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Class Council Elections – Criteria for making civic decisions by teenagers: Explicit and implicit attitudes

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Introduction

Children participate in the social life of various groups from the moment of birth. The first such a group is family, followed by peer groups in the courtyard, in the kindergarten and at school. Being a member of a group is conducive not only to establishing close emotional ties with others, but also to developing the sense of solidarity, unity and integrity. It also helps create one's own hierarchy of values, provides emotional stabilisation and social identity. Through taking an active part in the life of a group, children become acquainted with patterns of social behaviour and prepare themselves for taking on various social roles. They learn social rules and experience and the consequences of their application, they formulate social theories and they acquire knowledge about social systems.

Another crucial experience is the first contact with a formal institution, such as kindergarten or school. This is where the child learns his or her first lesson in civic education. A goal of school education is to help pupils to gain knowledge and develop the skills necessary for living in a community. Teachers concentrate on both of these in their work. But a less formal, but almost equally important, outcome of education is the promotion of certain attitudes among pupils. Attitudes towards civic rights and duties are affected by both formal and informal knowledge about the functioning of cultural and educational systems. This knowledge is the child's source of their first and often subconscious 'civic experiences', which will contribute to future attitudes toward social participation. The way such attitudes are developed, their coherence and authenticity, are critical factors for civil conduct.

This paper focuses on children's attitudes towards a key element of civic education at school – class council elections. This is one of the most important lessons of school democracy. Elections confront formal knowledge about participation in social life with inner, personal convictions about who participates in this form of activity, and on what basis. An analysis of the deliberative choices made by pupils, and the consequences of their decisions, reveals the nature of explicit and implicit attitudes – informal and unconscious, but forming the basis of social behaviour. Understanding the motivation behind actions taken by children will help teachers realise how they influence their pupils in both intentional and unintentional areas.

Explicit and implicit attitudes among classmates

The investigation of attitudes is one of the fundamental areas of research in social psychology. For many years attitude was understood as a willingness to act that was determined by three elements: the way of thinking, the way of feeling, and the way of behaving (Mika, 1984; Madrzycki, 1977).

More attention has been given in recent years to unconscious sources of attitudes, their automatic character, or even dualism (Bargh, Chen & Burrows, 1996; Chaiken & Trope, 1999). As well as traditionally understood attitudes (*explicit* attitudes) the concept of

implicit attitudes was developed. This dualistic theory allows an individual to assume different attitudes towards the same object or phenomenon – one conscious that they are aware of and the other unconscious which they are unaware of. The former shows itself in automatic procedures that do not require reflection, a consequence of actions taken promptly and absent-mindedly. The latter are the result of analysis, deeper reflection, deliberate and intentional choice or controlled action repeated over a longer period of time.

As with other social objects, the classroom community can be evaluated by pupils at two levels: explicit (controlled and declared) and implicit (automatic and unconscious). Pupils may thus demonstrate explicit and implicit types of attitude towards one another and towards school procedures. Dual attitudes are different from ambivalent attitudes: the latter give rise to internal conflicts, whilst the former do not pose such dilemmas.

Explicit attitudes are adopted as a result of reflection and acceptance of information that has been obtained, a consequence of conscious learning. Implicit attitudes generally result from implicit learning, gaining complex procedural knowledge in an unconscious way (Czyżewska 2001). Civic education proceeds at both levels, as do all learning processes. The explicit dimension is experienced through civic education lessons and discussion that promotes universally accepted behaviours, and through other kinds of classroom and school social life designed to encourage particular desirable behaviour. One explicit point in promoting social activity is the discussion a teacher will have with pupils each year about the role and work of the school council, and the characteristics of their members. The implicit dimension of learning is the informal observation of behaviour, rules, procedures, ways of communicating, customs and habits, made without thinking about them or consciously examining them. This might also include observing actions taken by teachers or the school headteacher when they choose a class representative to undertake some small tasks, like passing information to another teacher or taking the class register to the staffroom.

The School Council can be considered from the perspective of explicit education. In Poland, school regulations define the School Council as one of the institutions that supports democratisation in school. Council members are supposed independently to carry out tasks considered important and in the interest of members of the school community (Lobocki, 1974). The School Council is expected to fulfil the following functions:

- promote the affiliation and equality of rights,
- encourage proactive attitudes,
- encourage pro-social attitudes,
- encourage co-responsibility for others,
- promote partnership with adults,
- develop organisational skills (Radziewicz and Migros, 1988)

The rights and duties of Class Council members depend on school regulations and codes, but often include:

- representing the class and cooperating with the School Council,

- organising the social life of the class (including events, duties, excursions, etc.),
- solving internal conflicts in cooperation with the tutor,
- offering help to classmates with learning difficulties, in cooperation with the tutor.

Class Council members have a strong influence on the social life of their peer group, which suggests that they should enjoy the respect and trust of their classmates, be sensitive to the needs of others, and be cooperative. But do they meet this description? This study asked pupils about the criteria they use when voting for their representatives. A detailed analysis of these criteria can be compared to the actual characteristics of Class Council members, and this may contribute to the better understanding of explicit and implicit civic attitudes among pupils, and various areas of social life in the classroom.

