; however, in 2008, more than 62% of Omani government schools implemented the new form of education (Ministry of Education, 2008). In order to improve all elements of the education scene, Basic Education schools designed to exhibit comprehensive development of education scene in Oman. The reform plan was designed to improve different the elements of the educational system such as the curriculum, extracurricular activities, the learning environment, teaching technology, assessment strategies, in-service training and redesigning school buildings. These changes aimed to provide a rich learning environment to prepare citizens for an active role in different aspects of civic life. This reform was a major part of a wider plan called “Vision for Oman’s Economy – Oman 2020”. The main purpose of this Plan is improving the country’s economic and social development (Ministry of Education, 2006).

Civic participation is a core issue in the recent education reform plan. According to the Philosophy and Objectives of Education in the Sultanate of Oman document (Ministry of Education, 2004), educational institutions in Oman should aim to on the one hand to develop a positive attitude among students towards active participation in public life, and on the other to participate actively in global issues, such as protecting the environment and maintaining a peaceful life in the global community. Similarly, the theoretical framework document of Basic Education states that the new form of education places a very high value on enhancing learner ability to develop:

- Life skills through communication
- Self learning
- Scientific and critical thinking
- The ability to understand contemporary science and technology, as well the ability to adapt to innovation
- The ability to deal rationally with problems of the present era: conservation and wise exploitation of the environment
- The ability to internalize the values and ethics of a mastery of work, production, sensible use of leisure time, and participation in civil life. (Ministry of Education, 2001, p.9)

3. Methodology:

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory study is to determine the perceived state of civic participation as seen by participating teachers in four Basic Education schools in the Sultanate of Oman. The respondents in this enquiry were eight teachers teaching Social Studies and Life Skills subjects in Grade 10. The data sources were semi-structured individual teachers’ interviews and seventeen classroom observations of their teaching. In the interviews teachers were asked about their experiences and views on civic participation

opportunities in their schools, the difficulties that might restrict their attempts in enhancing civic participation among learners, and their strategies to actively involve students at both the formal and informal curriculum level. The classroom observations focused on teachers' practices and the overall learning environment inside classrooms such as teaching techniques, openness and communication styles between teacher and students, and among the students themselves. Further, assessing students' ability to work as one team and expressing their opinions were part of observation goals.

The respondents' teaching experience ranged from four months to twenty three years. Alwatan and Alsalam schools are single sex school. However, Alnoor and Algalal are mixed gender schools. The main characteristics of the teachers are described in dawn Table with pseudonyms used for both schools and teachers.

Table: 1
Participant teaching backgrounds

Teacher	School Name	Teaching experience in years	Teaching in Basic Education	Gender	Teaching field
Reem	Alwatan	10	5	Female	Social Studies
Zayanah	Alwatan	6	5	Female	Life Skills
Salim	Alsalam	5	2	Male	Social Studies
Nasir	Alsalam	4 months	4months	Male	Life skills
Sameerah	Alnoor	23	8	Female	Social Studies
Eiman	Alnoor	9	5	Female	Life skills
Samiah	Algalal	5	5	Female	Social Studies
Salmah	Algalal	19	3	Female	Life Skills

4. Findings and discussion:

The set of data was analysed using NVivo-8 software. Transcripts were coded and categories included in three main themes with sub-themes. In this paper we will discuss three of these main arising themes: curricular, extracurricular and classroom environment.

Curricular: When asked how the curricula they teach enhances civic participation, the teachers gave many examples of topics and activities from the adopted textbooks that relate to developing civic awareness among students. There were obvious agreements between the respondents that the curricula they teach linked regularly to local and global issues. They were also satisfied about the comprehensive presentation of topics needed by the students to develop as active and knowledgeable citizens in the future.

For example, the Social Studies teachers stated that students learn about topics essential for civic development. These topics include the Basic Law of the State (which plays a similar role to a constitution in some countries), environmental problems and their effect on human life, the global economy and respecting the independency and identity of other nations. Samiah, a Social Studies teacher, stated "*The main concern of this subject is the society, and therefore, its main focus is about introducing issues related to local or global community....The content is so helpful that teachers can easily connect students to their surrounding society*".

