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Education for democratic citizenship as whole-school activity: A case study

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Abstract

This is a theoretical and empirical inquiry on citizenship education as a whole-school activity explored through a case study of an upper secondary school in Denmark. A whole-school approach to citizenship education means involving students in democratic processes at school, rather than teaching citizenship as a solely curricular subject. Focusing on student's learning processes the study aims to examine how students learn the capabilities for citizenship by experiencing democracy at school. In particular the research question addressed by the study was: How are students socialized in a school that practices whole-school citizenship education? Citizenship is conceptualized drawing on theories of educational and political philosophy (e.g., Dewey, Arendt, and Habermas) as an activity taking place in a democratic political space characterized by equality openness, pluralism, deliberation, and decision-making. Based on a literature review, a set of capabilities for citizenship – cognitive, emotional and ethical, and capabilities for action – is identified. The methodology of the research is the ethnographic case study. Qualitative data was collected through a review of official school documents, participant observation, semi-structured interviews with teaching staff and focus groups with students. Participants were ten teachers and twenty students (14 to 19 years old), and data was triangulated across sources and methods. It was found that students' capabilities for citizenship are developed in school spaces that enable them to participate in deliberation and decision-making in the conditions of openness, equality, and pluralism. Findings are contextualized in the broader socio-political context of the Danish education system and reforms.

Keywords: *Citizenship education, education for democracy, whole-school approach, student participation, empowerment.*

Introduction

1. Democratic citizenship education

The term 'citizenship' has been defined with multiple meanings and it is still debated today. In the literature, among the various and contested definitions, there is some agreement that 'being a citizen' involves being a member of a collectivity, having a set of rights and duties, and taking part in political decision-making (Landrum, 2002). At the beginning of the twenty-first century education for democratic citizenship was the object of renewed interest (ibid.). It was recognized that 'democracy is essentially fragile and that it depends on the active engagement of citizens, not just in voting, but in developing and participating in sustainable and cohesive communities' (ibid., pp. 433). Education was considered as playing an important role in citizens' formation and strengthening

civil society, and schools were seen as the place where students would develop the knowledge, values, and skills, and dispositions to become democratic citizens (Hahn, 1998).

Traditional citizenship education focuses on transmitting civic knowledge (Keating et al., 2010), or 'what' one needs to know to be a citizen in modern representative democracies, such as knowing about governmental institutions, elections, division and separation of powers, the rule of law, basic rights, and duties (Print, Ørnstrøm, & Skovgaard Nielsen, 2002, pp, 199). Civic knowledge is usually transmitted through curriculum, either by introducing 'citizenship' as a school subject; or by integrating it into traditional subjects; or as a cross-curricular theme (Neubauer, 2012). Most literature on citizenship education focus on analyzing school curricula and the civic knowledge taught in civics class, or across disciplines in schools. Traditional citizenship education can also be taught in an environment that is undemocratic, by enforcing constraint, hierarchy, inequality, compliance with rules, codes of conduct, and discipline, rather than promoting students' participation (Tse, 2000., pp. 41). Analyzing school curriculum is not enough to understand how students are socialized as citizens. It is the 'political socialization' taking place in the whole school that forms active citizens, such as participating in decision-making within the school. As pointed out by Print, Ørnstrøm, & Skovgaard Nielsen (2002), 'only by acting democratically at all levels within the school and developing the abilities to act as democratic citizens later on in life can citizenship education be promoted effectively in students' (ibid, pp. 206).

The present study will examine citizenship education as a whole-school activity, meaning by involving students in democratic school practices. The aim is to investigate from a theoretical and empirical perspective the following research question: How students socialized in a school that practices whole school citizenship education within the current Danish education system? A Danish secondary school, Det Frie Gymnasium, was selected as a case study since it was created based on the principles of direct democracy. The case study focuses on students' democratic experiences and how such experiences contribute to develop their capabilities for democratic citizenship.

2. Democratic citizenship education as a whole-school activity: A theoretical framework

A whole-school approach to democratic citizenship education focuses on learning democratic citizenship through experience at school. In order to understand what this means let us look at two main concepts: experience and democracy. Experience in education could be conceptualized drawing on Dewey (2004), as the activity that allows people to make conscious connection between actions and their consequences. Learning through experience occurs when students are able to act, and undergo the consequences of their actions, and reflect on the connection between the two. The concept of democracy, from the Greek demos (people) kratos (rule), means 'rule by the people', or that the people govern. In ancient Greece in the city-state of Athens, all citizens (except for females and slaves) participated in public affairs and political decision-making in the 'ecclesia' (the assembly), where they had equal right to speak, vote, and hold office

(Held, 2006). Democracy was meant to maintain citizens' freedom, by enabling them to govern themselves. A whole-school approach to democratic citizenship education creates in the school the conditions for students to have democratic experiences, meaning to take decisions about school issues. Through these experiences, students learn to act and reflect while participating in democratic processes. In order for schools to have students experience democracy, they need to create spaces where students can act as citizens.

