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Bridging the Disconnect

Representative Decision-Making in Education and Healthcare

In today's society, education and healthcare are two critical sectors that have a significant impact on people's lives and futures. These complex fields, which are heavily regulated and influenced by numerous stakeholders, frequently see decisions made by individuals disconnected from the actual processes. Such an approach frequently ignores the tangible real-world consequences and complexities of the people directly impacted by these decisions, resulting in unfavorable outcomes. The gap between policymakers and those on the ground is growing, particularly in the field of education, where students - the primary stakeholders - are rarely if ever included in decision-making. Similarly, decisions in healthcare are frequently made without taking into account the patients' experiences or perspectives, or even the advice of actual medical professionals. This research paper, therefore, aims to investigate the impact of representative decision-making in education and healthcare and to explore potential strategies to bridge the disconnect. By illuminating this issue, this paper aims to foster a dialogue that encourages more inclusive, empathetic, and efficient decision-making processes within these vital sectors.

Schools

Educational institutions are highly regulated and structured organizations governed at multiple levels. Federal and state laws, as well as district and individual school policies, all play an important role in school management. Despite the presence of this regulatory framework, there is frequently a lack of coordination and collaboration among legislators, administrators,

teachers, and students, resulting in a significant disconnect within the system. This disconnect is particularly noticeable in the absence of student participation in decision-making processes.

According to the National School Boards Association, in February of 2021, “Among the 495 U.S. Largest School Districts, only 14% Have Student Board Members.” Although this statistic is many years old now, the data shows that this problem has persisted, and conseration about this representation even gotten worse. An article from Education Next from March of 2023 quotes Traci Spiegel, a plaintiff in the case with Maryland’s Howard County school board challenging student members’ ability to cast votes saying “When you’re 17, you are incredibly idealistic. You don’t pay taxes, you would choose to eat pizza every night for dinner, you would drive your friends around at 3 a.m. How in the world can you make the same decisions as adult members?” But this viewpoint neglects to recognize how the majority of individuals on school boards, have not been involved in the education system for decades, if ever.

Although a few school boards have student representatives, according to Education Week in the article “Few Student Board Members Can Vote. Should That Change?”, very few are able to vote in any of the policies they review. The article goes on the point out the deteriments of that article, in particular as Ananya Tadikonda, a 2018-19 student board member for Montgomery County says, “We are the one member of the board that feels the direct impact of change, of every program, and every policy,”(Sawchuk). This lack of student involvement is problematic, as it can lead to policies that are not reflective of the needs and perspectives of students, ultimately resulting in a suboptimal learning environment. More specifically, “The Relationship Between Student Voice and Student Engagement in Urban High Schools” written by Jerusha Conner et, al states that if students feel they have a voice, they are more likely to feel connected and cultivate a healthier school environment and can ultimately improve academic performance.

To better understand the implications of this issue, this section will analyze two policies that demonstrate how the disconnect between lawmakers, administrators, teachers, and students can lead to unhelpful outcomes. The first at the federal or state level, where lawmakers often make decisions that have far-reaching effects on schools across the country, and the second policy implemented at the individual district or school level, where administrators and teachers have more autonomy in decision-making. Through this analysis, it becomes clear lack of student involvement in decision-making at all levels of governance can lead to negative consequences for the educational system as a whole.

Truancy Laws

One example of a policy that was put into place in pursuit of student success, but unfortunately failed, is truancy laws. These laws are in place to ensure that students attend school regularly through negative consequences, specifically aimed at parental figures, often leading to more harm than good. According to The New Republic, truancy is defined in Pennsylvania as more than three days of unexcused absence from school, after which parents can be fined \$300 per additional unexcused absence, in addition to court costs. They also state that, since 2000, more than 1,600 parents in Berks County, Pennsylvania, have been imprisoned for failing to pay truancy fines. When parents are unable to pay the fines, it often results in court fees, probation, and/or loss of custody. This punishment has proven to be too severe for many families, particularly those who are struggling financially. Additionally the New Republic reports on a case in which Eileen DiNino, a single mother of eight, was imprisoned for owing over \$2,000 in fines and fees related to the truancy of her two sons. DiNino died in her cell due to a lack of medication for her health issues while incarcerated. (Goldstein) This result is surely much more detrimental than the possibility of increased attendance in schools, and shows that when

law-makers create rules surrounding delicate situations without feedback from citizens, they disregard the intricacies of real-world scenarios that they couldn't have foreseen.

