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Building democratic citizenship: What schools could learn from social movements

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Abstract

Several social movements have recently questioned the unjust status quo of different societies: Arab Springs, Spanish Indignados' movement and Occupy movements have all challenged the established world order. This paper aims to characterise the process of creating activist, political and democratic communities and the meanings that young people have built around them. It explores the relations and implications between social movements and school settings, focusing on the Spanish context. This paper is based on a case study of the General Assembly of Granada (Indignados' movement), which include participant observation, interviews and document analysis (following methodological suggestions of Stake and Simons), and in observations of the St. Paul General Assembly (Occupy London Stock Exchange, OLSX). The findings reveal that these kinds of movements have challenged notions of citizen and citizenship, political understanding, hierarchical structures and the democratic learning process. The way of civic and political engagement in society at large is changing: we should, therefore, review the process of learning democracy and citizenship inside educational institutions.

Keywords: *Social Movements, Democratic Education, Young people, Global crisis*

1. Introduction

The progressive loss of welfare state at the hands of capitalism has worsened the living conditions of those who live in Western Democracies, with particular impact in the so called PIGS countries- peripheral countries of the European Union (Portugal, Italy/Ireland, Greece and Spain) pressed by the hegemonic powers of France and Germany.

In a context of a created global crisis – economic, social, environmental, political and ethical- citizens have realized the immorality of decisions and actions of the economic and political powers; and have lost their trust in formal politics and politicians who seem to govern for their own benefit and for the markets and banks instead for the citizens. In this time of cuts in public spending and austerity measures many people all over the world have gone to the street to protest against an unjust established system: Demonstrations and general strikes in Greece since May 2010; the 2009-2011 Icelandic financial crisis protests; the 2011 March Portuguese protests- complaining about precarious working conditions for Portuguese youth, in particular qualified university graduates; and the Arab Spring against dictatorships, human rights violations and government corruption are some examples. While the virtual sphere also started to host protests against the current situation: in 2007 *Wikileaks*, a non-profit international media organization founded by the Australian Internet Activist Julian Assange, started to

publish huge amounts of confidential documents obtained by hacking into government computers; and in 2008 *Anonymous* launched its first actions for freedom of expression and independence of the Internet.

In the Spanish young democracy –which still displays traces of the Franco’s dictatorship permeated in the political sphere (e.g. extreme right wing parties, Falange’s shields in social housing, streets called as Franco’s Generals, and so on) and in the need to recover the historical memory of political crimes- the health of a poorly consolidated welfare State has been eroded inside the global general crisis provoked by capitalism.

The lack of trust in Spanish politicians and majoritarian Trade Unions is not new in the current two-party political system – from political corruption surrounding the Antiterrorist Liberation Group (GAL) and the train bombings on the morning of 11th of March 2004 (killing 191 people and wounding 1,800) to the application neoliberal measures by the theoretically left wing party in power - and involves both sides of Spanish politicians.

As a result of the dismantling of the Welfare State and the general lack of credibility in everything surrounding traditional politics, protesting groups started to emerge, both online and offline, in this social and political context – for example, (a) the so-called *Sinde Law* (a regulation of Internet copyrighted-content downloads) approved for the main political parties triggered the virtual campaign #nolesvotes calling on refusing to vote any of the parties that passed the law (More information in: <http://wiki.nolesvotes.org/wiki/Portada>); (b) protests against the Bologna Process gathered 5,000 people in a demonstration organized by “Youth Without Future” on April 7th in Madrid.

From the idea that collective work can have more impact and also chance to change the established status quo of the society than the isolated initiatives in 2011 born Real Democracy Now (DRY for its acronym in Spanish), a national – with local groups in several cities- ‘assemblist’ citizenship platform integrated by many collectives and individuals. They planned a demonstration on May 15 under the slogan "*we are not goods in the hands of politicians and bankers*" which took place simultaneously in several cities – the number of people gathered who didn’t feel represented by their government exceeded by far any expectations: for first time people had gathered in a common protest; without any flag, without any organizations or parties’ label.

