

The SAGE Handbook of Education for Citizenship and Democracy

Democratic Schools: Towards a Definition

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This analysis of school democracy, extensively rooted in UK-based research but drawing also on experience from Europe and across the globe, is obliged to begin by attempting a definition. Can a school be democratic? Some would assert that it cannot. In general, schools operate within a fairly rigid command structure. However heads/principals may choose to run their institutions, above them will be a hierarchy of governance and government which almost inevitably imposes a traditional line of authority and accountability. Indeed, heads have such considerable positional power because they are appointed by that hierarchy, however much consultation may have been involved in the process. Similar pressures operate on others: teachers in many countries feel beleaguered by the requirements of government-enforced examination and programmes of study. Thus Huddleston (2007: 6) finds in a survey of European member states:

The idea of school democracy does not as yet have universal acceptance within the teaching profession (Rowe 2003) and the ethos in schools in a number of countries is still often dominated by authoritarian power structures (Birzea et al 2004: 39). Opportunities for student participation are often perceived to be constrained by the requirements of nationally or regionally prescribed curricula and testing regimes and by the need that teachers and school leaders feel to moderate their principles in the light of parental and other external expectations.

Similarly, although Torney-Purta et al. (2001: 5) see the argument being won for the 'effectiveness of an open and participatory climate in promoting civic knowledge and engagement', they find that such an approach is 'by no means the norm in most countries.' Moreover, if externally imposed constraints provide a measure of justification for the perpetuation of autocratic leadership styles, Hahn (1984) identifies what she describes as 'self-righteous authoritarianism': those who work in schools will recognize that trait as far from being limited to the American setting of Hahn's study. Indeed, Huddleston adds as a European footnote: 'The All-European Study reported that in the Eastern and South-Eastern European regions the democratic school is 'not yet the prevalent model ... the dominant model continues to be an authoritarian-type governance and a rigid institutional background' (Birzea et al., 2004: 39).

So can this kind of organization have any hope of giving rise to democratic practice within individual institutions? In practice, and despite this widespread and persistent authoritarian tradition in schooling, schools do indeed function well as democracies, frequently in a highly developed state. As long ago as 1989, Polan (1989: 29) was describing school as the 'inevitable democracy': 'Despite impressions to the contrary, schools amount to some of the most advanced formal social institutions ... in terms of democracy, debate and participation.'

Certainly there is no simple definition of a democratic school, though a good starting point is Watts (1977: 129), writing about his experience of running a school that was - in UK education terms - democratic during the 1970s: '... a formal school in which teachers and school students have been able to enjoy an increase in dignity which results from their sense of determining, to a large extent, the conditions under which they work and grow.'

If they are involved in determining the conditions under which they work and grow, teachers and students are

inevitably participating in the democracy as it develops in the school. Huddleston (2007: 6) finds that definitions of student involvement vary as widely as do the styles and practices that are broadly described as democratic:

Whereas some understand it simply to refer to the work of student representative bodies - such as school councils or pupil parliaments - others define it more widely to encompass all aspects of school life and decision-making where students may make a contribution, informally through individual negotiation as well as formally through purposely-created structures and mechanisms.

The present author's own experience of developing democracy in a school used as a working definition of democracy in schools:

... a considerable degree of consultation, a right for individuals to speak their minds, whether or not they agree with the official or majority line of the school, and [...] an implication that the rights of the individual will be enshrined while at the same time being balanced with the needs of the community as a whole (Trafford, 1993).

Since then it has seemed necessary to add to that definition the expectation of active participation by all those involved. But each time that definition is revisited, it seems essential to add still more elements. The 1993 definition refers to the implication of the rights of the individual, but what about the fundamental respect and dignity of each? And respect and dignity in turn imply a requirement for tolerance and mutual support. The definition keeps growing and becoming more sophisticated (Trafford, 2003: 28).

Watts (1989: 26-27) returns to the search for a definition: 'If democracy in school is about anything, it is not so much about power ... as the free exchange of ideas. Without that open, continuous debate, power-sharing is pointless.' The democratic view, therefore, is less concerned with deciding where (or in whom) power resides and more interested in creating a climate in which all those involved can genuinely participate. Participation, of course, lies at the heart of democracy, so the school that claims to be democratic will do more than simply operate an open and consultative management style with regard to teachers. It implies of necessity that all the stakeholders are involved, and have a voice: a fundamental principle of democratic schooling must be, therefore, that pupils have the right to have their views heard and taken into account, a right both enshrined in principle and encouraged in practice. Holdsworth (1999), writing in Australia, employs the analogy of a tripod to outline his view of participation. The three essential and balanced legs are:

- Student representation on school decision-making bodies;
- Student-run organizational structures; and
- Participatory approaches within the curriculum and classroom.