Criteria applied during Class Council elections – research results

The study concerning children's attitudes towards Class Council elections was performed in a lower secondary school with a group of 102 pupils aged 14 years, representing four classes. An analysis of previous research findings (Lobocki, 1974) and a focus group with pupils suggested the following factors as a basis for investigating the basic criteria employed in the election of Class Council members:

- (1) the social position of a pupil (popularity, acceptance and authority);
- (2) the emotional intelligence of a pupil (emotional self-consciousness and self-confidence, conscientiousness and reliability, self-control, self-motivation, willingness to take the initiative, empathy and understanding, readiness to cooperate with other group members) (Goleman, 1999); and
- (3) fulfilling school duties (achievement of good marks, showing subject knowledge).

Stage I – election criteria – declarative level

To examine the explicit attitudes employed in Class Council elections, all the pupils were asked to identify the distinguishing characteristics of Class Council members, whose duties have been listed above. Pupils could select from 15 possible characteristics, randomly ordered, of which five were associated with social position, five with emotional intelligence and five with the fulfilment of school duties:

Social Position	Emotional Intelligence	Fulfilment of School Duties
accepted by all pupils	self-confident	having very good marks
standing out from other pupils	conscientious	being a model pupil
Popular among classmates	initiative	being prepared for lessons
well-liked by all pupils	understanding	demonstrating knowledge in particular subjects
highly regarded by all pupils	cooperative	being diligent and paying attention during classes

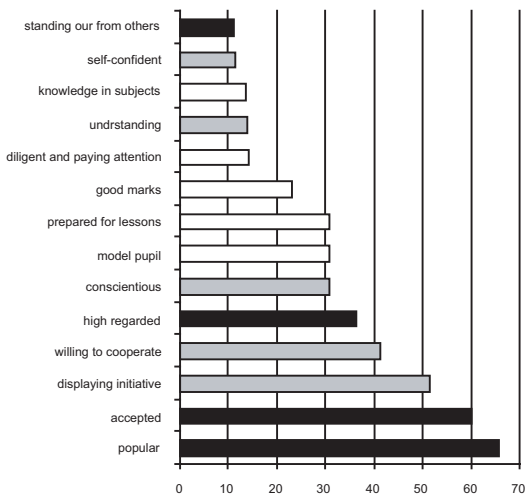
Pupils were asked to select five characteristics a Class Council member should possess, and five characteristics that need not be possessed, choosing from the 15 characteristics.

Figure 1. illustrates the choices made most often by the respondents. Characteristics relating to Social Position are black, those relating to Emotional Intelligence are grey, and those relating to the Fulfilment of School Duties are white. The pupils felt that the key characteristic of a Class Council member is popularity: the person elected should be known and accepted by all classmates. The most desirable categories in the emotional intelligence category are displaying initiative and cooperativeness.

The characteristics that were considered much less important by our respondents include whether they fulfil his/her school duties diligently, has good marks, shows knowledge of particular subjects and is well prepared for lessons.

The criteria for selecting Class Council members stated by pupils at the explicit and declarative level were popularity and acceptance, and readiness to take the initiative and cooperate. School grades and formal knowledge were of minor importance.

Figure 1: Characteristics a Class Council member should possess



Stage II – election criteria – behavioural level

To examine the implicit attitudes towards electing members of School Councils we decided to analyse the profiles of Class Council members from the four classes participating in the first stage of the study.

We began by interviewing the tutors about the procedure of Class Council elections, which was similar in all classes and consisted of five stages:

1. preparatory – the teacher presents the school regulations and discusses the duties of Council members;
2. voting by secret ballot – each pupil could vote for two fellow-pupils, writing their names on voting slips;

3. counting the votes, the four with the most votes being elected;
4. consent to be elected to the Class Council given by these four;
5. selection of positions and functions (President, Vice-President, Treasurer, Secretary) between the four.

In two classes two of the pupils initially elected did not wish to be Class Council members, and these were replaced by an election by two others.

The Class Council members from each of the four classes (16 in all) took part in this study, and their profiles were analysed in the three categories:

- Social Position – determined by a sociometric analysis using a questionnaire (the ‘Friendliness Poll’), which gives the level of acceptance and popularity on a scale: high acceptance rate – average acceptance rate – isolation – rejection.
- Emotional Intelligence – determined using a questionnaire that examined emotional self-consciousness, self-control, self-motivation, empathy and social skills (Skierkowska, 2004).
- Fulfilment of school duties – an analysis of school grades and responsibility (getting prepared for lessons, demonstrating knowledge, and diligence), estimated by the tutor.