Eileen DiNino's story is only a sole example of the serious consequences that can result from decisions made by removed individuals, such as legislators, without taking into account the personal experiences of those affected by their policies. In numerous instances, truancy laws, intended to improve student success, have unfortunately resulted in tragic deaths and family hardship as a result of fines and imprisonment. This case emphasizes the importance of hearing from those affected by policy decisions more frequently, and seriously considering potential consequences before enacting legislation. The broader educational system must prioritize empathy and awareness of real-world family situations more intentionally going forward, by striving to make decisions that take into account a broader range of student experiences.

Medicine Bans

The issue of drugs in schools is a complex and multifaceted one, with many different strategies and policies employed to address it. One such strategy is the use of holistic bans, or heavy regulation protocols on drugs, which aim to reduce the availability of medication in schools and discourage use among students. Turning to the example of Longview School District, which prohibits the possession of any drugs on campus except if held by school nurses, and the only way to obtain access to medication, is through a lengthy process of obtaining parent permission ("Policy & Procedure Posts - Longview School District"). Although this concept sounds like a promising practice, these protocols can have unintended consequences, such as limiting the access to pain relief for students with chronic pain or medical conditions.

What school officials fail to consider in these decisions is the impact of bans on people who rely on prescription medication for chronic illnesses as well as those who regularly use

over-the-counter pain relievers like ibuprofen or aspirin. Because only students with parents who can take breaks to travel to school can obtain medication, the policy disproportionately affects low-income families. Even breaking the rule for the sake of self-preservation is a luxury for the upper-middle class, given that 47% of Mark Morris High School students qualify for free or reduced lunch (“Mark Morris High School (2023 Ranking) - Longview, WA”). This rule alone shows that the experiences of students can not be accurately represented or understood by those who do not share these experiences.

This same idea is echoed in an additional challenge related to drugs in schools: the disconnect that can exist between decision-makers and those affected by the policies. Stepping away from an analysis of the population of students who are unable to obtain access, to those who are able to but through exploitation of the system, we can turn to an article from the New York Times, which details what actually happens when these insane rules are put into action. mother Lisa Belkin writes, “So, starting in middle school and into high school, I periodically slipped him a few Tylenol or Excedrin Migraine on his way out the door, to tuck in a pocket and swallow unobtrusively if needed.” Even in the comment section of the article you can see how these policies actually result. User “AngelaM” wrote, “We are smuggling these pills in pencil cases, lunch bags, ziplock bags in her jacket, whatever works at any given time. This policy of putting aspirin and mainlining heroin into the same category has made rule breakers out of all of us. And a student selling Xanax is nothing but a drug dealer and should be punished.” (Belkin) This final repercussion shows the stabiliazation and reversal of the initial intended effects, which treds into waters almost unrelated to education, bringing us to the impacts representative decision making can also have in healthcare.

Healthcare Policies

Healthcare is a crucial aspect of modern society, with decisions made in this field often having far-reaching consequences on people's lives. From policy makers and insurance companies to hospital administrators and medical professionals, various stakeholders are involved in healthcare decisions, each with their own goals, interests, and priorities. The complexities of healthcare decisions are compounded by the fact that they often involve intricate medical procedures, advanced technologies, and cutting-edge medications. In many cases, these decisions require a deep understanding of medical science, ethics, and patient care. “Engaging patients in decision-making and behavior change to promote prevention” by Alex H. Krist et al. states “Effectively engaging patients in their care is essential to improve health outcomes, improve satisfaction with the care experience, reduce costs, and even benefit the clinician experience.” showing that this concept can impact many unforeseen import aspects of healthcare as well.