These accord with Huddleston's recommendations (2007: 28-29).

Harber (1995: 9) approaches the question from a different angle, identifying the atmosphere in which education for democracy may satisfactorily take place:

Tolerance of diversity and mutual respect between individuals and groups, a respect for evidence in forming opinions, a willingness to be open to the possibility of changing one's mind in the light of such evidence, the possession of a critical stance towards political information and regarding all people as having equal social and political rights as human beings. In other words there is, or should be in a democracy, an emphasis on reason, open-mindedness and fairness. These are some of the values that education for democracy must foster ...

These values echo those of the American National Council for Social Studies' 1979 position statement on democratization of schools:

... the school should be a micro-society and should reflect what is happening in the real world. Schools, like society, have a system of justice and notions of equity ... Students need to feel a part of the system of justice,

and they need to tackle the problems within the school setting in order to gain experience in the agony and frustration of democratic decision making (in Hepburn, 1984: x).

These are values to which many schools would lay claim, whatever their *modus operandi* from day to day, and raise the question of *why* schools should be democratic: this will be considered after the following section.

LIMITATIONS OF THIS ANALYSIS

This chapter deals with democratic schools but recognizes that, for the most part, it will be describing features of schools operating within a state/government-run system and developing and promoting democratic practice and ideals within the limitations of that system. There are globally a very few, invariably small schools which are genuinely democratic in both foundation and practice. The website of the International Democratic Education Network (<http://www.idenetwork.org>), which mounts an annual global conference of its members, lists over 200 schools 'offering democratic education in more than 30 countries, working with over 40,000 students.'

Principal among such schools, as identified by Hannam (2000), are The Forsoksgymnaset in Oslo (FGO), Norway; Sands School, Ashburton, Devon, England; The Democratic School of Hadera, Israel; Sudbury Valley School, Framingham, Massachusetts. (To these one might add such examples as Boorobin Sudbury Democratic Centre of Learning, Australia, and Naestved Fri Skole, Denmark.) Probably the most influential of these, and the one most frequently copied, is Sudbury Valley School. Hannam (2000) describes its democratic structure, drawing heavily on the school's website:

It has a totally democratic structure not unlike Hadera's on which it has had a considerable influence. All students and staff (though not parents) are members of the school Assembly, which resembles a traditional New England Town Meeting. The Assembly has an elected chairperson, always a student, and deals with most of the school's decision-making including the creation of the many school laws. Attendance is not compulsory. Teachers are appointed by the Assembly and it also reviews and renews their contracts annually. Most teacher contracts are renewed but even the most long-serving staff have no security of tenure beyond their annual contracts.

Space does not permit further consideration of this important minority of schools. Similarly it is beyond the scope of this chapter to consider the 'free school' or libertarian tradition. Libertarians (who seek free, not strictly democratic, education) believe that 'education has to be freed from the authority of the teacher as well as from the state', (Shotton, 1993: 9-11). Shotton gives a full account of the growth and, in general, the ultimate demise of that libertarian view of schooling to which tradition, rather than the democratic, A.S. Neill's (1990) famous Summerhill really belongs. However, Neill's writings and the work of the democratic and free schools mentioned above have exerted a powerful, yet impossible to measure, influence on many Western educators who have felt encouraged and challenged by them to make their own schools very much more democratic than they would otherwise have been.

WHY DEMOCRATIC SCHOOLS?

Democratic education is on the agenda. Global concern with the development of the democratic citizens of tomorrow from the children of today is leading many countries to look again at their systems of schooling, regarding them as the chief - indeed, to a large extent the only hopeful - setting in which the next adult generation can learn and experience the meaning of democratic citizenship. The Council of Europe, for example, designated 2005 as its Year of Education for Democratic Citizenship (EDC). Writing for the Council, Liègeois (2007: 91) describes EDC as:

a set of practices and activities designed to prepare people to live in a democratic society by ensuring that they actively exercise their rights and responsibilities. It includes human rights education, civic education and intercultural education. EDC is very closely linked to the idea of participation, since no one can pass on

democratic citizenship without practising it.

