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The democratic leader - an invitation to create contacts between student teachers

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In Sweden, a new Teacher Training Programme began in the autumn semester of 2001. Students may choose between a shorter Education Programme of three and a half years and a longer Education Programme of four and a half years. The shorter programme is for student teachers who want to work with children from one year to 12 years of age, and the longer one is for those student teachers who want to work with children older than 12.

During their first year all student teachers take the same courses independent of whether they are training to work with small children or older children. One of these is 'Living in the World' and one of the sub-sections of this course is The Democratic Leader. This is basically about democracy, basic values, children's conditions, and the Convention of Children's Rights. There are 260 student teachers beginning training every year, and 139 take the course 'Living in the World'.

One task within this course requires the students to start by describing what a democratic leader is for them. What concepts do they think of and connect with a democratic leader? What demands do they put on a democratic leader? How does a democratic leader work? They are asked to write down their views and how they look upon their own role in the future as a democratic leader. What do they think they have to develop in order to become such a democratic Leader. At the end of the course they are again asked to reflect on their views of the democratic leader, having studied different texts and having been out in schools to gain practical experience. Do they still have the same views? Why/why not? Are they now better prepared to be a democratic leader? What impressions have they gathered during the course? How can this influence their future role as a teacher? They are required to write a reflective text about these issues.

I have studied the papers which the students have collected in their portfolios. The concepts which the students most often mention are fairness, listening to pupils, influencing/participation, self-confidence, self-knowledge and respect.

An important part of the curriculum of Swedish pre-schools and schools deals with basic values. The same fundamental democratic values are to permeate both pre-school and compulsory school. These involve care and consideration towards others, solidarity, gender equality and tolerance. The pre-school curriculum proceeds from the assumption that the child is competent and is constantly seeking to improve its understanding of life around it.

Most of the students report that their original opinions of the concept The Democratic Teacher remain the same after they have studied the course. However, a few say that they have started to reflect more over what democratic thinking and acting stands for, and that their conception has deepened. Of those who say it is the same, some mention things at the end of the course which were not noted at the beginning. What is evident is that from the start the concept of democracy is looked upon from a political point of view, while by the end there are more reflections from a pedagogical point of view.

Listening to pupils

Almost all of the sample of 32 students who commented on the concept The Democratic Teacher focussed on being quick to listen to pupils.

Fairness and treating all pupils in the same way

Twenty students of the 32 used the concept fairness or being fair. Initially the concept was rather simple but by the end of the course it had become more complicated. One student commented that there can be different ways of looking at fairness; equality for all, according to need, or according to what is deserved. A few students mentioned that a Democratic Leader does not treat pupils differently as a consequence of different colours of the skin, gender, sexual disposition, handicaps et al., and said that if some pupils needed extra support, they should get it. A Democratic Leader should create a good climate where all live and work in the same conditions. It was also important that the Leader fostered a climate where everybody could express their opinions.

One student referred to the author Christer Ferm (1993), who says that it is not possible to scatter the same tasks from the text-book over the whole class, and also that he/she should work from the interests of the different pupils. Another student thought that a Democratic Leader should be able to meet every pupil on their own ground, look upon every human being as a unique individual, and in this way give everybody the same chance. Everybody has different conditions and experiences and this places high demands on the leader. Trying to have all pupils working at the same level does not work in reality because all pupils are different. According to this student, we should change our way of thinking into working as if all have unique characteristics: it is the task of the Democratic Leader to discover these characteristics.

Influence and participation

A Democratic Leader should see to it that everybody gets his/her voice heard and is able to give his/her opinion. The Democratic Leader is a guide: guides do not know everything themselves, nor have an answer for everything but they do know how to direct pupils in order to help them find the answers to their questions. A Democratic Leader should never choose sides. It is up to the guide/pedagogue to know how to find answers or reach goals. Ferm (1993) writes that this way of working is more important and more professional than having a ready answer, because it is only by only 'leading' the pupils as a Democratic Leader that the pupils will reach the goal by themselves. It is permissible to offer alternative solutions, but not to act as a judge

Learning

One student noted that children want to learn different things. Many teachers succeed in extinguishing this desire to learn by using the particular pedagogies which do not allow the children any influence - this leads to a feeling of constraint from the pupil's point of view. One student remarked that the teacher cannot only teach the children; he/she also has to bring them up because the parents have no time for that. (The Swedish curricula for pre-school and primary school teachers states that teachers should both bring up and teach children.) What is problematic with opinions like these is that they target parents, and accuse parents of not paying enough attention to their children. This may be true, but is probably not often so. Another view is provided by the student who wrote that if

children and parents are to like her as a teacher, she will need to show the same warmth and consideration to everybody.

Human, humorous and joyful

The Democratic Leader should show human qualities and be able to be true and generous with her/himself. Humour is also important, as is the ability to lead pupils with joy and commitment. One student wrote that such a leader is more trust-worthy and interesting to listen to. A good Democratic Leader looks to the needs of others and forms ways of working accordingly.