Similarly, Life Skills teachers were also satisfied about the goals and objectives of this subject. This subject was introduced in the educational system in Oman only in 1998 when

the reform plan was implemented for the first time. For all Life skills' teachers, the content is directly related to developing knowledge and skills needed by any individual to be active in their society. Zayanah said *"It is mainly about the society, students learn about parliamentary life in the country, and how they can participate in such aspects of civic life, they learn about voluntary work, and how they can become members in Non government organizations"*.

Furthermore, some respondents indicated that improving civic efficiency among students is also supported by other subjects. For example, Samiah stated that many topics in Islamic Studies also focus on some aspects of civic life. When Salmah asked if other subjects support Life Skills subject aims, she replied: *"Sure I think all subjects, one way or another, support the civic developments among students...I noticed that last month, the Science teacher asked his students to collect some data from the people in the nearby village about the most common diseases among people in the village, I think such an assignment supports the outcomes of my subjects"*.

Nevertheless, some respondents suggested that they faced some problems in the positioning of civic topics in the curriculum. Firstly, some respondents noted that there was some overlap of topics between the two subjects Social Studies and Life Skills. In the main they saw this overlap as problematic. Secondly, there was a concern by two Social Studies teachers that the subject was overloaded by some unnecessary topics. As Reem mentioned in this regard *"instead of filling their mind [students] with needless knowledge, we need the time to give them the possibility to apply the knowledge in the real life"*. Worth noting here is that, in Oman, teachers follow closely standardized textbooks and such a point of view as expressed here intimate the need to provide teachers with a more flexible framework to achieve their subjects' objectives. While standardized textbooks could provide useful source of ideas and activities, teachers need to use their creativity to enrich these sources and choose what suits the diverse learning needs of their students. Zayanah explained her dilemma with teaching Life Skills subject by saying *"Some times in cycle two [years 5 to 10], the dedicated time to teach all topics is not enough"*.

Thirdly, there were concerns about some teachers' ability and interest in dealing with civic topic in the curriculum. The Life Skills subject does not exist as an independent professional major at any of the teacher education colleges in Oman. Hence there are no specially trained teachers to teach this subject. Schools usually nominate teachers from different disciplines to teach Life Skills. Although some respondents acknowledged that their own previous life experience helped them to teach this subject, this was not the case with Nasir. He graduated from the Faculty of Education as an Islamic Studies teacher, and after two years of waiting for a school placement he was offered a position to teach the Life Skills subject. Before starting teaching this subject, he was offered two weeks of training about the aims and teaching methods in the subject. Nevertheless, he explains his experience in teaching this subject by saying *"It is an interesting subject[Life Skills], but all knowledge and teaching skills I come across in my first degree was about teaching Islamic Studies.....I should say that teaching this subject is challenging and difficult sometime"*.

Extracurricular

All schools studied had well developed extracurricular activities in which students participated. The majority of the respondents expressed an agreement that such activities were a crucial part of the school environment that was able to contribute to the development of civic participation in students. All respondents except Nasir and Salim were involved in

supervising one extracurricular activity. Although the respondents mentioned a variety of organised groups and activities that ran in their school, they emphasised the important role of activities such as student government, public service, school radio², scouts, theatre and participating in general cleaning and the tidying up of the school. Salmah is the coordinator for extracurricular activities in her school. She believed strongly in the important role of these activities in raising learners with positive attitudes towards involvement in their society. She said *“I am always looking at these activities as key element in the learning environment because it is essential for developing students’ personality. If you look at the public service activities, you will find them as important scope linking the students to their surrounding society. Sometimes they do some cleaning and in other occasions raising donations for people in need. . [Also] school government is crucial [because] it helps to develop leadership skills, and I noticed that this activity in particular becomes more popular among students’ year after year”*.