She quotes (Liègeois, 2007: 90) the 20th Session of the Standing Conference of European Ministers of Education (Krakow, Poland, 2000) as agreeing that EDC 'promotes and is promoted by [...] a whole-school approach, in terms of school ethos, learning and teaching methods and the participation of pupils, students, educational staff and parents in decision-making and, as far as possible, in determining the formal and informal curriculum.'

Significantly, Liègeois is writing in an appendix to one of four volumes which comprise a Council of Europe-published Toolkit for EDC, circulated across its 46 member states, reflecting the importance the Council attaches to this agenda. This is not surprising given the disparate nature of the Council's membership. Some countries are old, established democracies with school systems that enjoy advanced democratic structures Scandinavia comes immediately to mind -while others are still fledgling democracies where racial and other tensions create problems in schools as in every other aspect of their societies. In such settings, the development of a universal appreciation of democracy becomes an imperative.

Notwithstanding the extent to which authoritarian governance structures prevail even now, schooling is seen as both the appropriate place and a convenient one in which to provide young people with genuinely democratic experience. It is a not a new view, and the literature tends to share it unanimously. In *School and Democracy* (1916) John Dewey was urging: '... a [democratic] society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder ...' (Dewey, 1916: 99).

He went on to lament the fact that schools at that time were so inimical to such an education. In his vision (expressed originally in a still earlier lecture):

When the school introduces and trains each child of society into membership within ... a little community, saturating him with the spirit of service, and providing him with the instruments of effective self-direction, we shall have the deepest and best guaranty of a larger society which is worthy, lovely and harmonious (Dewey, 1990: 20).

The 1979 American NCSS position statement was mentioned above: earlier than that, a study of the political attitudes of elementary school children in eight cities and four regions of the US identified the school as 'the most important and effective instrument of political socialization in the United States', (Hess and Torney 1967: 101, quoted in Hepburn 1984: 6). With such a powerful national train of thought, it is scarcely surprising that a recent US grouping of some 100 schools called *First Amendment Schools* directly links schooling with the development of democratic skills and ideals. Their vision statement (available at [http://](http://www.firstamendmentschools.org)

www.firstamendmentschools.org) describes schools as 'laboratories of democratic freedom'. The practice of democracy within school life is seen as an imperative so that 'students confront the challenge of self-government, including the difficult task of balancing a commitment to individual rights with a concern for the common good'. The schools are described as modelling the Constitution of US.

Belief in the ability and power of schools to develop the citizens of tomorrow is not confined to America. In their study of citizenship and education in 28 European countries, Torney-Porta et al. (2001: 4) are emphatic: schools, that model democratic practice are most effective in promoting civic knowledge and engagement. The argument is persuasive: indeed, politically it is arguably won. Democracy is regarded as a 'good thing', desirable as both process and outcome. However, Huddleston (2007: 6-7) warns that a lack of clarity about both purposes and means with regard to democracy in schools means that neither in approach nor in measures of success is there any consistency or coherence. Nor is there much recognition in the literature of the fact that different theoretical emphases, while positive towards the general idea of student participation, might sometimes conflict in practice (2007: 10).

FEATURES OF A DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL

What is most distinctive - and, indeed, most immediately noticeable - about a democratic school is the feel of it, as Harber describes above. Education in democracy is thus, inevitably, education for democracy - and vice versa. The two develop together. Democratic structures (such as school councils) will not flourish in an undemocratic climate: but their presence helps to transform the climate into a democratic one. Like Harber et al., Inman and Burke (2002: 30) list among the core values that characterize a democratic school 'co-operation, mutual respect, autonomy, justice, and commitment to diversity and equity.'

Huddleston (2007: 11) identifies significant factors in Europe, features which are held in common throughout the literature:

- students' level of confidence in the value of participation and sense of 'empowerment' in their schools;
- the existence of student representative structures, such as school councils or pupil parliaments;
- opportunities for students to be respected for their contribution to solving school problems;
- extent to which the school environment models democratic principles or fosters participation practices;
- links between participation and explicit teaching about democratic practice;
- an open classroom climate for discussion; and
- links with the wider community and participatory organizations beyond the school.

The most significant individual features of schools which are demonstrably - or palpably democratic - are considered below.