Replant Pregnancies

With the extreme polarization and controversy surrounding abortion, and the overturn of Roe v. Wade recently, in the last few years there has been an influx of bills introduced, and laws implemented related to to abortion and birth control. However, much of this legislation has been presented too quickly to recognize extreme faults in the logic and relation to healthcare. According to The Guardian as of April 2019, the Ohio state legislature introduced a bill to ban abortion which would require doctors to "reimplant an ectopic pregnancy" into a woman's uterus, or face charges of abortion murder. What these legislators did not recognize, is this procedure simply does not exist. And these officials twice ignored this input from medical professionals who have defined it as impossible. Dr Chris Zahn, vice-president of practice activities at the

American College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists said, “It is not possible to move an ectopic pregnancy from a fallopian tube, or anywhere else it might have implanted, to the uterus.” (Glenza) Introducing a policy like this which has one, not consulted medical professionals at any point, and two, ignored medical advice even after it was supplied, is a practice that further encourages the disconnect between citizens and lawmakers. Knowing that these individuals really do not care for the individuals that these policies affect.

The Ohio state legislature's proposed bill requiring doctors to reimplant an ectopic pregnancy is a prime example of how decisions made by distant individuals can have negative consequences for society. This policy not only disregards medical advice and scientific evidence, but it also demonstrates a disregard for the well-being of those affected by it. Such policies exacerbate the schism between lawmakers and citizens, making it more difficult to enact meaningful change that is in the best interests of all parties involved. It is critical that decision-makers solicit input from experts in the relevant fields and consider the needs and perspectives of those who will be impacted by their decisions.

Lack of Empathy

Aside from federal and state policies, there is an additional layer of regulation that related to healthcare, and that is the places this healthcare is practiced. One example of a disconnect in hospitals and between healthcare providers and the patients themselves, are IUDs. Intrauterine devices (IUDs) are a popular type of reversible long-acting contraception that can provide protection for up to 12 years. However, for many people, especially those who have never given birth before, IUD insertion can be an extremely painful procedure. A study published in the journal of Contraception discovered that patients rated their maximum pain during IUD insertion significantly higher than the healthcare provider's ratings. The mean patient maximum pain was

64.8 mm compared to 35.3 mm rated by the provider, indicating that patient and provider agreement on the most painful time point of the procedure was weak. (Maguire et al.)

This lack of agreement highlights the potential consequences of a lack of painkillers for IUD insertion. Providers may underestimate the amount of pain that their patients are experiencing, leading to inadequate pain management. In turn, patients may feel unheard or invalidated in their pain, leading to negative experiences and reluctance to seek out healthcare in the future. By prioritizing pain management and empathetic decision-making during IUD insertion, healthcare providers can help to ensure that patients have positive experiences and are more likely to seek out healthcare in the future.

Ultimately, the lack of empathy highlighted in the IUD insertion study highlights the importance of considering the effects of decision making from distant individuals. When healthcare providers fail to prioritize patient experiences and validate their pain, it can have negative consequences, such as a decreased willingness to seek healthcare in the future. This is just one example of how distant individuals' decisions can have a significant impact on the well-being of others. To ensure positive outcomes for all parties involved, decision makers must prioritize empathy and consider the potential consequences of their actions.

The Common Ground Between Education and Healthcare

While education and healthcare may appear to be two distinct entities, they are inextricably linked in many ways, particularly when it comes to decision-making and the consequences for those who are directly affected. Previously we have looked in depth in the at how decisions made without adequate input from the people affected have had a negative impact in both sectors.