Many young people encouraged by the success and popular support of the demonstration decided to continue with this event shifting from protest to action in the following days– they constituted *ad hoc* assemblies and set up camps throughout Spanish *plazas*. Every single assembly has (re)invented the movement, establishing autonomous and self-organized bodies with authority to make their own decision in order to address aspects which were affecting directly to people involved in it – nevertheless one of their basic tasks would be to keep coordinated with other assemblies.

Several camps were dislodged by police in a show of power and violence, in some cases more symbolic than real – in Granada protesters were dragged away one by one to the adjoining street, three of them were arrested as a lesson for the others, and all their

belongings were thrown into a garbage truck; in some cases objective violence - violence – dislodgement of Barcelona in May 27th with more than 120 injured activist. Any case, the effect was opposite to the one expected by the police and/or the Government: the authoritarian imposition increased the outrage of citizens motivating more people to protest against it – fear is no longer the harmful weapon it used to be during our recent dictatorship.

2. The case of *Plaza del Carmen*:

As an example of one of those self-organized autonomous assemblies I introduce *Plaza del Carmen* Assembly, Granada:

2.1 *Agreements on the basics: how they are*

The first day agreements on the basics were established by consensus in the General Assembly and they would be present in the whole development of the Granada's movement - each proposal, activity, behavior should respect these agreements. The assembly declared itself as non-trade unionist, non-partisan, denominational, pacifist, and creative, inclusive, and collective responsible; establishing the open general assembly as a place for decision (by consensus and with rotating moderators and minute recorders) and the working teams as places for elaborating proposals and further discussions. They declared they are for constant communication and coordination with other assemblies; and for spreading their ideas both physically and in free and decentralized networks and alternative media – informing traditional media through press releases.

Pacific resistance and civil disobedience have become useful political tools of the movement to question the established status quo - A local election was going to be held on May 22 and Spanish electoral law forbids any kind of political advertising in the 24 hours both prior and during an election. The Electoral Central Board declared all protesters camps around the country illegal (even when they had been already declared illegal since the outset). In Granada, under the slogan "*I am reflecting, I am not demonstrating*", citizens did not dismantle the camp, but questioned again the concept of individualistic reflection (understanding reflection as public and collective), the justice of the established legality, and ultimately the legitimacy of politicians to think and decide for everyone. They reflected about who can declare something illegal: "*Citizenry declare the Electoral Central Board illegal*".

2.2 *Demands: what they want*

In the General Assembly of May 22 the General Assembly reached a consensus about the more urgent demands they were asking for - among the more than 600 proposals written by citizens organized by a working team: "Real democracy right now" - direct and participatory democracy in which the Assembly shall be the main instrument for discussion, reflection and collective decision making -; repealing of the labour

legislation reform; repealing the Pensions Act reform; a real right to decent housing; the guarantee of social services and basic needs; repealing of Granada Civic Ordinance

2.3 Structures: how they organize themselves

Open General Assembly is the main structure of public debate and decision making. Working teams were created from the needs perceived by the participants. The first day four groups emerged: a) Group of proposals, b) Legal group; c) Logistics group; d) Diffusion group. But quickly the structure of the movement was growing and getting increasingly more complex - as was reflected in the evolution of physical space and infrastructure - whilst the general assembly remained the main reference point, many new working groups had been created; others had been divided into branches; and a process of decentralization had started in neighborhoods, villages and University – what had begun as dissemination branches had getting increasingly more autonomy until they had become assemblies in their own right.

They understood the camping not as an end but as a mean, as a space for self-organization and the creation of networks. When they considered they were enough organized with an effective general assembly and strong working teams, camp was no longer a useful political tool so on June 9 after the set up the structure in a festive protest: “*We do not leave the square, we take the city*”.