Ethos

The 'feel', the way people live their lives within the institution, is the direct result of the ethos, something which in a democratic school will be carefully nurtured. Radz (1984: 73) terms this the 'climate', commenting that those who spend time in schools can attest to its impact on 'how they feel, how they perform, and how they grow as individuals.' Inman and Burke (2002: 48) describe what this democratic ethos feels like in day-to-day life:

... we were stuck by the openness and warmth that we were routinely shown by staff and students. Visitors were clearly not a threat to adults or students. The staffroom was striking - noisy and vibrant, with much talk and laughter. There was a confidence in the atmosphere that was impossible not to feel, though difficult to describe.

They received comments (2002: 49) about the ethos from year 11 students along these lines:

'It's not like a prison' 'I think they give you independence' 'You're heard' 'They give you freedom' 'They care about you' 'I think why the school is so good is because the students are so friendly to each other. They really are.'

They continue:

From the observations and interviews we observed an underlying culture of respect and equality between members of the school community. We observed a politeness and respect in the manner that staff talked to students. We saw staff opening doors for students and vice-versa as a matter of routine practice. The corridors were largely free of stress and tension but rather were spaces where people engaged in communication (2002: 49).

It is important to stress that, in those schools where democracy has really taken root, it is not in the formal structures that the change is most felt. Harber (1989: 55) finds that, at Countesthorpe School: 'The day-to-day democratic 'feel' comes less through its formal structures than through the informal democracy that characterises contacts in the classroom. The atmosphere is relaxed, friendly, non-authoritarian, and pupils' opinions matter.' At the heart of a democratic school ethos, it is clear that there lies deep respect between

everyone in the school, teachers, students, other staff, and indeed all others (not least parents) who become involved in the school atmosphere. Which comes first? Is the ethos democratic because the relationships are so good, or are the relationships so good because it is democratic?

Inman and Burke (2002: 49) see 'treating pupils with respect' as a vital element in this democratic ethos. Like so much of the living reality of democracy in a school, respect given and respect received create a virtuous circle. The more it is given, the more it is returned. If teachers set examples of politeness, of opening doors, or of picking up litter, pupils develop similar behaviours: far better than screaming at them for being slovenly! If children are treated as intelligent beings capable of developing and exchanging ideas, they respond in kind.

The School (or Student) Council

It is arguably impossible to imagine a democratic school that does not have at its heart some kind of formal democratic structure such as a school council. Of course, a very small school (such as one of those listed by Hannam, above, perhaps) might simply gather all its pupils together in one place rather as the ancient Athenian Demos met when important decisions had to be taken. The rest need to create a democratically elected representative council. There are nowadays numerous countries that legislate to require that students have a democratic voice in their schools (Scandinavian countries come to mind, as do Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Spain and, part of the UK, Wales). Legislation does not, of course, ensure that representation is of good quality, so those countries continue to work on their school or youth democracy and surveys and comparisons of practice and experience of necessity continue across continents.

Democratic schools require school structures in which pupils are consulted and given opportunities to experience responsibility. In theory then, school councils would seem to be an essential feature of a school that promotes active citizenship. School councils have the capacity to send powerful messages to all pupils about the possibilities of the participation and about their value and worth within the institution and beyond. Moreover School Councils at their best will raise fundamental questions for those who control and manage the school as to the nature of the institution they wish to promote (Inman and Burke, 2002: 29).

It is not easily demonstrable whether the presence of a council creates and promotes the democratic ethos or vice versa. Davies (1998: 36) has no doubts: 'What has become clear is that for a school council or other system of representation to work it must be embedded in a total ethos of democracy, equity, and concern for pupil and staff welfare and performance.' The mere existence of an effective school or student council makes a statement about the school and its attitude to its students. The principle of open management and the right of children to express their views and concerns, while respecting the rights of others not to be damaged by such expression, are both enshrined and made real by the presence of an active council. The right to a voice in the way the school operates is shown to be real for staff and students, and thus begins to permeate the fabric of school life. The presence of a school council further emphasizes the right of anyone, staff or student, to talk to anyone about what is worrying them, rather than being sent through 'proper channels' -which, even if they exist, can too easily seem to a worried individual like being fobbed off.

It goes without saying, perhaps, that the student representatives in a truly democratic school council are democratically elected: a school that cannot resist nominating students who it feels are 'suitable' has already left the democratic path. Holdsworth (1999) is emphatic that students who have been otherwise excluded from success and value be included - without being stigmatized by being included on some kind of special programme.

School councils take a variety of forms. Some will bring representatives of the student body together in a forum with other stakeholders. The commoner, and probably more successful, model sees a council consisting solely of students: this student council may well in turn send delegates to other groups within the management or governance structure (but note the observations below about effective as opposed to tokenistic school councils).

