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Can schools educate for democracy? Towards a participative pupil role in Norwegian schools

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Participative democracy – an old tradition in Norwegian schools

The first experiments with pupil participation in schools as places for democratic learning began in the 1920s when Hareide (1972) convened the first council for pupils. This idea spread to many other upper secondary schools in Norway, and after the second world war most such schools had councils. During the war there was cooperation between the different political factions in the resistance movement, rather than class struggle, and it may be that this gave Norwegians a lesson in democratic cooperation. These sentiments made a great impression in the years after the war. All political parties agreed on the importance of using schools as places for democratic learning, and the school council became a permanent part of upper secondary education. Although in some schools the councils became, as intended, a place for debates and decision-making, in most schools they occupied a more modest place in the lives of most pupils.

However, the next generation of young people demanded more influence and power in their lives, at home, in school and in higher education. As in the rest of the western world, there were protest movements in the late 60s: the anti-nuclear movement, anti-Vietnam war protests and the student movement. During these years the whole educational system in Norway was reformed, including the emergence of new organisational forms giving pupils and students more influence. More importantly, the curriculum guidelines following these reforms included many statements about the importance of new roles for teachers and pupils, with a more democratic relationship in the classroom.

Did all this lead to more democratic classrooms and lecture halls? The 1974curriculum reforms for primary and lower secondary schools were evaluated, but the change to more democratic relationships within schools was not; possibly because it was very difficult to establish a baseline for comparing the situation before and after the reforms. The teacher-centred classroom continued as before, as Cuban (1990) has shown for comparable reforms in the Unites States.

Reform '94 – a call for changing roles and relationships in the classroom?

In the 1990s further major educational reforms took place across the whole educational system from primary education to doctoral level. I evaluated the upper secondary education reform of 1994, called ‘Reform '94’. The aim of the reform was to change both structure and curriculum of this part of the system: my responsibility was to evaluate the curriculum changes between 1994 and 1998. In this paper I present some results from this evaluation: did one of the main goals of the new curriculum – developing the role of the active pupil, who takes responsibility for her/hisown learning – succeed in changing the roles of teachers and pupils towards a more participative and democratic relationship?

Possible changes in the pupil and teacher roles indicated in the data

Two questionnaires were completed by teachers in 1995 and 1998; some of the same questions were asked on each questionnaire. The samples in the two cases were not totally

comparable: in 1995, 440 Mathematics and English teachers replied, while in 1998 the number of teachers from most subjects and types of course was 790. However, analysis of the data revealed that the most important variations in the questionnaires were not between the subjects, but between those teaching general courses and those teaching vocational courses, and between the sexes. In relation to variables the two questionnaires were comparable. Also, there was such wide agreement in the responses to the two questionnaires that there is reason to believe that the most important variations in the teachers are revealed in both cases. In the following section I shall look at some examples of both stability and change in the replies to identical or comparable questions from the two different questionnaires. The examples are chosen to help the analysis of the influence of the content of the reform upon the teacher's role.

The teacher's view of the curriculum has changed little

Both questionnaires asked teachers what they thought of the general curriculum, about the methodological guides to particular subjects, and about the central principles contained in the curriculum reform. The replies were almost identical. It was surprising to find such a high degree of agreement, but this supports the view that both the surveys were fully representative of all secondary teachers. It appears that teachers only slightly changed their opinions, notwithstanding the reforms: the group which supported the central principles of the reform were in both cases between 66% and 75%. The evaluation of the general curriculum was generally the same, as was their view of the methodological guide.

The teachers have changed their way of working

More teachers in 1998 than in 1995 said that they used the curriculum, both in relation to planning and implementation and in their evaluation of teaching. It has become more usual to plan together with colleagues, and teachers also said that they included pupils in this to a greater extent. The pupils reported that they participated *less* in curriculum planning, but this does not undermine the teacher's assertions. If these figures are correct and teachers do what they say they do, then the curriculum has had an effect, although the changes are not dramatic and there is still a large group of teachers who continue to be more or less uninfluenced by the new curriculum.

How can this change be explained? It must be seen against the teacher's background perception that the curriculum does not appear to have changed over this period of time. It seems that some of the teachers who supported the principles in 1995, but could not or would not realise them in practice, were in 1998 planning with their colleagues, involving their pupils in this planning and had introduced project work. This change is of the order 10-20% of the whole sample. Even though there was some variation between statements, the pattern was sufficiently consistent to assert that there has been a real change. This is an example of a number of teachers who had changed their behaviour, but not their attitudes. Over the three years it appears that there was a significant increase in the number of teachers who followed the expectations of the curriculum reform.

‘To change in order to preserve’?

How can the percentage increase in the number of teachers who follow the expectations of the curriculum reform be explained? Fundamentally, this appears to represent those teachers who were initially largely in agreement with the principles of the new practice.

Over these three years, through courses and in response to directives, they have arrived at some new ways of working. Greater cooperation with colleagues has occurred under the direction of the school heads, and in many cases the new departmental heads have regarded this as one of their most important tasks. In the interviews teachers are somewhat ambiguous about this change: they see the need for more co-operation, but are at the same time sceptical about the way it was introduced, and want more time for informal co-operation between small groups of colleagues. Currently a lot of time is taken up in relatively large groups, such as departmental meetings. Co-operation with pupils on planning and teaching appears to be the result of the development of planning models in which pupils can be included through standardised procedures which culminate in reports, either to the departmental or school heads.

