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Democracy and participation: looking at the daily experience of young people in Swedish schools

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Introduction

On a windy and rainy morning we came to the school. We entered the building and found ourselves alone in a room filled with music – Vivaldi's 'Spring' – and the smell of freshly baked bread. ... A girl met us and politely asked if she could assist us. We told her that we were going to see the headmaster, and she helped us to find her. When we asked about the music, we were told that, up to nine o'clock, Inga, the woman in charge of the café, chooses the music. After nine o'clock, the music is chosen by the teenagers working with Inga for the day.

During a week of field studies in the school, we met with positive curiosity from pupils and adults alike. We were invited to participate in the activities of the school, and we observed that the adults were always ready to help and serve the young people. For example, pupils were always welcome to visit the staff room and ask questions. This demonstrated that, in the adults' view, the most important people in the school were the pupils. It was because of them that the adults were working in the school. In the same way, the adults were welcomed by the young people in their settings.

After our week in this school we felt happy to have experienced a generous and open meeting place between adults and youth, one that offered good conditions in which to work and participate.
(Bergström & Holm, 2002, field note 1:1, 2:1).

Every child has the right to be taught and to be supported in all situations, without being stigmatised or excluded. Several government commissions have shown that teachers need good pedagogical and social knowledge to be able to meet the needs of every child. The Education Act says that a school which provides an education for all is one in which every child has the right to kindness and attention (www.skolverket.se). Children's experiences are important and have to be taken into consideration. The Commission on Teacher Education stated that teachers in the future must be prepared to meet and educate all children, but teachers need greater competence to meet the needs of children who require different kinds of support. They need more knowledge about the importance of being valued members of a group. Teachers must be able to identify the processes and settings that create opportunities for children to participate, to experience equality, and to have influence on their everyday lives in school.

This paper is based on a project that started in spring 2001. The project 'My school – a study of young people who need support, and their experiences of pre-school and school', is financed by The National Board of Education for the years 2001-2003 and is led by Professor Elisabet Näsman (Näsman, Bergström & Holm, 2000). Its purpose is to show, from the children's point of view, the conditions necessary for Swedish compulsory schools to avoid exclusion of children. We try to identify and understand the processes that create obstacles to, and possibilities for, participation. We started in 2001 with identifying when young people experience participation, and how they talk about it. We found that the boys and girls talked about participation in everyday language, describing

it with phrases such as ‘to have fun together, to be involved, to like the same things and situations, not to be excluded, not to be bullied’. Experiences of participation were found in different situations and contexts. One of our goals became to define participation not only in a theoretical sense, but also as it is practised in the school context. We visited different compulsory schools, at the senior level, and found one where we, as researchers, experienced participation first-hand; we felt welcome to participate in all activities of the school from the beginning. We have tried to describe this feeling in the field note above.

As a part of the project we started a study about the school as a room for participation for young people (aged 13-16 years old). When we use the word ‘room’ in this paper, we are referring both to physical and psychosocial places in the school, and to formal and informal arenas for meetings and co-operation. To achieve our purpose we spent two to three days a week in the autumn of 2001 with the pupils in our chosen school, observing different situations and talking to the young people and the staff. We studied documents from different levels – national, local and specifically school levels. We also conducted thematic interviews with eleven teenagers. The focus of the interviews was well-being and participation in the school. We also asked the girls and boys to describe their overall school life, past and present. We regard the children as co-researchers, recognising their ability to reflect upon themselves and to interpret and analyse their own actions and situations. Children are experts on their own lives; they choose what is relevant to tell and how they express their experiences.

Participation as a part of democracy

The main goals for Swedish schools are to create conditions in which pupils can become good citizens with democratic values and also gain knowledge and practical skills. (UFB 2, Skolans författningar, 2000/01 s. 184-201). The curriculum states that schools have to inculcate fundamental social values in young people. It also defines democratic principles as the right to have influence on, to take responsibility for and to participate in one's life in school. Our goal is to show where young people have possibilities to participate and use those values now, before they can apply them as adults in an informal and a formal democratic context. In this, we draw on young people's specific experiences of democracy in everyday life in school. Our perspective includes the premise that children's feelings and experiences of democracy have a value in themselves, here and now, not only as preparation for becoming democratic citizens in the future.