Reservations about the effectiveness of some school councils demonstrate to Inman and Burke (2002: 6) the council's dependence for success on the existence of a wider democratic setting. Moreover, the school council itself creates and strengthens that democratic framework and promotes engagement:

... technical weaknesses in the structure, form and scope of councils [...] are often symbolic of wider whole school weaknesses in relation to pupil participation and engagement. The [...] literature on democratic schools would suggest that there is a dynamic interplay between effective school councils and democratic schools. School councils flourish most effectively in the context of a wider democratic ethos and structure, but they also play a significant role in promoting and sustaining that democracy.

However, inefficiencies in the functioning of the school council, notwithstanding the support of the school, can undermine it. In a newsletter for Australian school councils (generally termed there Student Representative Councils), Holdsworth (2007) is blunt. His article, entitled 'Don't do it ... manage it', advises elected student officers to avoid the trap of trying to do everything for the student body themselves, urging them instead to get organized and operate effective delegation and reporting systems.

This is crucial. Communication is a key challenge. So while it is comparatively easy to design a council, it will only be effective if all the links work smoothly. A typical school council structure will have individual classes electing representatives to a larger forum (council, assembly or parliament are the names commonly used to describe this major body). Frequently this full assembly is seen as being too large to be efficient in making decisions or taking action. Accordingly task-groups may be set up to deal with specific issues, or that large body will elect some kind of smaller executive group. In theory that is a sensible structure: but in a busy school where students find themselves, after all, for only a few hours each day, communication from the executive, though the assembly and back to the grass roots in the class, is often poor.

For those reasons, schools sometimes decide that it is impossible to bring representatives from all the year-groups together into a single forum, so classes simply send delegates to meetings for that year-group alone, or for a section of the school. Efficiency may increase, but one powerful component of school democracy, in which older students listen and accord respect to younger and vice versa, has been lost.

Some schools place particular value on the full assembly as a visible symbol of democracy: others choose the efficiency of smaller meetings. There is no one correct model, and all stand or fall by the effectiveness of representation, of action taken, and of two-way communication between grass roots and representatives. Huddleston (2007: 20) identifies this feature as an imperative emerging from a Slovenian study:

... the most effective forms of representative structures will be those that maximize the number of students who have the opportunity to represent their peers. One way of achieving this is through multi-levelled structures ... We should look in general towards the development of in-school structures and procedures that encourage more 'grass-roots' participation by students - such as class councils, or by better use of existing structures - such as the regular 'tutor periods' built into the school day in countries like England and Spain.

So how should we recognise an effectively functioning school council? Inman and Burke (2002: 7) list characteristics shared by the school councils in their case study schools: these are very close to characteristics identified throughout the literature.

- Meetings are timetabled into lesson times.
- The council is whole-school rather than being class or year-based.
- There are explicit representation and reporting mechanisms.
- Meetings run formally with agendas and minutes.
- The council has a formal constitution.
- The council is formally consulted about major policy decisions.
- The scope of the agenda can be determined by pupils as well as staff.
- The council is under the direct oversight of the head teacher.

For the school council to be effective, then, it has to be an integral part of the school. Something that is missing from the list above is the sense and collective understanding of a clear purpose. What is the council there for? Many UK schools are nowadays seeing the value of involving the student body in school improvement and issues of teaching and learning (though this involves some dangers with regard to manipulation of the student voice for managerial purposes: see following sections). In other schools, the expectation may be only that students will organize their own activities and events, leaving teachers to do what is seen as their exclusive, professional job. Flexibility is a democratic virtue - but lack of clear expectations and boundaries can cause great frustration.

The literature is full of examples of loss of confidence in the school council as a result of its coming up against insuperable barriers so that belief and trust are lost. Conversely, Boomer (1992: 14) values obstacles as providing opportunities for negotiation: 'Negotiation also means making explicit, and then confronting, the constraints of the learning context and the non-negotiable requirements that apply.' To achieve Boomer's aim in that context requires courage and confidence on the part of school leaders, teachers and students: issues of leadership are dealt with below.

The school has to value its council as both a practical and a symbolic demonstration of respect for the pupil voice. If the school has a philosophy of engaging with its students, harnessing their energy and enthusiasm, and giving children responsibility for their lives and learning, the school council will be in harmony with the school ethos. The more the students are given opportunities to demonstrate how much their participation can contribute to the well-being and development of the school, the more that democratic engagement will strengthen the school ethos. Thus a virtuous circle is created.

