

Democracy in schools: qualitative analysis of pupils' experiences of democracy in the context of the Norwegian school

Åse Haraldstad, Anne Dorthe Tveit & Velibor Bobo Kovač

To cite this article: Åse Haraldstad, Anne Dorthe Tveit & Velibor Bobo Kovač (2021) Democracy in schools: qualitative analysis of pupils' experiences of democracy in the context of the Norwegian school, Cambridge Journal of Education, 52:1, 73-89, DOI: [10.1080/0305764X.2021.1935738](https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2021.1935738)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2021.1935738>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 16 Jun 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 2730



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



OPEN ACCESS



Democracy in schools: qualitative analysis of pupils' experiences of democracy in the context of the Norwegian school

Åse Haraldstad, Anne Dorthe Tveit and Velibor Bobo Kovač

Department of Education, University of Agder, Kristiansand, Norway

ABSTRACT

A limited number of empirical studies have explored pupils' democratic practice and the direct experiences of school children using a qualitative approach. The aim of the present study has been to analyse pupils' experiences of the practice of democratic rights in the context of the Norwegian school. The study adopts a qualitative methodology, using semi-structured interviews with pupils. Three prominent school arenas were focused on: the mandatory pupil-teacher dialogue, the pupil council and classroom discussions. Three main markers of democracy have been used in the data analysis: contextual openness, participation and the ability to engage in democratic discussions. The findings reveal that all three markers of democracy, although variously distributed, were visible in these school arenas. The findings in the study are discussed in terms of implications for the development of pupils' future democratic competencies and the educational mandate schools have in preparing young people for adult participation in society.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 11 August 2020


Accepted 25 May 2021

KEYWORDS

Democracy; school arena; competencies; pupils; interviews

Introduction

The concept of democracy, one of the main guiding principles of school organisations in many cultural contexts, attracts a considerable amount of attention in the theory and empirical research fields (Harber, 1997, p. 41; Miller, 2002; Noddings, 2013; Straume, 2016). The connection between democracy and education is reinforced through several normatively loaded texts which emphasise the importance of their interrelation. The objective of developing school activities based on democratic principles is logical for ethical, political and historical reasons, and for the assumed effects democracy has on a pupil's psychosocial and learning development (Backman & Trafford, 2007). Starting from original texts nuancing different forms of democracy in education (e.g. Dewey, 1916) to the current status of democracy in the contemporary school, there is an unprecedented consensus among all stakeholders that the implementation of democratic principals in school settings is indeed a good idea. This overarching conclusion clearly suggests that all progressive educational systems around the world should embrace

CONTACT Åse Haraldstad  ase.haraldstad@uia.no  Faculty of Humanities and Education, University of Agder, PO Box 422, 4604 Kristiansand, Norway

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

democracy as a guiding principle that reflects various forms of active participation of all involved parties (i.e. children, parents and staff) in the school context. However, the idea of democracy in schools, similarly to some other contemporary politically loaded terms (e.g. inclusion), is also frequently misused for rhetorical or political purposes. Thus, the research on the role of democracy in education frequently merely reflects desired aims or imaginary objectives rather than describing current situations and experiences of actors in educational institutions (Harber, 1997; Kovac, 2018). Indeed, research focusing on users and their direct experiences with democratic principles in various cultural contexts often shows that current knowledge, understanding and, most importantly, the use of democracy in school settings is far from the described ideal that is expressed in academic texts and political documents (e.g. Farstad, 2015; Mncube, 2009; Tursunović, 2005; Yilmaz, 2009).