These models (which are increasingly found in computer versions) make it easier for teachers to follow up the expectation of planning together with pupils. The standardised procedures weaken the arguments made by teachers early in the reform period that it was too time-consuming. Individual teachers saw the arrangement as unproblematic, because it allowed them to meet the directives without having too much effect upon what they saw as their main obligation: to cover the ‘curriculum’ and textbooks, and other basic expressions of the contract teachers think they have with their subject and society. Other teachers said they had little time for such formal exercises: though they followed the reforms, they had little belief in their educational value. There was also a group of between 20 and 25% of teachers who were barely influenced by these expectations, following only that which was clearly and definitely imposed, at the same time regarding much of this as a bureaucratic exercise. It also seems that in the growing group of teachers who were following the curriculum reform, there was doubt and scepticism about the value of planning with colleagues and pupils, questioning if this does increase pupil's responsibility for their own learning. This supports the pattern suggesting that there has been a slight fall in the support from the teachers. Is this difference between attitudes and behaviour a surface adjustment to the new demands, without teachers regarding it as a change in the role with which they can or will identify?

The dominant teacher culture in the majority of schools, both in the 1998 survey and the interviews in the schools, views the increased co-operation with scepticism. They have only changed their attitudes to a slight extent over the four-year period. They admit the necessity of certain forms of co-operation with pupils, but think that previous experiences in the reform period showed that it should have been given a less significant position, both with respect to the standards of teaching and because they think that pupils are not over-interested in greater co-operation (a view which many pupils also support). The demands made by leaders at the county level, and by heads in individual schools, for reports documenting planning with pupils are met with deep scepticism. To varying degrees attempts are made to avoid the new demands, by completing the necessary forms with a shrug of the shoulders.

This leads to the question whether we are witnessing an increasing difference between schools in their ability (or opportunity?) to follow the content of the curriculum reform. Has the reform resulted in an increased awareness of the value of traditional teacher and pupil roles in many schools? Will the teacher culture support more actively a more 'polished' - somewhat modernised, but still traditional - teacher after a period of defensive reaction? (Cuban 1998). It is too early to answer this unambiguously, but the changes and patterns registered suggest these changes can be interpreted as an indication of this.

Modernisation will depend on how the teachers accept and adopt some of the new terminology associated with curriculum reform. They will cautiously adopt some of the new working methods, such as project work and the direct consultation with the pupil – in other words, they will follow the old conservative slogan ‘change in order to preserve’. For the group of teachers who identify with the teacher's role they know from their own schooling and as teachers for new generations of pupils, the point is that the nucleus of the traditional teacher's role cannot be interfered with. The central values of the teacher's role are connected with the teacher's authority with respect to knowledge and the understanding of this knowledge, which is a necessary part of this authority of knowledge (Apple 1992). Their purpose is to be caretakers of their subjects, to defend its knowledge and to transmit its values to the next generation.

New hopes and new challenges

This conclusion might be questioned in two ways. First it might be that the reform efforts between 1994 and 1998 did not adequately challenge teachers' and pupils' willingness to change. Second, the traditional role of the teacher must be challenged: in Norway, as all over Europe, we are becoming a multi-cultural society. In most Norwegian classrooms we have pupils from cultures very different from our own, and teachers have to rethink their roles as teachers.

Since 1998 I have been involved in a project on cooperative learning in Oppland County, where my college is situated. This was initiated by the education officer and has been operating since autumn 2000 with the intention of making small changes in adopting the curriculum goal of pupil participation in planning, implementing and evaluating the curriculum (Monsen & Hansen 2002). One of our conclusions to date is that by giving pupils and teachers a structure within which to work, and practical and easily understandable methods of working, we have achieved more change in the past two years than in the previous four. If this conclusion is correct, we may have to apply more theoretical discussion to the tradition in curriculum research with which I began. Role changes might be more of a possibility than the research community has thought possible. This might offer hope for a new century of progressive education, working for more democratic classrooms (Rust 1985), but we now have to also learn about the challenges of the multi-cultural classroom and we may find this as difficult as the democratisation of the traditional classroom.

The new challenge of the multi-cultural classroom

The bigger cities in Norway now have a great influx of refugees from different parts of the world, as far away as Iraq, Iran, Somalia, and Kosovo. The Norwegian policy of inclusion seeks to find methods to integrate these pupils into Norwegian society. In the press and other media we read almost daily the many issues our new citizens create in doing this successfully. In a famous Norwegian children’s song one line runs ‘ ... some children are brown, some children are black, but inside we are the same’. This mode of thought has been the official attitude towards the integration of children from different cultures, but in recent years we have learned that children are also different inside, and this difference has to be taken seriously into our curriculum planning. In some schools with more than 50% of pupils from other countries they have had to think about this for some years, but for most schools this is a new challenge with which they have been confronted more recently.

Integration is regarded as something the schools should do something about. In the short run expectations and ambitions are higher than the possibilities for instant success. Several studies have tried to understand the process of inclusion and integration in classrooms with several ethnic groups (Kaya 2000). A principal finding has been that both the pupils and their parents have difficulties in understanding a democratic role for the teacher. For them it is natural for a teacher to be authoritarian in order to gain respect from pupils. It seems that teachers who keep to a more traditional teacher role have fewer discipline problems and are better liked in multi-ethnic classrooms (Hoegmo 2001). To change attitudes and teaching practice in these learning environments seems to be a greater challenge than in the traditional Norwegian classrooms. In the short run I think we have to find a balance between expectations of the curriculum concerning a democratic relationship and the possibilities open to teachers in multi-ethnic classrooms to change culturally-based attitudes. But these problems and challenges should not deter us from keeping the goal in sight. In the long run it should be possible to develop more democratic relationships in all Norwegian classrooms.

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