Despite their apparent differences, education and healthcare have one thing in common. In both fields, policies and decisions are frequently made by individuals who are disconnected from the realities on the ground. Without the necessary feedback from those directly involved, the consequences of these decisions can result in inefficiencies, disparities, and negative outcomes. This top-down decision-making approach has the potential to create a disconnect between policymakers and the realities of the people directly affected by their decisions, resulting in a systemic lack of understanding and empathy. This problem transcends education and healthcare, permeating all aspects of society. Nonetheless, the effects are most visible in these sectors, and the need for reform is most pressing. If left unchecked, decision-making disparities can widen the chasm between decision-makers and those impacted by their decisions, exacerbating social and economic inequities.

A Path Towards Resolution

In the following section of this paper, we will look at strategies for addressing this disparity in decision-making. We will discuss the significance of participatory decision-making, in which those affected by decisions have a say in shaping them. From expanding feedback channels in the educational and healthcare sectors to advocating for policy changes that encourage stakeholder participation, we will investigate solutions that can democratize decision-making while promoting equity, empathy, and effectiveness.

We will also look at how technology may help decision-making become more inclusive and the promise of data-driven strategies to guarantee decisions are well-researched, efficient, and responsible. We can begin to address these gaps and create institutions that really serve the interests of all by giving input to the people who are most directly touched by decisions made in

education and healthcare. Understanding the issue is the first step in bringing about change, and it is our hope that this paper can act as a starting point for that conversation.

More Representation

The first critical step in correcting the imbalances we currently observe in the healthcare and education sectors is to increase representation in the decision-making process. To do this, we must first recognize the distinctive perspectives and ideas that students, instructors, medical professionals, and patients may contribute. In the book, "American Grace," the writers point out how "diversity, in fact, has the potential for creating a richer, more creative society, provided it is managed in a way that respects all perspectives and values all voices" (Putnam and Campbell). Showing how this value can not only be beneficial in it of itself, but holistically as well.

Establishing regular town-hall meetings where students, teachers, parents, healthcare professionals, and patients can share their problems and ideas is one strategy to boost representation. A diverse group of stakeholders should be represented on advisory boards that are to be established by policymakers. Decision-makers can gain a deeper and more nuanced grasp of the problems at hand by using these boards as a regular forum for stakeholders to offer their perspectives. Additionally, using surveys and polls can be a useful approach to get input and assess opinion on a range of issues. To promote the most engagement, these tools should be created to capture a wide range of viewpoints and should be simple to use. Finally, maintaining diversity within the decision-makers themselves is another aspect of representation. In order to ensure that a wider range of viewpoints and experiences are considered when making choices, policymakers should strive to be more diversity in terms of race, gender, socio-economic background, and professional experience.

Integrating More Science

Integrating science into decision-making is more important than ever in a time when knowledge and technology are advancing rapidly. This is especially true in the domains of education and medicine, where using evidence-based methods can greatly improve results. The fields of cognitive science and educational psychology can shed light on how kids learn in the classroom. These findings should be used by decision-makers when developing policies or initiatives. For example, studies on the benefits of active learning could be used to improve teaching methods, or findings on the importance of socio-emotional learning could be used to shape school culture.

Integrating evidence-based methods is equally important in healthcare. When developing health policies or guidelines, policymakers should consider the most recent medical research and public health data. Furthermore, the application of health informatics - the interdisciplinary study of how health data is acquired, stored, and used - might result in more informed and impactful decisions.

Call to Action

The way to more transparent, productive, and compassionate decision-making in education and healthcare is clear: greater representation and a greater reliance on scientific evidence are required. We can make progress toward a more inclusive and successful system by providing individuals directly touched by policies a voice and using the best available research to influence these policies.

Recognizing this approach, however, is only the first step. To effect this change, all stakeholders - legislators, educators, healthcare experts, and the general public - must work together. We implore people in positions of authority to welcome additional voices into the room, to listen, and to act. We encourage those who are directly affected by these decisions to speak up,

participate, and demand a seat at the decision-making table. We can only develop a decision-making process that truly reflects the needs and viewpoints of all individuals by collective effort and commitment. Allow this paper to serve as a call to action, an invitation to rethink decision-making for a more inclusive, equitable, and successful future.

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