3. What does this movement show us?

3.1 About citizens and citizenship:

Changing citizenship: We live in a global world facing global conditions when independent, autonomous assemblies all over around the world (p. eg. OLSX St Paul’s Assembly and *Plaza del Carmen* Assembly) engage with debates about the same issues- such as bank crisis, undemocratic transnational institutions and corporations, growing inequalities, environmental sustainability, and so on - reaching the conclusion that we have to address globality through locality.

Unquestionably media communication has had a core role in the spreading of the outrage motivated by the corruption of banks, corporations, and the politics of global institutions; helping to coordinate global actions- people from more than 90 countries joined in a common protest rallying on October 15 showing that the borders of national States have been blurred.

From pre-citizens to autonomous citizens – The profile of young people has been discredited for a long time – they were called the lazy generation who do not want study nor work, the politically apathetic generation, dummies engaged with electronic media, self-centered people only interested in partying and drinking, and so on. This movement has tried to break these stereotypes empowering youth – they have claimed that they are not lazy but the most educated generation without employment, they are not politically apathetic but are not listened to by politicians, they are not a disconnected and wired

NetGeneration but valuable citizens involved in an intergenerational society which is facing common troubles– “*we are the children of comfort but will not be the parents of conformity*”, they are interested in partying but not any more than politics and public life – “*we like drinking, but we do like more thinking*”

Nevertheless a question remains: was this movement empowering for all young people? Did the movement deconstruct all derogatory conceptions of minoritarian social groups? Demystified stereotypes were related with middle class educated young people- many of them undergraduate students or graduates between their twenties and mid-thirties – corresponding with the profile of most protesters although there were people of all ages involved.

Secondary school students were not active participants in the assemblies and work teams, and children were relegated to a parallel (educative) space to the democratic agora governed by older people. That shows that hierarchies based on age were broken down to some degree but did not disappear completely in practice, although this question was raised by some citizens in different debates and actions.

Female citizens as activists: a countercultural movement which questions the established order cannot avoid facing the deconstruction of the patriarchy in which Western societies are founded- indeed, feminist critics have had an impact in reshaping relations between public and private politics. However, in the first (academic) publications and collections about the movement women were silenced again by researchers and writers.

In *Plaza del Carmen*, discourses about gender appeared linked to power relationships – a) feminine language structures were not questioned when used by (male or female) figures with authority within the movement but were not accepted by all when used by other females; b) gender role divides appeared stronger in the more hierarchical groups with very marked power relationships, like University assembly (in the first university assembly more than 85% were male interventions – and most of female interventions were made by women in the top of the academic and age hierarchies - whilst women had a core role as facilitators).

Nevertheless, gender was one of the issues addressed from the beginning and images of women and non-sexist language frequently appears in the banners. This event indicates a critical gender awareness of certain sectors, which is still not widespread in the dynamics of everyday interaction.

Power groups: The assembly has performed an active effort to achieve horizontality in order to get real democratic relationships in which every opinion matters. In order to achieve this, (a) a turnover in people who played core roles in assemblies and (b) a process of learning and empowerment of other citizens to be leaders, have received special importance in all dynamics -as it was shown in workshops like the one for learning how to moderate assemblies, or the one for learning how to make quality public records.

The absence of stable spokespersons avoided the printing of particular and biased view of the movement, enabling many sectors and groups to join in the process of working

towards a common goal – working for the same intended purpose through various means. These different groups have imprinted their style into the assemblies, providing them with a plural essence: “Trots” have influence from inside the assemblies’ governance, moderating and trying to take positions of decision making; syndicalists have employed the language of worker’s struggle and proposed general strikes; anarchists have rejected the system, influencing squats with their political capital and previous experience to claim the use of public spaces (p. eg. occupation of squares and banks); people involved in students’ movements have seek to apply the outrage reasons to the university situation of privatization and commodification; people in an immersive process have experienced and learnt this form of assemblist organization for the first time, giving to the movement renewed points of view and energy; and so on.

