Student democracy and students influence into the organization of a school

A guideline about student democracy, created in the Erasmus+ KA210 project
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Background

Several studies on democracy in primary schools reveal a recurring issue: children and young people are often left out of decision-making and not recognized as legitimate democratic participants (Andersson 2024). Yet, according to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Swedish Education Act, and national curricula in countries such as Sweden, Lithuania, and Romania, student involvement should be a fundamental part of education and systematic efforts to improve school quality.

Despite its importance, student participation is often overlooked and deprioritized in school improvement efforts, with students frequently becoming peripheral participants without the opportunity to influence the process and outcome.

Research highlights, according to Andersson (2024) both pedagogical and development reasons to prioritize student participation, including the development of social, civic, personal knowledge and leadership skills, increased learning engagement, and strengthened identity as learners and leaders. Student participation is defined as meaningful and developmental involvement, allowing students to take responsibility, feel needed, and influence their educational situation. To support the preparation for future life of the students, they should be supported to be involved in taking initiative and engaging in life here and now.

Student Impact for Real

Democracy in a school can often be reduced to rules of conduct. However, for it to be genuine and have a long-term impact on the education and organization of a school, students must have a significant impact. These points are examples of successful ways to improve student influence:

Continuous Partners: Students to become continuous partners in the school's management and decision-making processes. They participate in the school's management group and are involved in discussions about organization, quality issues, scheduling, and development areas. This involvement provides valuable feedback and helps students become better at working in the student council.

Integration into Regular Organization: Integrating class representatives or student councils into the school's regular organization, helps students feel like real partners in the school.

Real Influence: By involving students in the management group and other councils, schools are moving away from pseudo-democratic practices and towards providing students with real influence over their educational environment.

Democratic Organization: Principals are building democratic organizations that enable cooperation and two-way coordination of activities. This approach recognizes students as continuous partners and democratic innovators, contributing to favorable school development and improved educational quality. (Rönnström, N, 2024)

There are some challenges to pass, if we attempt to treat students as equal democratic participants in the schools. The initial challenge is to move beyond perceiving children as politically immature and instead recognize them as equal participants whose perspectives are valued. The second challenge is to provide democratic formative experiences that empower children and young people to act as democratic citizens. The third challenge is to adapt communication forms and contexts to be more suitable for students, as traditional democratic structures have not been effective for them. (Andersson, 2024)

The work to involve students in, for instance, the organization of school, can be supported by identifying the roles students hold in their democratic participation today and where we aim for them to be (Andersson, 2024, Fielding, 2001; Smit et al., 2020). The most common role is as an information source, where students provide information through surveys or give opinions as respondents. Less common is the role of co-researchers, where students work with staff to identify problems, design solutions, and evaluate initiatives. Rarely do students take on the role of researchers, initiating and leading investigations themselves. What role are they holding at your school?

Ideals in democracy

There are four ideals among democracy, to take into consideration when working with student democracy, due to the significance for students. They can be used as key words when making a current situation analysis of the schools' work with student democracy and creating goals for the future:

1) *Inclusion* ensures that everyone affected by a decision has the opportunity to participate and influence the outcome.
2) *Political equality* is that all those involved are included on equal terms and opportunities to participate, express their views, and challenge ideas in a free and equal opportunity to speak.

3) *Reasonableness* emphasizes the importance of respectful, balanced, and open dialogue, active listening and where differing opinions are seen as opportunities for constructive agreement.

4) Participants in a democratic environment interact in a way that creates a *publicity*, bringing together diverse interests, experiences, and perspectives to address shared challenges. (Andersson, 2024)

Student Council as part of the student democracy

A student council can support student democracy, but simply having one is not enough. The student council should be a group that genuinely takes action, turning ideas into reality and bringing joy to all students at the school. When the student council fulfills this role, it increases trust and confidence among students. Ultimately, the true value of the student council lies in what it accomplishes, as highlighted by The Swedish Student Council (2025).

The Swedish Student Council (2024) and The Swedish National Association of Students (2024) have both pointed out the need for a student council to be visible and heard in the school and that it should not focus only on certain activities, to reach all students. It is just as important to engage those who are already involved as it is to connect with those who may never have heard of the student council, or who haven't cared about what the student council does. A student council should therefore work with different council's activities. These activities can be divided into four areas: social, economic, cultural, and political activities. (The Swedish Student Council 2024) The first three strengthen the role and anchoring among the students, while the forth is having real impact on for instance the organization of a school.

The Swedish Student Council (2024) and the Swedish National Association of Students (2024) have both emphasized the importance of the student council being visible and heard within the school. To truly reach all students, the council should not focus solely on certain activities. It is just as important to engage those who are already involved as it is to connect with those who may have never heard of the student council or have not cared about its work.