However, this view is not universally held by the respondents. For example, Salim believed that the students’ attitudes in participating in these activities undermined their benefits. *“They use extracurricular activities to waste the time [from studies]- they are not serious enough when it comes to carry out what they should achieve within these activities”*. Also, some teachers were critical of the way these activities are presented in their schools. Most of them commented that the dedicated time to practice these activities was not sufficient. For Zayanah, these activities could not achieve their purposes precisely because there was *“only one period in a week [devoted to these activities] and the time of this period is taken by cutting five minutes from other periods in the school day. ... surely this is not enough time”*. Furthermore, some respondents argued that supervising these activities is regarded as an extra load on the teachers and that the teachers who are managing these extracurricular activities should be compensated by a reduced teaching load. Further, Salim wasn’t satisfied with the way of managing these activities in the school *“I am a Social Studies teacher, is it reasonable to be asked to supervise the health committee? I believe that self-interest and expertise of the teacher are very important to run these activities effectively”*.

On the other hand, there was a unanimous acknowledgment that all students should be given the freedom to choose their preferred activity. It seems that in practice; however, this is not always the case. For example, Samiah stated that, in her school, only students with good academic achievements are actively involved in extracurricular activities. She argued that teachers need to encourage students with poor academic achievement to take an active part in these important school spaces. *“Some teachers criticize giving the opportunity for students with low academic achievement in the school radio at morning assembly because their performance is always below the standard Frankly speaking even myself when it was the turn of school government group³ to run the school radio, I only choose the good students because I did not need to spend lots of time in training them”*.

Classroom environment

A teachers’ way of structuring the learning environment in the classroom is vital to ensuring positive civic development among learners. In other words, the classroom environment serves as a hidden curriculum that can model good or poor participatory practices. In addition to the

² In Oman, the main task of this club is addressing different topics at the morning school assembly

³ Samiah’s school is setting timetable to ensure that each classroom and club get the opportunity to run school radio at the morning assembly.

interviews with teachers, this study included classroom observations. Cooperative learning, dialogue, lecture and discussions were the main methods observed as teaching techniques used by teachers observed. Group work dominated the teaching methods employed by this group of teachers. While some teachers elaborate high ability of employing group work in their classes, others demonstrated a lack of expertise in using such teaching strategy. For example, in all periods of Salim's classroom his way using group work was poor and unsystematic. In one session, he asked the students to group in fives. However, he didn't provide them with any group work activity for the whole of the lesson. When asked about his opinion on group work in the class, he replied "*I don't like this way of teaching because it encourages chaos in the classroom*". Likewise, Sameerah asked her students to work as groups to find out the negative impacts of cutting jungle trees. However, at the conclusion of the lesson she asked individual students to report on their findings with no attempt to engage the groups that were working together. In contrast, Reem and Zayanah showed a strong ability of using group work effectively in their classes. For example, when Reem asked her students to find out the negative impacts of urbanization, her way of running this group task was well planned and clearly encouraged cooperation between students. First she asked them to think about this question individually, and then share their thoughts in their groups. Finally, she gave each group representative the opportunity to share the group's ideas with other students in the class.

Furthermore, some teachers used creative ways of teaching to encourage knowledge, skills and the disposition needed for civic participation. For example, when Zayanah's class observed a Life Skills teacher, she was teaching about Majlis Alsura, (a body of government that serves a similar function to a Parliament in many countries). Significantly, her way of teaching this topic was to model the functioning of the Majlis in class. She started her class by simulating elections to this body. She encouraged the girls to nominate themselves as candidates and to seek election as members of the Majlis Alsura from the whole class. Then girls were asked to talk to the whole class about their qualifications, and what they plan to achieve if they were elected. Later, the teacher asked for volunteers to handle the election process which included counting of votes and announcing the results. Each girl in the class chose her preferred candidate in a secret ballot. They departed their desks one after another and put their own form in the election box. When the result was announced, the girl who lost the election congratulated the winner.

