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CiCe  
Institute for Policy Studies in Education  
London Metropolitan University  
166 – 220 Holloway Road  
London N7 8DB  
UK

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## **A democratic perspective of educational change: self-evaluation and the clarification of values**

*Randi Andersen*

*Hindholt, National Institute of Social Education (Denmark)*

Many educational organisations in Europe are engaged in the process of change because of pressure to introduce the knowledge society and the need for effective 'knowledge production systems'. Such changes bring the values of the educational system into focus and into discussion. This paper describes the experiences of changing the educational system at the National Institute of Social Education (Hindholt), and particularly focuses on democratic perspectives of change. We are introducing a values-based organisation, methods for quality development and self-evaluation, involving the students, the institutions where they will work in the future and the Board of Hindholt.

In Denmark a new law for social education brings new challenges for institutions that teach educators: our courses of study will become bachelor's degrees in education, our institutions must be linked to universities and to research, and we must engage in development projects. The former social educational institutions are also required to merge with centres of education, and numbers of institutions will be rationalised. These developments conflict with many of our traditional ways of doing things and challenge our current values. As a consequence we needed to initiate discussion about our values in the light of this new situation, and to identify those values that we feel should guide our future activity. When we initiated this process of prioritising and explicating our choice of values, we agreed that our primary focus should be democracy. We paid new attention to this concept, because we would be evaluating ourselves with democracy as the central point.

I will first describe this process of value clarification and present some reflections on how we organised the work around a democratic perspective. This process was organised by a steering group of Tove Munk, head of the institution, and myself.

### **Story workshop**

Attention was been given to the problem that, from the teachers' perspective, changes often seem to come from the top down: they had the feeling that they lacked influence. Tove, who had only recently taken up her position, wanted to change this. We saw it as important to organise the new process from the bottom up, and to create an atmosphere of trust. Some of the teachers attended the steering group to participate in planning, and together the group decided to use the story workshop method. In this each teacher would bring to the discussion two stories about personal experiences from their working life, chosen to express some of the values that the storyteller found important. One such a story from the workshop was:

By chance I happened to educate four girls through all their semesters at Hindholt: in theoretical periods, in all their projects, in interdisciplinary periods as well as their final examinations. They gave me a red ball of wool symbolising the continuity I had given to their study. They and I were very satisfied with the result.

When the storyteller finished her story, the others asked questions in a plenary session, and together identified the key values. Participants shared their stories, on the principle that since stories are the way we usually share meaning and values in everyday life, story-telling is a good method for working with values. It is a bottom-up process that promotes personal involvement and mutual trust. As a result of the meeting we produced a catalogue of stories and an extract of the plenary dialogues of values.

### **Dialogue with partners**

Following the story workshop, the steering group held dialogues with representatives from three groups: the students, the Board of Hindholm and the institutions that receive our students when they complete their courses. We tried through these to discover whether our understanding of what we were teaching was meaningful for our most important partners. These dialogues led to a new statement being produced for further meetings with the Board, the students and our colleagues.

### **Prioritising values**

At this, the steering group summarised our dialogues with our partners. We discussed the challenges for our institution as well as its values, and at the end of the meeting we were able to prioritise a list of our values, and to conclude that we should initially concentrate on one key value - *democracy*.

We felt it important that the students collaborate in this. We had agreed that the students should send representatives from their students' council, so we were disappointed when no representative attended. We instead decided to use teachers' personal contacts with students to identify students with an interest in this kind of work and to invite them to join the process.