Democracy can be seen as a form of decision-making or as a way of life. The Government Commission on Democracy has chosen the latter definition and pointed out that all individuals have the same value; it also highlighted important concepts such as empathy, solidarity, engagement and responsibility. (SOU 2000:1 En uthållig demokrati, s.17-38). The Government Commission on Democracy used the concept of ‘dynamic citizenship’. To achieve this, everyone must have opportunities to participate and to have influence in a context of clear insight and equality: under these conditions people can be expected to experience participation, and participation is meaningful. Positive experiences of participation lead to the legitimisation of the democratic process, and the will to take part grows stronger. The dynamic process creates a wish to be responsible for oneself and others, and to be more tolerant and trusting. It also provides opportunities to practise co-operation. The difference between the curriculum and the Government Commission on Democracy is that the curriculum describes the three concepts – influence, responsibility

and participation – in parallel, while the Government Commission on Democracy describes them as a process.

Democracy in a school setting goes beyond theory. It must be put into practice in every meeting and situation at school. A democratic dialogue is based on the premise that everyone's knowledge, experiences and opinions are important for good decisions. The Government Commission on Democracy advocates deliberative democracy as a theoretical base, the characteristics of which are a free and equal dialogue - the most important idea of democracy. Official arenas have to be created, and in this context the Swedish school is an important arena. It is important to realise that schools are arenas within which there are great differences in power, not only between adults and children, but also among the children. The fact that power is in play in interpersonal relations can imply that a more democratic attitude in schools changes the power relations both between adults and children and also among children.

Trying to capture participation

In our study 'Room for participation' we carried out a qualitative analysis of the documents, the observations and the interviews from our field studies, and identified three categories – organisation, meetings and learning – as being important for participation.

The school we studied is situated in a town with 131,000 inhabitants. The building was constructed in 1968 as part of a big building program. It is situated near green areas. In the area where the school is situated there are about 4,000 people, half of whom were born abroad, or born in Sweden to immigrant parents. These kinds of residential areas are very common in Swedish towns. They represent a form of segregation and there are a great number of immigrants and poor people living in such areas.

About 600 pupils between 12 and 16 years old are enrolled in the school and they represent some 20 nationalities. The students are divided into 24 classes; there are 55 teachers and 12 other staff members. There is one headmaster and six autonomous teams. The teams can decide on schedule, the distribution of work, further education, economy, education, pupil welfare and evaluation. The school was not an extraordinary school from the beginning, but during recent years the teachers have made great efforts to improve their school and today we would say that this school is not an ordinary Swedish school.

During the 1990 school year the teachers faced a difficult situation. They wrote 'our pupils did not feel very good, and they had difficulty assimilating knowledge and practical skills'. At the same time, demands for improvement in academic performance increased. In this situation, the teachers began an effort to improve the school that resulted in changes to the organisation. We have interpreted the process of this effort as very democratic.

In 1997 the school was ready to institute the changes to its organisation and made many reforms. The use of specialist teachers was discontinued. Every class has two teachers, one with education in humanistic science and one with education in natural science. These teachers follow the same class each year, and they are responsible for teaching all subjects except those that require special rooms, for example, home economics, physical training and handicrafts. To be successful in this system, the teachers have to be very

generous to each other, for example, if the class does not have a teacher who is a specialist in maths, the teacher will have a mentor to help her/him and the class if needed.

Each class has its own classroom, and there are no specific subjects listed on the timetables, which simply read 'all'. Every Monday classes start with planning the rest of the week. The teacher has a plan for what is to be done, and pupils do have lessons together, for example, when they start on something new, but generally the pupils can decide when they want to work and with which subject. The pupils can also choose where they work. In the classroom and in the library, students must work quietly, but they can choose to work in big study halls, where they can sit in groups and talk. The talk does not have to be limited to school work: teachers know that pupils talk about their private lives during school time, and they refer to this aspect of school life as 'the social project'. If young people are not allowed to express themselves fully, they feel emotionally and physically blocked and they will not learn efficiently. If there is not enough time to complete their work during school hours, pupils must do homework.

One benefit of this system is that the pupils are not dependent upon a particular room being free, or on any other teacher's timetable. Another benefit is that, since they do not follow a rigid timetable, pupils do not have to break their concentration on work in which they are engaged. The pupils have flexitime, one hour in the morning and one in the afternoon. With fewer pupils in the school in the afternoon, it is a good time for those who need extra help to meet with their teachers. One of the objects of the organisational reforms was the teachers' wish for their pupils to have more influence over their days – where they work, when they work, with whom and with what.