Moreover, some other teachers were using current affairs in their teaching practices. Nevertheless, Life Skills teachers were more frequently mentioning social issues that attract considerable attention in the Omani society such as car accidents, lack of access to higher education and the ongoing increase of the cost of living. According to Life Skills teachers, the nature of this subject gives them a great opportunity to link students regularly to different aspects of daily life. Supporting what Zayaanah said about Life Skills subjects previously, Nassir said "*Life Skills subject draw regular attention to local and global issues, for example, recently we were focusing on the inflation at local and global market....also we discussed the lack of job opportunities and how Omani youth could overcome this problem*".

In addition, there were elements of positive interactions and a sense of respect between teachers and students in most classes observed. Teachers had a habit of calling students by their names and rewarding them verbally. These sorts of teaching behaviours articulate closeness and positive relationships between teachers and their students. Also, some teachers were giving regular opportunities for students to answer questions or to be part of facilitating the learning situations. In addition, interactions between students working in the same group or between different work groups in the class were mostly supportive. When Salmah, a Life Skills teacher, asked her students to express their opinion about the higher education opportunities in the state, Students' suggestions and comments reflected a sense of respect.

They were using terms such as agree or disagree when they were commenting on their colleagues' opinions. However, this was not always the case; in Salims' class, for example, there were some disorder problems that occurred from times to time. In this class, there were some students who were unwilling to take responsibility and on one occasion were unwilling to interact with peers. It was noticeable that teachers with high level of classroom management skills were more able to maintain and create a supportive classroom environment for all students. Such skills appear to be critical to establishing a positive space to develop civic efficacy among learners.

On the other hand, teachers often didn't draw enough attention to encouraging students to express their opinions when they come across some current affair or a controversial issue. For example, one female student at Sameerah's class raised the issue that local society should draw more attention to the global warming issue. Although the first reaction of some female students in the class showed disagreement, the teacher moved on to another task without commenting on this opinion or even encouraging other students in the class to express their opinions. Also, there was not much attention in the classroom on the development of critical thinking. Only Salmah asked her students if the labour law in the state supported the basic rights of workers. While some teachers mentioned that they use this way of scientific investigation from time to time, Reem, a senior teacher of Social Studies, acknowledged that teachers are not drawing enough attention to critical thinking because "*there is lack of experience among teachers in employing such skill in their daily teaching*". Enhancing students' ability to express their opinions and to reflect critically are important tactics in developing confidence among learners.

5. Conclusion

This paper attempts to present the experience of eight teachers about factors that enhance or inhibit their endeavours to promote civic participation among students. Teachers acknowledged that recent educational reform plan brings to the Omani students a better learning environment that is likely to develop civic participation. In the eyes of these teachers, Basic Education schools become more capable to develop the knowledge and skills essential for developing positive civic attitudes among learners. Also, it seems that teachers are comfortable in general with the space provided at the new schooling system to enhance students' engagement in the public affairs.

However, the teachers raised many difficulties which need to be addressed in order to improve recent educational practices towards enhancing civic participation. For teachers, the contents of textbooks should be organized to reflect a sense of integration and cohesion. Furthermore, the teaching load is a serious issue effecting negatively the well implementation of extracurricular activities in these schools. The structure of the extracurricular component in Basic Education schools needs to be reviewed, especially in terms of timing and management responsibility. While civic participation requires good educational policies, skilled teachers are key elements to put any theory in practice. Widening teachers' ability to create constructive learning environment inside classroom and within the school is an important factor to enhance civic participation among students. Teachers need to be trained how to employ available spaces efficiently in order to support desirable knowledge, skills and dispositions, as cited in the literature (Branson & Quigley, 1998; Kirline, 2007; Patric, 2002; Torney-Purta & Vermeer, 2004; Vontz, Metcalf & Patrick, 2000). In this regard, in-service training needs to place more attention upon not only strengthening teachers' skills inside classrooms, but also encouraging them to incorporate extracurricular activities in their attempts to address different aspects of civic participation issues. Finally, pre-service institutions are another key player in this regard.

Although this study was a small scale exploratory investigation, it is hoped that these preliminary findings will contribute to enriching the ongoing educational reform in Oman, and to help other researchers to identify some variables for further study related to civic participation and educational systems in this part of the world.

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