### **Self evaluation**

Our major task was to evaluate our own democratic practice. We started this process with staff and some students spending a day together. The students were known to be interested in what we were attempting. To be precise and to concentrate on questions that measured our commitment to democracy, we worked on the following scheme:

**Democracy**

<b>Definition:</b> (what does the concept mean?)	<b>Purpose:</b> (what do we want to achieve?)	<b>Activities:</b> (What are we actually doing?)	<b>Question:</b> (What questions can we ask to find out if we succeed in attaining the purpose?)	<b>Methods:</b> (How can we methodically get an answer to our questions?)
Sense of community	To inspire. To feel sense of belonging.	Join the activities of our educational community. Supply colleagues and leaders with information.	Do we show that we belong?  Do we feel sense of belonging?	Interviews, questionnaires

There was great interest in student perspectives we felt that their presence improved the discussion. They were less interested in the democratic rights of the student community (represented through students' organs) than in informal perspectives of democracy. They agreed to produce plans to evaluate with other students in elaboration of this theme. Questions would be asked such as:

- Are the teachers aware of their role as figures with whom to identify?
- How do teachers view their responsibility to communicate democratic values through their personal attitudes to the institution, to students and colleagues ... and to society?
- What kind of teachers or fellow-students do students see as figures with whom to identify – and what democratic values do these individuals communicate?
- How do they communicate their message?

**Learning democratic citizenship**

The renewed focus on democracy in education in Denmark has resulted in the new law that stresses the influence of students. But it is common that students are not eager to participate in their democratic organs, and this seems not only a Danish problem. In the EU there is a focus on the challenge of learning democratic values, such as active citizenship in a world of individualisation. Audrey Osler's study of EU-financed projects that contribute to developing active citizenship in Europe suggests that important themes in initiating learning for democratic citizenship are information and rights; identities and feelings; and skills (Osler, 2001). I now discuss these themes in the context of our work at Hindholm, using them to illustrate a democratic learning perspective.

### *Information and rights*

Osler stresses the importance of learning how to access information about institutions and structures, in order to learn how institutions work and how to gain influence. We often hear students complain that they do not understand how decisions are made or which decisions they can influence. By participating in our self-evaluation project they took part in more informal dialogues with the Board, the teachers and the leaders, where they could learn about the organisational structure of their educational system.

### *Identity and feelings*

In learning about democratic citizenship the opportunity to reflect on one's identity through exchanges with others is essential. For the teachers, the story workshop was a good opportunity to reflect on their own identity and values and to share thoughts and feelings through the telling of personal stories. We restricted this initial story workshop to teachers, because we felt it would be positive for them to exchange their stories alone. But the workshop could have been used to bring different parts of the institution together to share experiences, and we may use the story workshop method again in the evaluation process with students or other parties.

### *Skills*

Skills of active citizenship include dialogue, presenting for an audience, participating as a member of an interdisciplinary team, negotiation and decision-making. It is important to organise a project so that the participants (particularly students) have the opportunity to develop these skills in the process. These give students real-life experience of using democratic skills that can be applied in their working life and in their life as citizens.

## **Future work**

In this project, democracy was the focus for both the form - the way we organised the project – and for its content. It was also the first key value for self evaluation.

We have found it is essential to think of democracy not only as a formal way of influence through democratic organs, but also to consider the more hidden perspective of role models, and to recognise that students do not find democratic organs particularly interesting. If we want to integrate students into institutional processes, we must find students who find this interesting, even if they do not represent student organisations. We found that students do not focus on institutionalised democracy, but use role models from amongst teachers, leaders or other students for inspiration. The attitudes of these role models are essential to the way students connect to the concept of democracy. This is illustrated by a story one of the students told at one of our meetings:

We had a very bad timetable for one of our subjects and complained to one of the teachers. But she just agreed. She made us see the planning was totally against her own wishes. So we gave up even trying to change it. Since it seemed that teachers had no influence, we thought that we would have none at all.

This will be one of our focal points in our future work on self evaluation: how do we unintentionally, as well as intentionally, transfer democratic (or non-democratic) values to each other? We will look at the following relations:

1. leaders – teachers,
2. teachers – teachers,

3. teachers – students and
4. students – students.

We think these perspectives essential, since the process of identification will continue. When our students become social workers, the children they work with will mirror their attitudes towards democratic values.

### **References**

Osler Audrey (2001) Learning for Active Citizenship in Europe, in Korsgaard, Walters and Andersen, *Learning for Democratic Citizenship*, The Danish University of Education