3.2 About the political understandings

Political (dis)affection- A growing worry about political disengagement has started in Western democracies, with a special emphasis on young people. Some researchers have placed the blame on youth culture and some on the lack of political opportunities to participate, but all seem to agree with the decline of civic and political engagement (Banaji and Buckingham, Forthcoming).

In this picture, nobody expected that thousands of people, most of them young, would suddenly demand democracy; in other words, demand a system in which they have the option of effective participation. With this claim they show that they are neither politically disaffected nor disinterested in public issues, but to some extent silenced. Massive responses – demonstrations, protests, actions and camps- points to disenchantment with institutional politics and a general increase in the already high levels of distrust in Spanish politicians, but not to a real abandonment of politics.

An electoral law which created an uneven distribution between parties – giving clear advantage to majority parties PP (right wing) and PSOE (left wing) – resulted in a two-party system in which alternatives are few; the decisions tend to move away from campaign promises; the capital dictatorship managed by the supremacy of the Interests of the IMF and the ECB removes citizens’ interests from those of institutional politics; the limited opportunities for participation and consultation; privileges of the Political class; and so on, have made that people look to participate in less hierarchical environments. In this sense, vote turn out and volunteering with political parties, trade unions or traditional association or NGOs cannot be seen any longer as exclusive predictors of civic and political engagement.

Relation between the movement and institutional politics – This movement is not about political parties or trade unions, so one can ask the question: does it have any impact in formal politics? It has had real impact in political agendas on both parties, introducing some inescapable debates such as those about decent housing, subprime mortgage and evictions, unemployment and precarious employment among young, and, to some extent, even about the current electoral system.

Challenging traditional politics and communication - The concept “representation” – core concept in the established representative democracy - has been profoundly disputed: “*They do not represent us*”, neither politicians nor mass media communication. People do not want to be represented by anyone; they want to have their say and be listened to; they want to decide about the issues which affect them.

The absence of main stable leaders has been part of the core essence of this countercultural movement; they have managed to annoy more than one person who cannot understand the apparent organized chaos of a horizontal self- organized movement: where was the spokesperson to talk with reporters eager to find quick news? Where was the person who led the movement to negotiate and make pacts with politicians? Where were the conveners of the assemblies wanted by the police to control the expansion of the movement?

It is the first time in a long time that people gather to talk about what they want and not only about what they do not want. It is also the first time that citizens get together in a same struggle, forgetting means and focusing on aims – making real the slogan “*nothing can compete with the contagious euphoria of collective dreams*”. In this “contagious euphoria” people have been empowered through the experience of political agency: what they are saying has a real outcome!

This empowering experience has led to a (re)politicization of the society at large, people has begun to talk about politics again because what they are saying is starting to be listened to. And probably this reinforcement of the political agency is one of the most important achievements of this movement and one of the reasons because it will have a lasting impact

In this sense, politics (and the communication that build the political general opinion) have been retaken by citizens. As Serrano (2010) said *people have the voice but they just have to take the floor* – in other words, this crisis of representations shows the emergence of DIY (do-it-yourself) politics and communication.

The retaking of politics has been accompanied -against official “recommendations” - by the occupation of public spaces or spaces with public functions (squares, public buildings, NHS, universities, banks, and so on) as a symbol of the return of the popular sovereignty; the return of citizenship that symbolizes the recuperation of an Agora, a *plaza*, as assemblyist space; the determination of its citizenry to decide what is public.

Liberalization of the culture of fear- Political strategies have been based on the control of the more active citizenry through the dissemination of this fear culture, but this movement has shown them that this tool is not working any longer: any insinuation of repression is answered with people’s union against the threatening figure. On the day of the eviction in *Plaza del Carmen*, they promised “*today we are 100, tomorrow we will be 1000*”, and, effectively, there were more than 1000 answering “*today, they are the ones who have to ask permission to be here*”.