The characteristics of a democratic space were identified in various theories deliberative democracy, respectively: openness, equality, pluralism, deliberation, and decision-making. (1) openness refers to the possibility to let all participate in the political space, in schools it may refer to an open classroom climate and opening access to students to political spaces for deliberation and decision-making, (2) equality refers to equal distribution of power among the members of the collectivity, in schools it refers to granting equal right to participate, speak, and decide on various school issues; (3) pluralism refers freedom of expression, exposure to various perspectives, and openness to critique; (4) deliberation refers to argumentative dialogue on collective issues, in school spaces it is the activity through which students learn to developing and exchanging opinions; and (5) decision-making refers to equal right to vote and decide on collective issues, in schools it enable students to act politically and see the consequences of their actions. Creating the conditions a democratic political space at school is the basis for a whole-school approach to democratic citizenship education.

2.1. Student empowerment

Educating democratic citizens with a whole-school approach means *empowering* students to participate in deliberation and decision-making on school issues. Power here is not seen as a characteristic of an individual, but as the ability of a group to 'get together and act in concert' (Arendt, 2005, pp. 52) through speech and action. Power emerges from a group that voluntarily engages in concerted actions, it exists as long as a group holds together, and it is located in the political space in-between individuals separating and connecting them (ibid.). Schools with a whole-school approach to democratic citizenship education are usually called 'democratic schools' (Apple & Beane, 1995) and are characterized by empowering students and involving them in democratic processes at school.

2.2. The capabilities for citizenship

In order for a citizen to take part in the political space he or she should develop the capabilities of a democratic citizen. The term 'capability' refers to 'the ability to...' (Sen, 1985), and it has to do with agency, freedom and the opportunities to undertake the actions and activities that one wants to engage in. The capabilities for citizenship can be articulated in various dimensions. Inspired by Audigier's (1999) 'core competencies for democratic citizenship', I propose three dimensions, respectively cognitive capabilities, ethic and emotional capabilities, and capabilities for action. (1) Cognitive capabilities refer to political ways of thinking, such as critical, autonomous, reflective and representative thinking. Representative thinking is particularly relevant for citizenship

education because it involves the ability to consider multiple perspectives when taking a decision and acting for the common good. (2) Emotional and ethical capabilities for citizenship can be defined as the ability to take decisions based on ethical criteria and the civic courage (emotional self-control) to enact them even when they may imply a risk for oneself. (3) Capabilities for action refer to the ability to engage in political action through speech (e.g., expressing opinions) and actions (e.g., voting).

3. The case of a Danish high school and the context

The study focuses on the case of a high school in Denmark. Denmark is a relatively homogeneous society based on cooperation, egalitarianism, and collectivism. The Danish education system historically embodied the value of participatory democracy, and educated citizens not only taught through school curriculum, but by promoting student participation in councils, committees and assemblies, as well promoting democratic school practices such as an open classroom climate, and democratic teaching practices such as 'pluralistic teaching'. Indeed Danish students were found to score high in levels of active citizenship and political engagement in comparative citizenship studies (Hahn, 1998).

The school selected for the case study is Det Frie Gymnasium (DFG), a Danish democratic school created in the 1970s as part of the friskoler movement with the aim to build a free and alternative school based on democracy, and transformed in recent years under the recent educational reforms. DFG is based on a whole-school approach to democracy, and has been functioning for the past forty years by regularly involving students in democratic deliberation and decision-making in all aspects of the school. The goal is that 'everyone should be able to shape their everyday life and the school itself. This goes for pupils as well as teachers, in terms of the teaching and in terms of all the other things that contribute to the life of the school' (Det Frie Gymnasium website). This case study analyses how students learn democratic citizenship through democratic experiences at school.