Even though there is an extensive body of research exploring how school and classroom climates influence student development and achievements, there are few explorations of pupils' direct experiences of democracy within the school context. Furthermore, the research in this area is predominantly quantitative, theoretical or purely normative in nature (e.g. Lenzi et al., 2014; Nishiyama, 2019; Schostak, 2019; Tormey & Gleeson, 2012). Hence, there is a noticeable lack of studies that explore pupils' experiences of and practices with democracy in school that use a qualitative approach and pose a simple question to participants in the study: in what contexts and in what manner do you experience democratic praxis in your school? Although this approach might seem obvious or directly plain, the review of the current literature suggests that there is nevertheless a knowledge gap when it comes to exploration of the direct experiences and perspectives of the actors who are supposed to represent the real catalyst behind democracy in schools, i.e. the voices of pupils. Bearing this background in mind, the aim of the present study is to analyse pupils' experiences of the democratic practice in the context of the Norwegian school. Our intention is to explore the ways in which and the degree to which democratic practices are '*situated in the life of young people*' (Biesta & Lawy, 2006, p. 73) through their own participation, in contrast to assessments of pupils' verbalised levels of general knowledge about democracy. The study adopts a qualitative methodology, using semi-structured interviews with pupils in four educational settings. More specifically, we conducted twelve interviews with pupils at four lower secondary schools, focusing particularly on three distinct and important arenas in the school organisation where basic democratic principles are expected to be detected or expressed: the mandatory pupil-teacher dialogue, the pupil council and classroom discussions.

Theoretical background

Bearing the abovementioned aims of the present study in mind, it is a given that the identification of processes that characterise pupils' democratic practices directly depends on the 'theoretical lenses' one chooses to use. Thus, prior to data collection, the research team had to delineate and reach consensus on the selection of the theoretical perspectives that would shape the manner in which the main themes/categories in the data material were to be identified, collected and subsequently analysed. The relation between democracy and schooling represents a complex subject with many subtopics, especially considering that conceptual issues about what democracy is and is not have been a matter of

continuous debate (Schmitter & Karl, 1991). The present theoretical approach consisted of two steps. First, we focused on predefining some basic democratic principles or 'markers' that might help us to identify pupils' democratic experiences in school. Although the concept of democracy might be elusive when it comes to its wider definitional delimitations, there are nevertheless some basic principles that are frequently connected to experiences of pupils' democratic practice in contemporary research: contextual openness, levels of participation and individual abilities to practise democracy.

The first essential principle or 'marker' of democracy is to have an atmosphere of non-restrained contextual freedom to promote arguments without fearing systematic or institutionalised consequences. Thus, the analysis of the internal structures in terms of openness that characterise any given context is decisive in understanding the potentials and limitations of the possibilities to practise democracy. Applying assessments of contextual openness to schools is logical considering that school settings are characterised in many cultural contexts by a clear hierarchy when it comes to reaching meaningful decisions (Yilmaz, 2009). In other words, the decision-making process in schools and classrooms concerning important issues is reasonably centralised and controlled to a high degree by the teachers and school leaders. This is partly understandable considering that discussions based on democratic principles can be time-consuming and obstruct effectiveness when it comes to realisation of pre-planned goals originating in the upper echelons of the educational system. The classrooms and school openness constitute the issue that is reasonably well-explored in the current literature and predominantly connected to pupils' civic skills and citizenship education as an important prerequisite for development of a democratic practices (Alivernini & Manganeli, 2011; Lin, 2014). Contextual openness, as a marker of pupils' democratic practices, was connected in the present work to a wide array of indicators, such as the opportunity of the pupils to be heard or listened to, freedom to express themselves and their own positions, experiences of real influence, issues it was possible for them to discuss, and what discussions and topics are excluded, and the possibility to express and debate different opinions simultaneously.

The second principle or 'marker' of democracy in schools that is frequently mentioned in contemporary literature is the notion of participation (Schnack, 2008). The connection between participation and democracy is basic, i.e. it is difficult to analyse democratic practice in school without considering the degree to which pupils actively exhibit involvement and participation in the arenas where opportunities are presented. Even though some voices are calling for more theoretical precision on this concept with the aim of avoiding empty rhetoric (e.g. Vuori, 2014), a review of the relevant literature nevertheless indicates that democracy in educational contexts depend on the active participation of the people involved (S. Hart, 2013). Thus, there seems to be consensus that participation is best represented by a number of participatory approaches where processes of knowledge sharing and collective decisions result in a deeper and more meaningful understanding of participation in practice (Reid, Jensen, Nikel, & Simovska, 2008).