Combined with the use of control as political strategy the misinformation of the population has played a central role in the building of the public opinion, the use of

euphemisms have characterized the political language: war and death have been called collateral damages; the reduction of work rights, reforms; cuts in public spending, economic adjustment; bail out banks, bail out a country. Within a culture of fear and ambiguity it is not very difficult to sell oneself as a redeemer; but this strategy does not work any longer. People have started to educate themselves, to learn further about the political arena, to talk in a common language, introducing all these polemical terms and concepts (some marked by the previous history) in the public debate as a sign of a political maturity – they have had debates about the market economy, the press groups and their role in the building of public opinion, capitalism, neo-liberalism, delegation, representation, self-organization, participation, deliberation, and the concept of democracy itself.

Reshaping politics - This movement has reminded us that politics is not something that can remain enclosed in the walls of the hall council; that it belongs to the citizens and not just to politicians; and goes far beyond voting the day of an election – so the movement did not stop on May 22, after local elections.

Active politics have been reshaped in a changing postmodern world: Boundaries have been blurred and politics have become a dynamic play that fits in a flexible world:

1. Liquid politics (Bauman, 2009): citizens confront new challenges like the blurred of boundaries that used to be solid and defined: private and public, personal and political sphere, civic and political arena, legality and legitimacy, and so forth, are not as clear cut as before.
2. Personal becomes political: the movement has adopted the feminist critic, politicizing issues which were not considered as politics before. Issues like globalization, economic justice, environment, human rights, gender, sexual orientation, what we eat and so on appeared mixing political perspectives and normative personal implications.
3. Care networks: an importance of the care networks has appeared enabling the maintenance of equal relationships, in which everyone feels she/he has the support of others. These care networks have played a central role in ensuring the attachment to the group since the very beginning of the movement. It has been a movement where emotions and the personal sphere have not been left aside but have played a key role in creating a connectedness; a connectedness that arose in the tensest moments in which a network of support and care became fundamental.
4. Lifestyle politics: housing, subprime mortgages (and banks' corruption), evictions, corporations' accountability, work organization, unjustified fires, retirement conditions, alternative transportation, Vega's (Agricultural and green region of Granada) sustainability, food, education (fees), public order, civil rights, police control, etc. came to the forefront of politics, characterizing which Bennet (1998) called *Lifestyle politics*.
5. Back yard politics: As Giddens said government is too small to address global concerns but too big in order to solve local issues (2005). In this sense it has been a shift from macro to micro politics, centered in local communities; while at the same time global issues are reinterpreted and addressed from these local contexts.

6. Horizontal and flexible organizational structures: the movement has been prefigurative, becoming itself in the change which activists hoped for the general democratic system.
7. A language of irony and political comedy/parody: double senses are used to caricaturize the established formal political arena considered to be a joke itself. *“Electoral boards forbid juice because it is too concentrate.”*, *“Getting concentrated for a test and being arrested by the electoral board.”*
8. Creativity: in the attempt of (re)invent politics they look for new forms of catchy actions and language, away from traditional unattractive political advertisements. This creativity is shown throughout slogans and banners - *“I cannot tighten my belt and drop my pants at the same time”*, *“I have spare month at the end of my salary”*; images of all kinds; performances - a group of people making a parody of banks inside a bank; actions- cleaning cars in the street with the degree certificate or making 1 cent deposits to collapse a bank branch which were about to evict a neighbor.
9. Hope is not lost anytime constituting a motivation in the political struggle. In this sense the rhetoric of democracy as a desirable dream is widespread throughout the movement- *“join the dream, stay to sleep”*; *“if you don’t let us dream, we will not let you sleep”*; *“nothing can compete with the contagious euphoria of collective dreams”*; *“and tomorrow they will say that dreaming is illegal ...”*
10. Joyfulness: outraged but happy to be participative citizens. A notion of an *Aristotelian civic republicanism* arose, showing that active participation is not only instrumental but itself socially and personally valuable. Demonstrations to the rhythm of drums have shifted from an angry and grumpy mass to thousands of people singing and dancing for democracy; and as it said a banner with a huge smile in de 19J demonstration people are: *“involved and happy”*
11. The immediacy culture - *“We want it all, and we want it now”*- reflects the postmodern conception of time. However, this redefinition of time contrasts the respect for the slow process of a participatory democracy - long debates and immediate actions and communication are mixed in a multidimensional movement.
12. Technology for politics: we live in a technological world surrounded by electronic devices of all kinds, and that devices have been (re)politicized – in the one side each technology is political, and in the other politics needs technology to be developed.
13. Online-offline politics: a continuum between online and offline political engagement shows the growing importance of virtual settings, although we cannot understand this new settings as independent and discrete scenarios.