Democratic citizenship education in Denmark was affected in the last decades by education reforms in two main directions. First, since 2005 there has been an emphasis on strengthening the Danish national identity with the introduction of a new school subject in called 'Christianity studies, life enlightenment and citizenship', which promoted the values and ideas of the Danish identity. Second, since 2005 a series of reforms inspired by new public management, contributed to centralize the main decisions of school curricula, and national examinations in the hands of the Danish Ministry of Education, and de-democratize the education system (Hjort, 2006). The reforms affected also DFG, which was stirred through funding to establish of board of directors as school authority, to eliminate alternative subjects, to compete with other schools for funding, to introduce school grades and their publication on the school website. The recent de-democratizing, and market-oriented education reforms have affected citizenship education in Denmark, and DFG by reducing the spaces for practicing democracy, and student participation in the school. Understanding the trends

and reforms of the Danish education system is relevant to examine the case within its context.

4. Methodology

This paper is part of a larger research examining various aspects of the school selected for the case study including school governance, and educational processes. However, this paper will only focus on the educational process, and the activities within the classroom as a democratic pedagogical space. Other school spaces for student participation, such as the school assembly and committees will not be examined here. Data was collected and analyzed drawing on Bernstein's' (1975) message systems, in order to understand how knowledge is organized and decided on at school through classroom practices. The three message systems refer to (a) curriculum, what counts as valid knowledge; (b) pedagogy, what counts as a valid transmission of knowledge; and (c) evaluation, what counts as a valid acquisition of knowledge.

4.1. Research methods

Data on school curriculum, pedagogy, and evaluation was collected with a combination of qualitative research methods, and triangulated during the analysis.

Focus groups sessions of about 60 to 90 minutes were conducted with four groups of students stratified by age. Semi structured 'active interviews' were conducted with teachers on pre-defined topics with variable wording and question sequence. School documents, policies, and website contents were reviewed to identify the norms, values, and modus operandi of the school. Classroom observations were not conducted because of the language barrier (most classes were in Danish); yet interviews and focus groups were used to gather accounts of classroom practices from students and teachers. The interviews and focus groups took place in English and documents had to be translated from Danish to English.

4.2. Participants: 20 students (10M, 10 F, from 14 to 19 years old), and 10 teachers voluntarily took part in focus groups and interviews. The sample was based on convenience sampling, and snowball sampling. Teachers' were selected trying to have a variety of subjects represented.

4.3 Procedure: Access was gain by presenting the research at the school assembly and having it approved through democratic voting. Data collection consisted in a one month ethnographic fieldwork, with participation in school activities, a well as focus groups and interviews. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. I tried to combine my theoretical categories based on the theoretical framework used to define democracy and citizenship, with the themes and issues emerging from participants, as well as comparing findings with existing literature. The analysis consisted in examining, patterns and regularities, matching, contrasting, aggregating, comparing and ordering notes and elaborating interpretations.

5. Results: Learning citizenship in a democratic classroom

In schools, the classroom is a pedagogical space because its main activity is teaching and learning and it cannot be equated to a political space where the main activity is politics. At DFG teachers attempt to create the conditions of a democratic pedagogical space and attempt to involve students in deliberation and decision-making in educational activities. The educational philosophy of DFG emphasizes self-determined learning. Students are expected to be responsible for their own learning and to take part together with the teacher to the learning process not only by doing homework, but also by actively contributing to their education inside and outside the class, participating in the democratic processes, and in joint arrangements.

The activities taking place within the classroom reflects the conditions of a democratic pedagogical space, openness, equality, and pluralism.

Openness can be noticed from the fact that students are encouraged to actively participate in their own learning, there is an open classroom climate by allowing controversial topics to be discussed and encouraging students to express themselves even when they are not sure. Being allowed to make mistakes empowers students because it allows them to try to engage in individual or collective, and see the relation between ideas and actions. Students' ideas are listened to and contribute to transform the education process. As a 17 year old girl says, 'the teachers are very open-minded and listen to what we want' (Student, M, 17 years old).

Equality in the educational processes refers to the relationship among students and between teachers and students. In the school web-site, teachers are described as 'teachers without limits', meaning that the relationship between teachers and students is 'based on democracy and open mindedness, where loyalty and respect for each other is the centre of the relationship' (DFG website). Both teachers and students describe the school as a place where there are no 'authorities' nor 'hierarchies'. However, both teacher and students in the sample acknowledge that they play different roles in the pedagogical space by saying that 'we have different responsibilities', 'of course they know that we are older, and more experienced, and we know more on different things', 'of course the teacher is clever and everything'. These comments suggest that teachers still hold some form of authority, but they are not authoritarian.

