

2010: SOME CHALLENGES FOR DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

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Back in the 1990s my Swedish colleague Elisabeth Bäckman and I were both already involved in the process of democratising schools and school management. We were both – separately in our countries and schools – trying to ensure that *all* the members of a school feel valued as individual human beings; that they are treated fairly and with dignity whatever their age, status, background; and that their views are accorded respect. At the time, in the UK at least, such views were seen as radical and probably dangerous.

The world has changed. It is now widely accepted that Student Voice is not just a valuable, but a vital component in school improvement. It makes a powerful contribution to learning and teaching. And across Europe – not least through the work of Council of Europe on EDC – democratic approaches to school governance are seen as vital to helping young people to grow into the democratic citizens of tomorrow.

In the UK, there is growing evidence that, the braver schools are involving their students in working on behaviour issues, in observing teaching and learning, in the very fabric of school and its work, the greater the benefits will be (even if one teacher, when asked if she'd like to join a pilot scheme of pupil-observers, retorted in outrage, 'I'm not having a *pupil* watching me teach!'). More and more schools are seeing the value of advanced uses of Student Voice. It moves beyond the old School Council discussions of toilets and the food in the canteen, and gets into the heart of school improvement.

School democracy is seen to work. In many ways, the argument has been won. But there are pitfalls, too. It's very easy to concentrate on these new, 'advanced' uses of Student Voice and overlook the time-consuming business of trying to run a representative, democratically elected School Council efficiently, with meeting times to find, agendas to produce, minutes to circulate. I have heard principals say, "We've done all that School Council business. We want to move on."

They should indeed move on, but not move away. There is a danger that schools get so engrossed in getting children to work on focus groups, behaviour panels and 'Teaching and Learning teams' (a strong UK focus at present) that they neglect the mechanism from where that sense of involvement came, the elected School Council.

If they do neglect it, the processes of school improvement in which these children are engaged risks becoming detached from the student body. The school may be scrupulous in *choosing* children from a good range of genders, cultures, backgrounds, abilities. They may be enlightened enough to get some awkward pupils involved in behaviour panels. But if those participants are not both validated by the school council *and* answerable to it, the school has lost genuine Student Voice, merely creating a prefect or monitor system by another name, a means of harnessing the energies of the more biddable pupils.

Moreover, in the UK (currently approaching a General Election), teacher unions are starting to agitate about what they describe as an over-emphasis or even misuse of Student Voice as a management tool for controlling teachers. Some of the evidence produced at very recent (April 2010) teacher conferences is worrying. It was suggested that children are being involved in the appointment of teachers (which is good practice, though not universally popular) – but in wrong ways: in one case, a candidate was asked by pupils to sing a song. 'Student voice gone mad' said the union: I would blame the school for an irresponsible lack of training given to those on the panel, so that they had no idea what their role was or where the limits lay.

Further grotesque examples were given of inappropriate interviews or of pupils marking their teachers' lessons out of 10. Again, I would argue that these were not instances of genuine student voice, but of schools abdicating responsibility – or of simple bad management. There is no doubt that, in some schools, pupils' views are being used cynically as a means to control teachers: as a result teachers feel undervalued by management and undermined by that misuse of student voice.

Student voice was also blamed for teachers' unwillingness to discipline pupils for fear of disciplinary or even legal action against them. Again, this has nothing to do with student voice. Too often, government, local and national, is seen as failing to support the decisions of school principals.

These extreme examples perhaps demonstrate how easy it is for those who lack courage or open-mindedness to find emotive reasons to distrust student voice and thus to undermine broader belief in school democracy.

For many nervous teachers and school leaders alike, *democracy* is still the difficulty. "School cannot be a democracy," they say. "I am responsible. I have to make the final decisions. If we talk about *democracy* pupils will think they have the final say, and that will lead to confusion and frustration all round because they can't have it."

But all democracy is limited. In the UK I get to vote for the government every five years. I disagree with many decisions taken in the meantime. Notwithstanding my frustration, I still feel I live in a democracy. Not a perfect one. An infuriating one, indeed. But a democracy.

School democracy is much the same. It has little to do with power – or, at least, with decision-making – and everything to do with ethos, with the everyday life of the school, with the atmosphere in the corridors, and how children perceive their school and their lives in it. A democratic ethos is about the feel of the place, not about power-structures. That is why the use of the word is important, but why a precise definition of its limits is not. Barbara Taylor Follett wrote (in *The New State* in 1918):

"Democracy is not a goal, it is a path; it is not attainment, but a process... When we grasp this and begin to live democracy, then only shall we have democracy."

Under those terms, then, schools, teachers and principals need not fear the word *democracy*. On the contrary, it is important to accept and use it. Where students are comfortable with the concept and have committed themselves to it – or where there is a hard-working and effective School Council – the voluntary extra effort comes because children have a sense of contributing to what they see as "our school". When school democracy is good, it is visceral. Pupils feel deep down a sense of belonging; that the school is there for them; and that they have the opportunity – and the duty – to do what they can to make it better; for themselves and for others; for their peers and for those who follow.

School democracy is both a morally right and a pragmatic way of operating a school. New initiatives in Student Voice should only increase that benefit. But it is only human to be tempted to seek short-cuts. If we do so, far from strengthening the democratic, co-operative ethos that a school with a successful Council enjoys, we may dismantle what we have achieved and start experiencing some of the problems outlined above.

We must ensure that Student Voice grows out of real school democracy where *everyone's* voice is heard and respected, not just those in the room at the time.