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INTRODUCTION

The material in this book is based on the concept of class meetings as outlined by Dr. William Glasser in his book *Schools without Failure*.

The authors have used this approach extensively in their own schools where class discussions are an integral part of the curriculum and used regularly by all staff members. Two schools which are known to successfully use them in this way are Gowrie Primary School and Latham Primary School in the A.C.T.

Many teachers working in schools where class discussions are not a formal part of the curriculum use them successfully in their own classrooms. School teachers also use them effectively in their particular faculty area and for problem solving. Interest in this strategy is growing rapidly and the authors are consistently asked to conduct workshops or class discussions.



Chapter 1

WHAT ARE CLASS DISCUSSIONS?

Many teachers have been conducting “class meetings” for a number of years and will see distinct similarities with what they have been doing and what is being described in this book. However it is true to say that a large number of those teachers have not realised the full potential of this strategy, often using it only as a forum for solving problems.

So what is it we are talking about? In our view —

Class discussions provide students in a particular class or group with an opportunity to talk and think together.

This is a very simple definition but captures the essence of the strategy. It can be expanded in the following way to include an indication of the purposes of class discussions —

They provide an opportunity for students to freely discuss open ended topics; to voice an opinion; to be heard; to respond thoughtfully to the ideas of others; and to solve problems through thoughtful discussion.

It is important to note that —

Class discussions differ from normal conversation in that they have a specific form and they usually have a specific goal

❖ Class Discussions

such as the development of communication skills, or to encourage thinking/debating skills.

The chapter outlining the place of class discussions in the curriculum will show that there can be many and varied goals and they will often be in much more specific terms than those indicated above.

A second important point to note is that although class discussions have a specific form they are not formal meetings —

Class discussions do not have a chairperson or a secretary, nor do they have an agenda or minutes.

There should, of course, be a place in the curriculum for the training of students in the use of formal meeting procedures but this activity should not be confused with the type of class discussions being discussed here.

The concept of class meetings, class discussions or group discussions has been promoted for many years by Glasser¹ and Dreikurs, Grumwald and Pepper². Although the authors have chosen different labels, their writings describe similar activity. Classroom teachers who have used these ideas consistently, attest to the success of this approach in the area of learning and teaching, and as a tool in the student management process in primary schools. Common comments include “the students have learnt to respect the ideas of others through class discussions”; “students have learnt to clarify their thinking before speaking”; “class discussions are wonderful for discovering how much the students have learnt”; and “it is so easy to solve problems using class discussions”.

Similar success in secondary schools is documented by Chance and Chance.³ In speaking of the first class discussion of the year they state, “It was obvious that students always left these first meetings excited and stimulated”; “so many parents indicated the impact of that first class meeting was substantial”; “one could not help but be amazed and proud of the students’ ability to contribute suggestions for improvement without personal attack” and “many ideas were exchanged, and the students left that day a little more involved with each other and with a feeling of power which comes from self-evaluation.”

¹ Glasser, William — “Schools without Failure” — 1969

² Dreikers, Grumwald and Pepper — “Maintaining Sanity in the Classroom” — 1971

³ Chance, Edward W. and Patti L. — “Class Meetings: Fulfilling Students’ Pathway to Power”
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