Pluralism at DFG refers both to the content, pedagogy of education. Pluralism of content refers to number of perspectives presented when teaching certain content, and the possibility for students to express their opinions in class, even when critical towards that of their teacher. Students are encouraged to take an active role towards knowledge, by critically analyzing the content and examining different perspectives on the same issues. Students are encouraged to express their personal (and critical) view not only about the content, but also about the teachers' views or approaches. Students report that 'teachers get happy when you say "I think you did that wrong"' (Student, F, 14 years old).

5.1. Democratic educational processes: curriculum, pedagogy, and evaluation

In order to examine deliberation and decision-making in the organization of knowledge at school, I analyzed students and teacher's perspectives concerning curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation in the classroom.

Curriculum

Curriculum refers to the contents that are to be taught at school. DFG, since it is a school part of the Danish public education system, the selection of 'valid knowledge' is mostly done by the Danish Ministry of Education who indicates the subjects and themes of the national curriculum that secondary school are expected to follow in order to be officially recognized. Teachers are caught between having to deliver contents from the compulsory national curriculum, and trying to meet the students' educational needs and wishes. Students are involved in deciding what they want to learn, but to the extent that it is possible within the national curriculum. As they say:

- There is only perhaps 5% you can do differently, but I have to follow the curriculum...Basically I do not have much freedom in regard to what I have to teach (Teacher, M).
- When it comes down to basic we have to follow the curriculum from the Ministry of education...but we can decide how we want to address these key areas (Teacher, M)
- Within the boundaries there is a lot freedom (Teacher, M).

Managing the tension between national curriculum and the commitment to create a democratic pedagogical space depends largely on the teachers, and as students say 'some teachers are maybe a bit more large about not following the rules' (Students, F, 18 years old), but both teachers and students recognize that not following the national curriculum would imply the risk of failing national exams. Teacher at DFG, use the 'margin of freedom' to attempt to create a democratic pedagogical space, and co-construct the contents of the education with the students. As reported by students:

- Almost every teacher tried to offer his or her hand and say what do you want to do in your next topic? What are your preferences at learning? And we get these choices. (Student, M, 19 years old).
- Sometimes the teacher asks us what kind of subject would you like for the next period of time and how do you wanna work with it? And then we discuss (Student, F, 17 years old).
- There are things that we have to learn, but we can relate them to the topics we want to learn...we decide that ourselves, as long as there are some points that we have to include (Student, F, 18 years old).

To a certain extent students take part in deciding the content of their education. This procedure introduces a democratic element in the pedagogical space, by allowing students to form their opinions about what they want to learn, present arguments

supporting it, and voting to decide which topics to work on. Through this procedure students learn in practice (in a small scale) to look critically at knowledge, take decisions on what counts as valid or relevant knowledge to them, rather than passively accepting what has been decided as valid knowledge for them.

Pedagogy

Pedagogy refers to the way in which context is transmitted at school. The Danish ministry of education requires a written description of the pedagogical methods used in each school, but the modes of teaching can be decided by each school. The pedagogical approach of DFG emphasizes cooperation and shared decision-making between teachers and students. Education is seen as a '...project between the teachers and the students...' (Student, F, 18 years old). One of the pedagogical values of the school is that both students and teachers 'should be able to shape their everyday life and the school itself, in terms of the teaching and in terms of all the other things that contribute to the life of the school' (DFG website). This principle is confirmed by students' reports:

- A lot of teachers at this school...try to teach students the curriculum in a different ways than other schools, because they ask us to be reflective and think about what we learn...We have to relate and discuss it (Student, M, 19 years old).
- We get to decide how we want to learn. Do we want to learn in groups, or do you want to work individually, do you want me be taught at the blackboard. So we have a lot of decisions to make, so we have a lot of influence (Student, M, 19 years old).
- If the teacher wants you to do something and the students think that maybe is too boring...then you can say it to the teacher and...talk about what you could do better (Student, F, 14 years old).

Sharing decisions over the modes of education empowers students because it decentralizes ownership on the learning process. When students disagree or want to express their view towards the teacher's pedagogical approach they are given the space to express it and contribute to transform their condition. Allowing space and time for critique, and for supporting students' initiatives outside the regular educational activities has significant pedagogical potential for citizenship. Students take responsibility in their own educational process, which is empowering as it develops a stronger sense of agency also outside school. As a student reports:

- I have also changed a bit in my mind what is possible and what isn't possible. Some friends at my old school say "I have this really shitty teacher and this bad education", and I say "why don't you do anything about it?", and of course it's not that easy to do something about it, but if you really want then...even when I'm out of school in my life, if there is something that I really want...I think that I can do it...before I started this school I gave up a lot quicker than I do now (Student, M, 15 years old).