Figure 2. Social Position of members of Class Councils

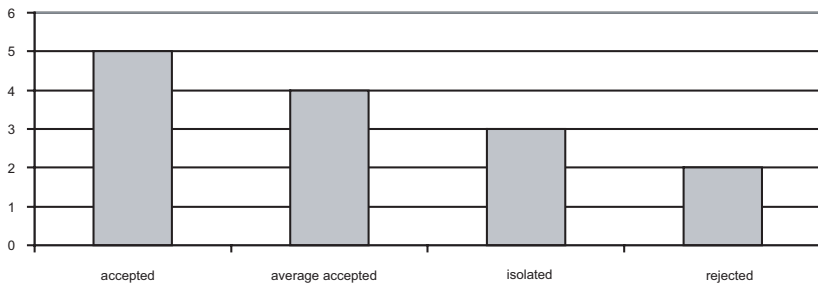


Figure 2. shows the social position of the 16 members of Class Councils. Two were rejected by the group, three were isolated from the classroom community, and the majority of them (nine) were accepted by their classmates.

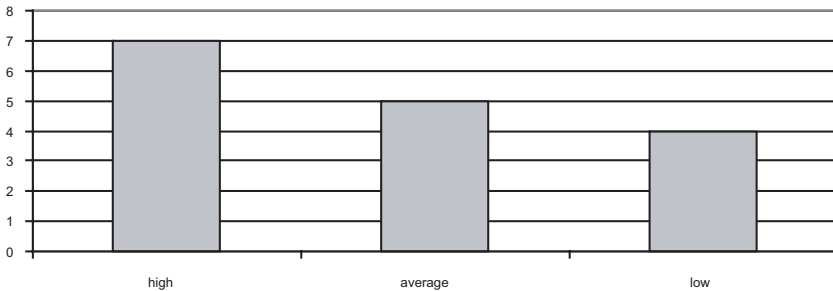
Figure 3. Level of Emotional Intelligence of members of Class Council

Figure 3. presents the level of Emotional Intelligence of Class Council members. Seven pupils had a high EQ, five of them had an average EQ, and four were characterised with low emotional intelligence. A supplementary analysis of the emotional intelligence of Class Council members indicated high self-control, self-motivation and, interestingly, only average social skills. Three pupils were characterized by low emotional consciousness and empathy.

The analysis of Fulfilment of School Duties included the average grades received in the previous school year (scale of 1 to 6) and diligence and responsibility (assessed by teachers on a scale of 1 to 6). Thirteen of the 16 had very high marks, and the other three good marks. Fifteen were described by their teachers as extremely diligent and hard working (only one was described as satisfactory). These results appear consistent with the data on emotional intelligence, and particularly with the high levels of self-control and self-motivation.

This data clearly shows that in the Class Council elections our respondents voted for the so-called 'good' pupils, considered to be responsible, conscientious, diligent and well prepared for lessons.

Summary and Conclusions

Civil education lessons proceed at two levels. The first one is explicit, and is related to acquiring formal knowledge, being universally accepted, promoted and desired. The other is implicit and hidden, and is associated with understanding informal meanings and structures.

This study shows that knowledge of active participation in social life gained by pupils at school is inconsistent, and that their attitudes towards their first 'civic experiences' are of a dualistic nature. Comparing the declared criteria in electing School Council members with their actual characteristics shows two dimensions of the concept of a 'representative', and two dimensions of their conception of 'civil conduct'. In the explicit and conscious dimension, pupils say they prefer popular and well-regarded people who display initiative to represent them in the School Council. In their first democratic elections they profess the importance of social position and some of the characteristics associated with emotional intelligence, like willingness to take the initiative and cooperate. The respondents said that success in school achievement, formal knowledge, and characteristics such as being well prepared for lessons ('being a good pupil') were of minor importance. But examining the results of the elections – the characteristics of those

actually selected by the pupils – it is clear that the choices were governed by rather different principles. Some 102 pupils voted for candidates who had high marks and showed a high level of diligence, although they had said that these characteristics were unimportant in a candidate. Most of those elected had as their most valued characteristics a high social position in the group and popularity among classmates. Emotional intelligence thus seems to be the most coherent criterion.

The principal object of this study was to find criteria used by pupils in voting for candidates to the Class Council. But these results suggested further investigation into the reasons for this dualism in the attitudes among our respondents. These may be significantly affected by informal life at school and the so-called hidden curriculum. Also teachers probably favour the so-called ‘good pupils’, and prefer them to represent the classroom community in various daily activities. Pupils, observing every-day school life, see that it is those who achieve good grades who stand out and are selected by the teacher to take on various tasks. How does this relate to the concept of the School Council as being an independent, autonomous, self-governing body? School Councils are often perceived as highly controversial, both by pupils and teachers. They are formally an important component of school democracy, yet on the other hand they are perceived as a group of passive pupils, submissive to teachers and ready to approve the decisions made by school authorities. Does this mean that the first lesson in democracy learned by teenagers is an illusion? The results of this study certainly do not give a clear answer to this, and perhaps do not even provide a basis for posing it. However, they certainly provoke discussion on how these widely propagated ideas are put into practice in the reality of school life.

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