Student leadership of school activities

Torney-Purta et al. (2001: 5) found that across Europe: 'Students prefer to belong to organizations in which they can work with peers and see results from their efforts. Such organizations can have positive effects on civic knowledge, attitudes and future engagement by giving students opportunities for participation in settings that matter to them.' This reflects the experience of all who chart democratic growth in schools. Much of Holdsworth's work and publishing in Australia is concerned with young people's participation in, and above all leadership of, community-based activity. America's First Amendment Schools promote what they term community engagement, describing opportunities to 'translate civic education into community engagement', (website: <http://www.firstamendmentschools.org>). Within a democratic climate, young people are quick to join or even set up activities, and to make them work, rather than waiting for teachers to organize it. Thus both the breadth and the quality of such activities grow.

Leadership and management in democratic schools

Inman and Burke (2002: 35) are unequivocal about the kind of leadership that must inevitably be present in a democratic school. Their interviewees identify the following as characteristics of leaders of democratic schools:

- The ability to take risks, to be able to live with uncertainty
- The ability to facilitate others to take leadership and power
- Visionary
- Has a commitment to the good of children
- Values staff as well as children
- Is outward looking, involving the school community in the wider communities and welcoming external projects into the school
- Is able to admit to mistakes, is self-reflective and analytical
- Is inclusive

Their findings echo Hannam's (2001) research:

It is evident that the vision and commitment of the headteacher and other key senior and middle managers is crucial to the process and that this vision is usually most effective when formulated in collectively developed policy that is consistently documented and against which progress is evaluated.

It is hard to picture a democratic school where the tone is not set by those in leadership roles: or where the management of (and by) the staff is not as open and democratic as that of the pupils. Indeed, one comes across words such as 'courageous' and 'strong' connected with democratic leadership styles. As Radz (1984: 69) observes wryly, to be a relaxed, open, and secure school principal (the desired qualities) is no easy task: 'know thyself, he advises' (p. 75).

Other features of democratic schools

Ethos, the free sharing of information and ideas, the involvement of all stakeholders as far as possible in analysis and review, in identifying problems and planning and implementing solutions, the formal structure of a school (or student) council, community engagement and leadership that allows and encourages it all to happen: these are the outstanding characteristics of a democratic school. Other features are also likely to be present. Briefly these might include:

- a constant process of self-review and improvement within those democratic structures;
- regular/routine use of democratic techniques (such as Circle Time) as learning and pastoral/social strategies in the classroom, often feeding (from class council through year council) to the over-arching school council;
- a student-run school newspaper (or, increasingly, a digital equivalent);
- student-run peer support/counselling and mediation;
- increased levels of inclusion;
- reduced feelings of alienation, tension and conflict;
- increased engagement in the community;
- effective and readily supported discipline structures (with significant student input); and
- students involved in teacher appointment procedures.

SCHOOL DEMOCRACY AND SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS

As the body of research into democratic schools grows, it is becoming increasingly evident that the growth of democracy in a school is a powerful force to school improvement. Indeed, it would not be unreasonable to assert that democratic schools are more effective schools.

A democratically structured and functioning school will not only promote EDC [Education for Democratic Citizenship] and prepare students to take their place in society as engaged democratic citizens: it will also become a happier, more creative and more effective institution. The value that is added is immense: the research evidence of this is growing in volume all the time. So this [...] does not simply describe a mission to do something morally right: starting down the democratic path is also a pragmatic step towards making schooling a more pleasant and productive process (Bäckman and Trafford, 2007: 6).

In 2001, the UK government commissioned a study of 12 secondary schools that described themselves as 'student participative', to find out whether, in those that were already 'taking seriously the "participation and responsible action" elements of the Citizenship order', there had been an improvement in 'attainment across the full range of GCSE results' (Hannam, 2001: 10). Hannam found that the 12 schools did indeed produce 'higher than expected levels of attainment at GCSE' (p. 63). He also made an explicit link between the warmer, more relaxed teacher-student relationship which comes with democracy and the resulting improvement in academic (and other) standards. One reason for this is that young people *believe* that they can achieve improvement, for themselves or for their institution, though usually for both, as Torney-Purta et al. (2001: 5) find in their European study.