Finally, the third basic principle or 'marker' of democracy refers to pupils' abilities to practise democracy. Thus, as implied above, it follows that we consider contextual openness and a high degree of participation as mere preconditions that do not

automatically guarantee that pupils are automatically engaged in democratic practice. In the current literature there are several parallel concepts that collectively promote the idea that democratic practice depends on abilities to express and formulate one's own arguments in a clear and convincing manner. Some of these concepts are democratic skills (Kahne & Westheimer, 2014), democratic habits (Hansen & James, 2016), reasoning skills (Lipman, 1993; Lipman & Sharp, 1986) or critical democratic thinking (Kovac, 2018). Regardless of the slight theoretical differences or positions, they all essentially underline that democratic discussions go beyond mere contextual openness and participation, and involve (1) the mode of communication that is based on dialogue and (2) the clarity of presented arguments from all involved parties. In other words, according to several authors, one important marker of democracy is based on the ability to undertake 'competent participation' (Schnack, 2008). This also means that any social interaction aspiring to be characterised as democratic should, to a sufficient degree, use the type of communication that facilitates the exchange of knowledge and value-based arguments where extreme individualistic positions are modified by collectivistic consensus. The results of such a decision-making process are based on the process of knowledge and value exchange between different participants or groups that initially were perhaps separated due to their having opposing views or perspectives. In the current literature the kind of communication that is compatible with basic democratic principles is known as 'deliberative communication' and clearly visible in the writings of Habermas (1996) and more recently Englund (2000, 2006, 2016). In simplified terms, the notion of 'deliberative communication' refers to discussions where different views are (carefully) expressed, and owned positions are formed only after other, possibly confronting perspectives, are heard, processed and weighed. This process refers to a type of social interaction that is characterised by tolerance and respect, as opposed to established, non-challenged rulings originating from the power invested in predefined authorities. Thus, the third 'marker' of pupils' democratic practice in the present research refers to communication styles and the abilities of pupils to discuss various matters in the spirit of democratic principles. This is in line with early writings where it has been pointed out that democratic practice in schools primarily concerns the quality of interactions and the type of relationships within a specific educational context (Dewey, 1916).

In sum, the 'markers' of democracy that are in focus in the present study are contextual freedom, participation and the ability to practise democracy.

The Norwegian educational context

The core idea of democracy in education has an impressive and long tradition in Norway where the formation of national identity has been coupled with basic democratic principles (Briseid, 2012). This is also visible in the number of educational directives in Norway which over the years have consistently expressed that a democratic approach is a general platform on which public educational settings should be developed. For example, according to the national curriculum, the school must give pupils the opportunity to participate in and learn about what democracy means in everyday life in school (Ministry of Education and Research, 2006/2017). Each lower secondary school in Norway is instructed to have a pupil council with pupil representatives (Education Act, 1998, pp. §11–2). Similarly, the development of pupils' abilities to participate in

discussions in a competent manner is also emphasised in the national core curriculum, but also in a number of the competence aims for specific subjects (Parliamentary white paper 28, 2015–2016, p. 41). This explicit connection between public schooling and governmental guidance has contributed to the formation of the relatively robust ideology of equality and fair conditions for all, regardless of personal or social background. The notion of democracy in Norwegian educational directives is explicitly associated with other similar concepts, such as human rights, the global community, scientific thinking, participation, social justice and national identity. Furthermore, this strong political rhetoric on democracy is embedded in intended practice where schools commonly establish pupil council meetings as a means of involving children in democratic processes. Democracy is thus seen in the Norwegian educational context as a competence that needs to be taught and learned by pupils, preferably through practice in various subjects (Solhaug & Børhaug, 2012).