Reshaping Democracy – Most of the time ‘democracy’ is restricted to vote every few years in order to choose between a limited number of established political parties. With a recent history of dictatorship Spanish citizens expected to have the opportunity to participate in the political affairs after the death of Franco, but they have found an uneven representative democracy in which they have really few options to influence public issues.

They want to shift from a notion of the current representative democracy to a claim for a participative democracy- "*Our dreams do not fit in your ballot box*": they believe in public deliberation, in assemblist and dialogic process, in the freedom of expression and the active listening to minorities. They believe in a democracy built between all citizens, and not in one managed by a privileged political class. They believe in the collective building of solutions and not in voting among few pre-established solutions. They just believe in the Agora, in the public sphere.

The deconstruction of the notion of democracy has not been made just through theoretical debates but through the experience of an equalitarian and democratic ethos: means and ends are overlapping within this movement – they work democratically to improve democracy.

3.3 About the democratic learning process:

Democracy is a social construction, and as so it is not innate, it has to be learnt; and this learning process was one of the most powerful issues that the movement has raised: squares became educative communities in many ways. The assumption that democracy requires a learning process implies that a) the building of a shared process takes time and immediate answers are not possible, and (b) as learners (and as human beings) citizens would make mistakes, which would not be a problem as long as they learnt from them. The model of learning which the assembly embraced was based on: slow pedagogy, collective learning and in the empowerment of the community. If we think about the idea of a non-written "curriculum" of the movement, it would be based on the Stenhouse's procedural principles instead of Tylor's objectives, in the sense that the learning process focused on the process and not on the outcomes, transforming the square in laboratories of democracy.

Learning has been understood as a social activity, showing a shift from the individualism to the creation of a necessary collectivity in order to create a self-organized (learning) community which works without mandates and hierarchies. In this sense, they have opted for a dialogic process to learn how to establish relations and/or communication with: a) other assemblies (neighborhood, university and general assemblies) and work teams; b) other cities; c) Real Democracy Now; d) previous social movements; e) institutional politics; and so on.

3.4 About the role of (new) media:

Media is not a magic potion to revitalize civil and political engagement but as technological devices are widespread in western societies and have a place in everyday life we should look at them as new channels - with their own characteristics – to communicate and represent reality (which, logically, affects politics). Far from technological determinism, the effects – either negative or positive- of the Internet (and other media and technologies) depend on its social uses, not in the technology itself.