The Democratic Leader must also be interested in what he/she works with, or pupils will not be interested in the work they are doing. A student noted that if a teacher shows that she/he likes what she/he is doing and dares be generous with her/himself, pupils will share the teacher's enthusiasm. School should be fun as well as a place for learning, and it is important that the teacher is wholeheartedly involved in her/his task.

The teacher should also feel connected to the pupils. There should not be a feeling of 'us' and 'them' but togetherness. If the pupils feel important, and that what they say and think is important, the gap between teacher and pupils decreases.

Self-knowledge, trust and self-confidence

Most students mentioned that the Democratic Leader should know her/himself, trust her/himself and have self-confidence. One student thought that it was not until she knew what she stands for herself that she would be able to work with her own prejudices, and from that stage act in a non-prejudiced way towards her pupils. When she knows who she is, she can trust herself. Another student wrote that if she did not possess appropriate self-confidence, her pupils would feel it and not pay her any respect.

Respect

The Democratic Leader should act as a model. One student wrote that to listen to the opinions of others and to show respect are the two most important characteristics of the Democratic Teacher. Another thought that today the voices of pupils are valued much more than they once were, and that it is now taken for granted that the teacher should always listen to the opinions of the pupils. As the voices of the pupils have been strengthened, the role of the teacher as a chairman has become more important. This student remembered that the teachers in the secondary upper schools who always asked what they thought about different things were models to her. There was on the other hand a student who wrote that it is not wrong to show power. It is the job of the teacher to teach the pupils different kinds of knowledge, and if respect is not learned from the start in school, then it will not be learned at all. Of course a teacher must also treat the children with respect, but there must be a difference between teacher and pupil.

There are two comments lead to some interesting reflections about how children learn. Do they learn mainly from the teacher presenting different sets of knowledge, or from finding knowledge themselves and from their experiences and interests? The remark about respect could be countered by the view of Stephan Andersson, the headmaster of a very democratic school in Norrköping, who said that whereas adults used to requested respect from their children, nowadays they had found in his school that children do not show

respect if they are not themselves treated with respect. Respect is not paid according to one's position but depends on who one is, how one meets other people, and what one says. This is a very large change.

Take part in the thoughts and opinions of the pupils

The Democratic Leader needs to learn more about how children think. This needs to be done in order to be able to meet both individual children and groups of children in an appropriate manner. The teacher must also want to get to know the children, as well as their interests, earlier experiences and special aims in life. If teachers do not know about the everyday lives of the children outside school, they cannot put them in context, nor understand them. 'How can I otherwise be understood as a teacher,' wrote one student. 'If I understand the children it will be possible for me to give other children tools for understanding themselves'. She also mentions that she must be fair, show respect, and give every person his/her right to integrity.

Student teachers' e-mail portfolios

As a part of a globalisation programme we asked our students to make an e-mail portfolio starting in their first year and going on until the third year of their training. One aim of this initiative was to provide opportunities for students to broaden and deepen their perspectives in order to be more prepared to understand human conditions in a multi-cultural way. The student teachers each choose to work in one of the following areas.

Comparative analysis of fundamental values in another country and in Sweden

In what ways do the curricula resemble each other and in what ways do they differ? How are they constructed, what do they contain, what ways of working do they advocate and is it compulsory to follow them in detail?

The teacher as a Democratic Leader

As described earlier in this paper, student teachers describe what a democratic leader is for them, study texts, gain practical experience and reflect on their original views. Learning is regarded as dependent on the relationship between teachers and pupils. The Swedish teacher's way of relating to pupils is regulated through the fundamental values of the Swedish Curriculum.

The Convention of Children's Rights

Student teachers discuss what can be said in the light of their interpretation and obedience to this Convention in their respective countries. Is it possible to see any special areas where there are significant omissions for special groups of children?

Visible and invisible handicaps

Student teachers study how to work with children with different kinds of handicaps in an integrated way in schools.

Parent-teacher co-operation

Students may choose to concentrate on co-operation with the parents of children with any kind of handicaps, or with parent-teacher co-operation in general.

Gender issues

According to the Swedish curricula for pre-schools and schools, conditions for boys and girls should be more equal. This issue may be discussed as a comparison between different countries.

Conflicts and dealing with conflicts in pre-school, primary school and secondary school

Reasons for conflict, ways of working with them and how to prevent them are vital issues for all teachers. Students are encouraged to discuss these issues discussed on a comparative level in order to broaden their perspective on what conflicts are and how teachers can deal with them.

How to organise this exchange of views

The Swedish students study literature about these topics and are supposed to communicate with students in other countries about issues they have chosen. They gather information about the chosen topic through e-mail and then share the information with each other in their working group or in larger groups.¹

This results in building a project and establishing research in the various areas, and may also form a basis for doing examination papers together with students in foreign countries. Mutual interest in finding out more about each other and about circumstances in their respective countries may arise from these contacts, which may result in personal relationships and maybe exchange visits. Colleagues and I look forward to helping students to create new and interesting contacts and sharing information on a more global level, and would be delighted to hear others' views on this idea.

References

Ferm, Christer (1993) *Demokrati I praktiken* (Democracy in practice). Stockholm: Runa Förlag.

¹ Any reader who knows student teachers who would like to correspond with our Swedish students is invited to contact the author .