When informal school relationships match those represented by the formal structures, a school may be seen to

be operating consistently. When these circumstances prevail the experience of researchers is that discipline and the students' sense of responsibility are high. Ashworth (1995: 44), reporting the views of headteachers gleaned from a survey, indicates that:

Discipline improved when school structures worked towards students taking personal responsibility. Students became more caring towards each other, for the school environment and for the decisions they made. Motivation in lessons improved as did students' commitment, pride and enthusiasm for their school work ... Overall, school life became more pleasant because students worked harder and behaved better. In addition, school management benefitted from students' ideas and some head teachers described how a sense of community had grown in their schools. They wrote about shared values, common understanding and increased dialogue between staff and students.

In the same way, America's First Amendment Schools talk about ensuring that everyone is given a meaningful voice is shaping the life of the school, so that 'all have a real stake in creating and sustaining safe and caring learning communities', (website: <http://www.firstamendmentschools.org>).

It is clear that, whenever students are involved in the discussion and formulation of school rules, the rules tend to be better kept and communication in the school is improved. Harber (1995: 11) observes, 'There is an increased sense of responsibility [...] staff and students have more control over their own organization [...] overcoming the "them and us" alienation in most schools'. Davies (1998) reaches similar conclusions in her research on the links between school councils and reduced levels of school exclusions. She finds that when students felt they are listened to, where they have a stake in the whole education process, they are less likely to suffer feelings of alienation, to play truant or to be excluded.

A democratic school constantly reminds everyone (teachers, other staff, parents, and students) that it is there for the benefit of the students. This tends to result in increased student motivation But democratic schooling is not merely about 'being nice to children': it is about a carefully judged, empowering ethos in which young people are given responsibility and are able to make the most of it. Unsurprisingly, then, in a school that has generated a democratic ethos:

- Relationships are better between students and teachers
- Young people are willing to take and exercise responsibility
- Standards of attainment rise
- Discipline is improved
- Alienation is reduced
- Truancy and exclusions are reduced
- Inclusion is increased
- Motivation is increased
- Confidence and self-esteem are raised
- Challenge is readily accepted
- High expectations are the norm
- Schools become more effective

(Trafford, 2005: 60-61)

By every measure, it seems, democratized schools become more effective. And they are pleasanter to work in, too, for students and staff alike.

CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE UK

Democratic schools contribute to the agenda currently being pursued by numerous governments to promote the values and practice of participation and citizenship among young people. A foreword written by the UK's Minister for School Standards, Lord Adonis, to guidance on making school councils more effective (Trafford, 2006) both

outlines that political thrust and links its implementation to the establishment of effective democratic and participatory structures in schools:

I strongly support the principle of ensuring that our children and young people participate more effectively in democratic processes. The introduction of citizenship as a statutory subject in secondary schools in September 2002, the Education Act 2002 and subsequent guidance to local authorities and schools has opened the way for much greater pupil participation. As a result, the number of school councils has increased substantially and the benefits to school ethos and achievement are clear. Pupils now have a real opportunity to impact on the way their school is run ...

Whilst many schools already have good practice in this area, the [UK] government is actively encouraging the spread of best practice so that school councils are truly democratic and the pupil body is given real power and responsibility.

In response to the citizenship imperative, UK schools are routinely embracing, for example, school councils as a means both of demonstrating their commitment to student participation and of providing opportunities for their students actively to engage. Moreover student voice, the term now most commonly used in this context and regarded during the 1990s as a strange and possibly dangerous fringe activity, is now widely accepted as a major contributor to school improvement: its historic proponents have moved from being seen as eccentrics almost to guru status. Accordingly, as the involvement of student voice more closely in matters of teaching and learning, and even of teacher performance, is increasingly covered in the educational press, so schools become readier to push back what were previously insuperable barriers. Thus it is now common (though not yet uncontentious) in the UK to see panels of pupils taking part in the selection and appointment of teachers, and there is a growing willingness to consult pupils about which teaching styles suit or appeal to them, and which do not.

An important action three-year research project came to completion in 2007, reported by a team from the University of Birmingham (Davies and Yamashita, 2007). School Councils UK's London Secondary School Councils Action Research Project (LSSCARP) followed in detail the development of democracy in several London secondary schools: naturally it was more successful in some schools than in others. LSSCARP breaks new ground in its coverage of how some schools brought pupils deeply into the observation, evaluation and planning of teaching and learning. Pupils were trained as observers and, in negotiation with the teacher, would record either the teacher's strategies or pupil reactions, discussing them in detail afterwards. A significant part of the action research project involved monitoring the training given by the School Councils UK project manager in these new approaches to both students and teachers in the project schools and tracking and analyzing the outcomes. Poor behaviour is acknowledged to be an intransigent problem in many London schools, and LSSCARP records how pupils were involved in behaviour panels, not only in the planning and implementation of rules but also in interventions and consultations in cases of bad behaviour.