The comments reported by this student provides an example of how by experiencing the possibility to transform the educational process in the classroom enhances student's sense of political agency and possibility to transform things also outside the classroom.

Evaluation

Evaluation or what counts as a valid acquisition of knowledge. DFG has a strong tradition of formative evaluations conducted in a dialogic form with the purpose to give feed-back, to improve both learning and teaching. Students evaluate teachers and *vice versa*, as well as the contents, and the class environment. Formative evaluation aims at improving the teaching and learning process, it is usually done through qualitative methods and based on internal validity and reliability criteria decided according to the priorities of a community. Whereas summative evaluation aims at controlling and comparing the educational process, usually through quantitative methods based on external validity and reliability criteria decided according to priorities external to the community.

DFG was created as grade-free school with emphasis on formative and carried out through dialogic reciprocal feedbacks between. Since the education reforms of 2005, the school was required to place emphasis on summative evaluations, such as grading and exams in order to be recognized by the Danish education system. The formative and summative purposes of evaluation reflect two different political agendas and discourses: formative evaluation represents the democratic tradition of student participation; whereas summative evaluation reflects the control devices employed by the Ministry. DFG had to combine these two evaluation modes and conflicting discourses. At the moment students are graded, but they do not see their grade until 6 months before completing secondary school. The debate about summative vs formative evaluation stirs ambivalent reactions in the students. The students who are against grades argue:

- This is a grade free school. And I think if it was only up to the school to decide we wouldn't get grades at all, but it's a law in Denmark that you have to get grades and so they have to do it. And we also get our examination grades...but we don't get to see them (Student, M, 17 years old).
- At this school...we don't think grading people is a good idea but we have to, in the end we have to (Student, M, 19 years old)
- They have to give us grades, but they don't tell us, they have it in the register (Student, F, 18 years old)

Students who are in favor of grades report the following:

- When you teacher says "Oh, you are doing great and I don't have much to say, that's fine" ...It's hard to know where you are because the evaluation is the same...and at the end of the year some students fail and some pass (Student, M, 17 years old).

- I like the competition, I miss the grades. If our class decides that we would like grades, then I think we should have the chance to get grades. (Student, M, 17 years old).
- I think it's kind of stupid [not to have grades] because the whole society is based on grades, and we want a higher education. I want to be a doctor and I need an average grade of 10.8. If that's what you want to do, you need to know your grades (Student, M, 17 years old).

It is clear that some students support the grade-free tradition of DFG, and see grades as a threat to the school values, others are interested in seeing their grades in order to know 'where they stand' in relation to national standards. In Denmark, the final grade obtained in secondary school influences whether what kind of higher education (and subject) students have access to. Dialogic evaluations are perceived as more valuable from a formative perspective, but the grades are perceived more as valuable from an instrumental perspective because they reflect what rest of society places emphasis on. Grades represent a source of certainty about students' worth within a competitive system.

6. Discussion and conclusion

This study examines how students learn democratic citizenship with a whole-school approach. A case study of a Danish secondary school was conducted with the aim to analyze how students are socialized as citizens through democratic school experiences within the classroom. The classroom was conceptualized as a democratic pedagogical space characterized by openness, equality, and pluralism where students are involved in deliberating and taking decisions concerning the content, the pedagogy, and the evaluation of their education.

From the data emerges that students experience school life in an open classroom climate where teachers listen to student and engage with their opinions, initiatives, and critique. Class relations are perceived as 'equal', non-'authoritarian' and based on mutual respect. Students in the sample do not perceive teachers as an authority, although they recognize that they have different roles and responsibilities, and that the teachers "know more", which gives the teacher some degree of legitimate authority. Given the nature and the aim of the pedagogical space (i.e., that of teaching and learning), it is questionable whether the relation between teachers and students can be completely equal, also when it is claimed to be so.