Inside the movement the Internet is valued as a communication channel that enables massive diffusion of any kind of information. However, virtual networks did not displace the importance of the direct personal networks, understanding the virtual sphere as a possible- but not substitute- extension of the assemblist off-line dynamics. The online sphere is not a utopian discrete space, people participate in offline social contexts simultaneously to their online participation- we cannot understand one without the other. In this sense the Internet appears to be a paradoxical tool which is: (a) inclusive and exclusive at the same time – inclusive because it enable the participation of those who do not dare to speak in front of a big public or those who do not have enough time to follow the whole offline dynamics; and exclusive since multiple digital divides are still dominating digital access and uses - However, a long term technological literacy process is seen as a way to get some of the opportunities that a (utopian?) e-democracy can offer. (b) Informative and diss-informative- informative in the sense that is a channel where consumers become producers and audiences become writers enabling a flux of non-mediated free information, but des-informative since the saturation of the information makes difficult to focus on the relevant issues. (c) Coordinated and dis coordinated-coordinated because peer to peer communication makes possible the idea of a useful horizontal network but dis coordinated in the sense that multiple virtual channels produce a variety of information which may be sometimes conflicting (e.g. an appointment convened at two different hours).

The horizontal promise of the Internet: Everyone can be audience and writer but power relationships are still present in the use of the Internet – as in any kind of human relation- and should be keep in mind when analyzing the social meaning built through these channels. We can find several power determinants: a) Technological experience and knowledge which determine who has access and control of the information (v-gr. Diffusion group, which managed the web and the official movement profiles in all the social networking websites, was formed by people with advanced technological skills, such as computer engineer students or telecommunications students); b) Time spent in virtual networks and disposition to use the Internet – those who spend more time posting from their profiles in the movement pages get much more visibility and voice than others; c) Seniority – following a meritocratic logic those who arrived first to the diffusion group have access to passwords, meanwhile new people have to gain the confidence to get them; d) Economic power of commercial social networking websites which can censure what they consider as inappropriate information and who, at last instance, own the information posted on the Internet; e) Access to/management of the Internet connection – One of the significant virtual struggles between the Mayor and the movement was about the management of the WIFI, while the first cut it in several times, protesters hacked it again and again - changing its name from “comtrend” to “viva la revolución”

Conclusions: What schools could learn from social movements

Formal hierarchical politics have been challenged, and so have been representative established democracy. Why don't we challenge school hierarchies and reinvent politics and democracy inside schools as the public agoras they should be? The way of civic and political engagement in society at large is changing. We should assume that school

democracy and hierarchical relationships inside educational institutions should change too in order to enable the engagement of the students as citizens – citizens inside the public institution of education and citizens in each area of their lives outside the school settings.

These movements and their reaction to authoritarian impositions have shown that strategies based on social control are not useful any longer. Instead of institutions of control, schools should be public spaces to experience real political agency as a way of enable students to feel they are important and complete members of the educative community:

I have experienced real agency for first time, I have developed a collective identity within the movement, I have felt myself integrated in a political network inside which I have developed strong horizontal links of work and care as well. I can say: I have been empowered, and this is the reason why I – and like me many other young people - stay committed to this political movement (26-year-old activist)

Encouraging a process of politicization goes beyond consulting from time to time, is about promoting critical thinkers with the ability to interrogate the institution itself in the search for social justice; about encouraging autonomous and informed students able to question the decisions of the authority about how to learn and why, and how to organize their learning process. Educative process is political; decisions are far from a neutral and participation of students in the building of the community is core to be accountable to their interest as school citizens, and to development of their political commitment and engagement:

This is a politicization which would be hard to turn back from once you've felt that your opinion matters and you do have a say in a participatory democracy which goes beyond the merely act of voting between pre determinate options every four years. My levels of political awareness and knowledge have risen greatly, as have my democratic and assemblyist skills, and ultimately my civic and political engagement. (26-year-old activist)

While discovering the structures under which democracy is played in order to develop it in schools, we should also consider the importance of understanding this new wages of civic and political engagement in the society as large as "Democratic education begins not only with children who are to educate, but with the citizens who are their teachers" (Guttman 2001:70). Democracy is something that can only be learnt significantly through democratic experience, and democratic experience could be promoted by those who have had this previous democratic learning/experience. Learning and teaching together democracy, experiencing democracy and living democratically is all about the same.

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