What are our conclusions? In what ways does the organisation of this school give pupils opportunities to participate? What are some positive and negative aspects of being in school? Starting with the Commission on Democracy, we tried to find out if there were good opportunities for young people to be treated like equals, if they had real insight and a chance to exert influence in their school. If we could find evidence of such opportunities, we should also discover tolerance, responsibility and trust among the people in the school – both self-trust and trust in others. We also found some 'hidden structures'. One is the concept of rights (here and now) and the expectation for the future. The other is the concept that the teachers call 'the social project' in relation to learning. By 'hidden structures' we mean that they are known to varying extents and with different signification for different actors in the school arena.

The idea of *a clear insight* is basic in the documents of the school and, in some ways, in the teachers' actions. To make the idea of using different rooms possible, it is necessary to have an open door system. We observed that the teachers were available to the students, not only as professional teachers but as fellow humans, but that sometimes their insight was limited by ambitions to educate for good behaviour dominated (contrary to the intentions in the documents to offer real insight in every situation). We concluded that these situations created feelings of powerlessness and disengagement, diminishing the will to take responsibility for the physical and psychosocial settings in the school and learning. We understood that changes within the school were a product of the adults, and think that all initiatives involving change in schools must include *all* of the people involved in school activities. It is important that young people's experiences of school life be taken into account when decisions are made. Otherwise, generations of children will find that taking part in school not is meaningful.

Equality is another aspect of participation. There is little equality between the young people and the teachers in school institutions, but we found that many boys and girls asked for equal conditions in decisions about the school. Many told us that they have a clearer view of their own and their classmates' working conditions than the teachers and therefore would like to share decisions with the teachers. We also observed that some of the pupils accepted that the adults make decisions for them, and that some teenagers had more influence over their school-life than others. The reason for this is that adults judged some teenagers to be more mature and able to take responsibility than others. All the young people we met had great trust in the adults. Sometimes this trust was built on experiences of equal relations; in other cases on more authoritative relations. The boys and girls in this school feel that adults show their youth culture respect. There are few restrictions on behaviour, but there is one important rule: everyone in the school is required to treat all others with respect.

Participation is complicated because all pupils are required to be in school. One of the boys expressed this 'Sometimes this place is like a prison, a Swedish prison, where you can have good food and everybody is good, but it is a bloody confined life' (Bergström & Holm (2002), field note 1:2). Pupils in this school are not forced to work together in the same room, at the same time and on the same content. We think that such flexible time and place solutions contribute to the fact that we did not see pupils sent to separate rooms because of bad behaviour or/and disabilities. On the other hand we did see exclusions of young people among peer groups. Many talked about such situations, but also noted that both adults and pupils work to prevent bullying: it was clear that the pupils hold neither themselves nor the adults responsible for situations in which certain peers became outsiders.

Influence varies. The most obvious example is that the young people have no influence on subject content. The adults negotiate the goals for every subject and the pupils are not invited to take part in this process. There is a gap between the perspective on knowledge of the school institution and on the young people's everyday lives: the young people find meaning in school life as a whole, not in the subject content alone. One result of a lack of influence over school life is that the desire to learn is diminished for many pupils. Many motivate themselves to learn by keeping an eye on future prospects. The teenagers mentioned that the subjects they like and find most interesting are practical and arts-oriented, but they do not look upon these as 'real' subjects. The school conveys the message that knowledge gained by scientific means is more valuable than that gained by practical experience.

The boys and girls find meaning mainly in 'the social project'. For them it is an escape, one that sometimes has to be hidden because the 'social project' has no official status. Some of the young people we met did not acknowledge its existence, while others described it as very important to their ability to work. The staff in the school we studied was conscious of the importance of 'the social project' for the young people's learning and well-being. We think that to realise the benefits of these ideas, teachers have to legitimate them and give them high status. They ought to find support for their thinking in theory. We have observed situations where the learning of school subjects and social development co-operated and the school became an arena in which solidarity and learning were created and grew in a mutual process.

Depending on whether participation is seen as a right of all children, as a practice for developing children who will become democratic citizens, or both, the consequences for everyday life in school for children will differ. In our study we found the 'children's rights' aspect most apparent in 'the social project', which demonstrated respect for the young people's culture and life situation. The teachers more often adopted the 'raising democratic citizens for the future' perspective. Our conclusion is that, in failing to recognise the importance of young people's use of time and space for social and emotional purposes ('the social project'), educators are missing an important opportunity. The social project could be a resource to develop democratic processes and co-operation among children - values and skills they can use here and now, and carry with them into their adult lives.

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