The classroom activities value pluralism by allowing different perspectives on school content and pedagogy to emerge, by discussing controversial issues, and educating students that there is more than one view to reality. Students are expected to take an active role towards their education process and maximize the influence they have on it. To a certain extent the teachers and students share power within the margins of freedom left by the national curriculum. Within the margins of freedom students decide what is valid knowledge for them, and how they want to pursue it through class deliberation and decision-making. Valuing students' 'interest' in educational settings, as Dewey argues,

means considering their 'specific capabilities, needs, and preferences' rather than assuming that 'all minds work in the same way because they happen to have the same teacher and text-book' (Dewey, 1916, pp. 141). When students pursue their interest through their actions, they learn to deal with things that have meaning and purpose for them, and that that can transform their education. Traditional citizenship education fails to promote active citizenship because it does not take into account students' opinions on what counts as valid knowledge to them.

The school has a culture of formative evaluation where students and teachers discuss together on how to improve the educational process. Teachers and students evaluate one another a discussion of strengths and areas for improvements. The school also conducts summative evaluation through examinations, grades according to standard criteria. Evaluation stirs controversial opinions among students. On the one hand it is not seen as a good pedagogical practice, on the other hand it is perceived as useful to meet societal demands, such as that of having a grade to be admitted to university. Formative evaluation is considered pedagogically empowering, as it allows students to influence their educational process and transform it, but it is considered as unpractical in a competition-based educational system.

From the study it emerges that learning in a school space that is open, equal, and pluralistic, as well as enabling deliberation and decision-making, develops students' capabilities for citizenship, as they enabling students to exercise power within a political space. By deciding over their learning processes students share and transform a 'common world'. This practice empowers students because on a small scale it makes them part of a history where collective decisions determined a course of action and where they could personally participate in deciding the course of action.

A whole-school approach develops the three dimensions of the capabilities for to democratic citizenship - cognitive capabilities, emotional and ethical capabilities, and capabilities for action. Democratic experiences at school enable students to make connections between their opinions, actions and consequences. Students in the sample reported that at school they are often asked 'what do you think?' on various issues, such as what and how to study in a particular subject. Being expected to have an opinion about collective issues within and beyond the school encourages students to form their personal view, and to search for information to develop informed opinions. Furthermore, being exposed to a variety of views on an issue, and having the possibility to speak up and express personal views, even when critical, places students in the condition to exercise their judgment and form personal opinions (autonomous thinking), evaluate the validity of various opinions and arguments (critical thinking), and perceiving the connection between actions and their consequences (reflective thinking). Also, by being regularly exposed to deliberation processes where multiple perspectives on same issue are presented, students learn there is more than one view to things and that one must be able to put oneself in other people's shoes and consider as many standpoints as possible when taking decisions (thinking representatively).

The emotional and ethical capabilities are developed with school life experiences that involve translating opinions in to political actions (e.g., speaking in the classroom or making a decision through voting). When a student has the possibility to 'try to act', he or she has to exercise judgment, and develop the emotional self-control to act in the public space even in circumstances of uncertainty. One of the main changes occurred while attending the school reported by participants was becoming more 'confident', persistent, with increased sense of agency as a result of being able to transform their educational space. Having the possibility to regularly practice deliberative dialogue and decision-making in school spaces provides the condition to develop the habit of exercising civic courage. These findings are in line with previous literature highlighting a positive correlation between the possibility for students to take part in group discussions and their level of political confidence (Hahn, 1998)

The capabilities for action are developed by acting politically through speech or actions. It was found that when students are repeatedly exposed to school experiences where they can engage in deliberation and decision-making, and have an immediate feedback to their actions, develop the capability to express opinions through speech. Such process develops gradually by in school spaces, the more experiences one has, the more one has the possibility to reflect on them and see the connections between acts and consequences. Taking an active role over different aspects of school life both by expressing personal opinions and taking decisions implies a constant call to 'care' about the class and school community, and the expectation to contribute to transform it. Such experiences on the one hand develop students' habit to be 'responsive' to events functioning as antidote to the 'loss of responsiveness to events' (Arendt, 1958) that makes citizens indifferent; on the other hand they develop the confidence that participating does make a difference.

The case study shows that spaces for whole-school democratic citizenship are subject to a number of contextual constraints in the current Danish education system. In order to meet certain requirements and standards to receive government funding, the school has to accept the decisions made by the Danish Ministry of Education concerning school governance, curriculum, pedagogy, and evaluation. In recent years, the educational reforms have introduced set of regulations that are de-democratizing the education system and reducing spaces for democratic citizenship education, as well as the ability for school members to take decisions.

This study contributes to the area of citizenship education studies by focusing on whole-school approaches in the formation of citizens, and by elaborating in conditions for learning democratic citizenship through experience.

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