How unusual it is even now to see students involved in planning curricula or even monitoring teaching and learning can be judged by comparing this with other experiences. Describing a school that had already travelled a long way down the democratic path in 1984, Grundfest et al. (1984: 99-100) describe a sticking point when students undertook an evaluation of teachers. By this stage of development most teachers accepted it, but a few were nonetheless outraged. More recently, Huddleston (2007: 15) reports experience of venturing into this territory in Czech Republic:

[The researchers] said that involving students in curriculum or teaching and learning methods is 'the hardest challenge of democratic practice in Czech schools.' ... The students ... interviewed felt there was very little opportunity for them to influence curriculum content or learning methods. A number said that trying to do so was often a 'bad experience', that 'no one listens to what they say' and that 'the reaction of the teacher is negative'. So they 'start to be passive and don't think that they could influence anything at all'.

This remains a difficult area, though the LSSCARP research illustrates some signs of change. In Australia, though Holdsworth (1999) espouses involving students in teaching or tutoring other students, and in preparing curricular material, he does not venture into the territory of watching or evaluating the work of teachers. An anecdote from LSS-CARP illustrates how defensive teachers remain, even to the point of absurdity. A teacher, when asked to become involved in using students as observers of teaching strategies, exclaimed, 'I'm not having pupils watching me teach!'

CONCLUSION

Some dangers

The lessons drawn from the UK LSSCARP research will prove to be important in the coming years, as more and more schools become aware of and seek to harness the power and energy inherent in the student voice. Even where pupils' active engagement is not sought, schools are making increasing use of questionnaires, surveys and focus groups. So much are schools concentrating on gaining student views on an ever-wider range of issues that there is a danger that they may neglect the truly democratic structures such as school councils. It is commonplace to read, in guidance on implementation of a new educational initiative, that the views of the school council might be sought - or even that the council might be 'tasked' with carrying out some research in school. This risks a directive approach where the school hands out jobs to students through their democratic structure, which must in time become very much less of a representative voice. Curiously, this could well bring about the sort of pseudo-democracy observed back in the 1980s. Ball (1987: 9) for example, though dealing with the consultation of teachers rather than pupils, notes that:

At times schools are run as though they were participative and democratic: there are staff meetings, committees and discussion days in which teachers are invited to make policy decisions.... at other times they are bureaucratic and oligarchic, decisions being made with little or no teacher involvement or consultation, by the head and/or senior management team.

Meighan (1986: 26) similarly observes that consulting pupils and using only some of their responses 'can become a means of coaxing them into niches of society rather than ordering them.' Persuasive voices can indeed be a threat to democratic freedoms and may often possess a veneer of openness and dialogue which masquerade as true participation:

Many of us who enjoy teaching and who get on well with their students may feel that we know that they are thinking and what is important to them. My experience suggests that from informal chats one derives only a piecemeal impression of what really matters to children at school (Trafford, 1994).

Critical discourse at the heart of democratic schools

Critical dialogue lies (or should lie) at the heart of school democracy, not mere surveys of views or expressions of preferences, nor indeed observation or critiques of provision, though all these may contribute to the democratic life of the school. There are so many pitfalls for schools that attempt to develop democratic practice that the only way safely to avoid most of them is to ensure that the participants, teachers and pupils, are encouraged to engage in genuine critical discourse, and to be unafraid to air conflict when it emerges.

A major part of empowering students is the matter of giving individuals courage, or what might often be described as self-confidence. It is self-confident individuals - who can see themselves critically and assess realistically their strengths and weaknesses in relation to others - who will be able to assess risks, to try original ideas, to overcome the fear of failure and so on. Empowering students is not so much concerned with neutralising their dissent as allowing them to feel able to explore, to experiment, to learn to argue and to negotiate within the sheltered environment of the classroom, the peer group, the School Council: this learning will prepare them to do likewise - and better - in the larger, less protected world outside school, (Trafford,

1993: 14).

Excessive emphasis on gathering student opinions for management purposes may lead some schools to forget that the effective structures they are using emerged from genuinely democratic growth, not from questionnaires or focus groups. It will be necessary to ensure that true empowerment remains at the heart of democratic schools if they are to continue the meteoric development that they have enjoyed over the past decade or two.

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