Therefore, a student council should take on a variety of activities, which can be divided into four main areas: social, economic, cultural, and political, according to the Swedish Student Council (2025). T first three areas help strengthen the council's role and its connection to students, while the fourth—political activities—has a real impact on aspects such as school organization.

Social activities organized by the student council foster community and help students form new friendships through events like welcome gatherings, games, and celebrations.

Economic activities create benefits and enjoyment and provide lower prices and higher quality for goods and products. In this way a council can also raise money, that can then be used for other fun and useful activities. Student council economic activities offer value by improving product quality and affordability, and can also generating funds for other beneficial initiatives. Cultural activities help create a vibrant atmosphere and share enjoyable experiences among students through events, shows and performances.

Political activities build respect and pride and put students' opinions on the agenda by advocating for issues and demands with staff of schools and leaderboard. Some examples are schedules, grades, school meals, and the working environment. The physical working environment is an important question, and also the psychosocial environment. For instance how the schedule is designed or how stressful things are. For example, questions about schedules can concern anything from lesson lengths, how long breaks and free periods should be, when the school day should start and end, how much time to rest after sports, to how many tests and assignments there should be each week.

It's important to remember that the student council should be owned and led by students, meaning that only students should serve on the board, be members of the council, and have voting rights at the annual meeting. While school staff can provide support, only students should guide and make decisions for the council. Teachers and principals are welcome to offer assistance and share their perspectives, but the direction and decisions of the council must always remain in the hands of the students.

The importance of staff for student democracy

Principals are expected, by law and in general, to lead, coordinate, and be responsible for development at a school unit, for instance the work with student democracy. According to a study by Rönnström (2024) on Swedish primary schools, is student democracy always considered important, yet it is rarely prioritized because other demands and financial concerns often take precedence.

One way a principal can foster democracy in a school is by practicing democratic school leadership (Woods, 2008). This approach can enhance goal achievement and school quality by encouraging shared leadership, empowering both staff and students, fostering a sense of ownership in change processes, and building strong collaboration to effectively address challenges.

However, not only the principle affects the possibilities for students to have impact at a school. Studies have shown the importance of low frequence exchange of teachers and staff, supporting students democratic participation. These due to students attempts to

understand how the different adults function and behave, and staff differences regarding involving students in democratic participation. The adults' view of children's participation in school, is also observed as a hindering factor in different studies.

Staff are also crucial in supporting all students to participate in democratic processes. Levels of participation differ among students, often depending on their confidence, social involvement, and willingness to speak up. Those who are socially excluded or shy are less likely to negotiate influence or take part in decision-making, highlighting that both social and political participation are interconnected and unevenly distributed. Therefore, staff support is necessary to ensure all students are included in the democratic process (Elvstrand, 2009).

Finally, it is important to assess the degree of children's participation in democratic processes (Hart, 1997). Despite good intentions, children's participation can easily become superficial, with children being manipulated or merely serving as 'decorations.' There are situations that begin at a high level of participation—such as when pupils initiate a change—but ultimately result in students being overruled or having decisions reversed without explanation. When such situations occur, pupils often experience disappointment and frustration, with less belief in student democracy (Elvstrand, 2009)

Student representatives

Fielding (2004) and other sciences have in different studies highlighted that democracy process in schools can unintentionally privilege confident, articulate, and often already advantaged students, while marginalizing less represented groups. Sometimes, student representatives impose their own views rather than genuinely listening to all students, reinforcing existing hierarchies. Engaging younger or less confident students meaningfully in decision-making remains difficult, and current approaches often favor older students. Efforts to broaden student participation should thereby shift from simply encouraging students to speak up, to creating environments where all voices are actively listened to and valued, with adults and student leaders reflecting on their own assumptions and practices. (Mayes, et. Al. 2019)

To improve the involvement of all students,Mayes et al. (2019) recommending student representatives to collectively work with the following questions:

- Whose voices are truly heard within the dynamics of our school? Whose voices are dismissed as immature, rude, or uninformed?
- Who is expected to speak, listen, and adapt within our school community?
- Who benefits from our current practices and actions? Who is left out?

- As student 'representatives', in what ways are we comparatively privileged compared to other students? Could our positions of privilege and relative power unintentionally cloud our judgment?
- Can student representatives realistically be experts on the experiences of all their peers? Is it possible that, without realizing it, we might disempower others?
- What can we learn from younger students, quieter voices, and those who may not be recognised as "good" students?
- How can we be more attentive and responsive to one another—listening beyond just verbal and written contributions?

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