However, although ideas about democracy are, as indicated, firmly embedded in the Norwegian school, the examples of pupils' democratic practices are not as equally or easily detected in all aspects of the school structure. Due to this, we had to select a distinct arena in schools where situations for pupils to practise democracy were visible and embedded in the Norwegian school structures, and consequently expected to occur. These arenas where 'education through democracy' (Biesta & Lawy, 2006; Biesta, Lawy, & Kelly, 2009) might be detectable, executed and practised are (1) the mandatory pupil-teacher dialogue, (2) the pupil council and (3) classroom discussions. According to the Regulations for the Educational Act (2017), the pupil has the right to have a regular dialogue with the class teacher at least once each quarter where the topic is the formative assessment of the pupil's achievements. During these talks, the teacher is supposed to present information about the pupil's development in relation to the competence aims in the national curriculum and to give the pupil the opportunity to reflect on and participate in his or her own learning (Ministry of Education and Research, 2006/2017). Thus, the basic intention behind the pupil-teacher talks is to promote a dialogue where pupils also have the opportunity to raise questions of concern. The pupil council refers to meetings where joint interests of the pupils are discussed with the aim of promoting good learning environments in classrooms and the school in general. According to the Education Act (1998, pp. § 11–2), each lower secondary school in Norway shall have a pupil council with pupil representatives that provides pupils with the opportunity to freely express their own positions and concerns. One member of the staff is assigned to assist the council and has the right to attend and speak in the meetings. The pupil who chairs the council may call meetings in consultation with the staff contact, but a meeting may also be arranged when requested by one-third of the pupils in the council, or by the head teacher. And finally, classroom discussions provide pupils with the opportunity to interact and learn what democracy means in everyday life in school. Promotion of the pupils' individual abilities to practise and develop democracy is emphasised in the core curriculum section of the national curriculum, but also in a number of the competence aims in the subjects (Parliament white paper 28, 2015–2016, p. 41). However, identifying potential contexts where pupils' democratic practices could be detected is of limited use if the researchers are unclear as to how to define aspects of the subject matter under investigation.

Methods

The present study was conducted at four lower secondary schools in three different municipalities with the aim of achieving a degree of variety during the data collection. Hence, one school was in a rural community, one in an urban municipality with rural surroundings and two schools were in a small city. The researchers started by approaching the administration at each school and asking them to purposefully sample informants. The sampling process was based on criterion sampling as described by Patton (2002) and the school representatives were asked to choose pupils that fulfilled the following predetermined criteria: the pupils should be in the last grade in lower secondary school and be active pupils who, according to their teachers, might have something to say about democracy and their own participation in school. Thus, information-rich informants were strategically preferred in this study. Additionally, we wanted 'ordinary' pupils in the class; not pupils who had been elected as pupil representatives. Finally, we also attempted to include both girls and boys as participants in the study to avoid gender bias. It must be noted that we are aware that this 'purposive' sampling strategy might introduce a bias in terms of obtaining an unrepresentative view on the issue, and might even be ironic considering the main aims of the study. Nevertheless, we would argue that, given the premises embedded in qualitative research, it was valid to select participants who could provide rich information, in contrast to participants who are not informed or interested in processes associated with democratic practices. All in all, we conducted 12 interviews with the pupils, who were between 15 and 16 years of age, three interviews in each school. The interviews took place in the schools; seven boys and five girls participated.

The data material in the study is based on a semi-structured interview guide. The questions were open-ended, and the pupils were asked broad questions about the concept of democracy, the mandatory pupil-teacher dialogue, the class discussions and the pupil council meetings. In the situations where pupils provided relatively short comments, the open-ended questions were complemented with follow-up questions about the variety of situations that are expected to be connected to pupils' democratic practices.

The research team consisted of three researchers, two of whom conducted the interviews in two schools each with the aim of reinforcing the reliability of data. The whole group was involved in the analytical process by discussing back and forth the various interpretations and meanings emerging from the data material. All data were recorded and transcribed where NVivo 12 software was used in the analysis (Philips & Lu, 2018).

To attain an overview of the data, the first step in the analysis was to make a thorough review of the transcribed material. The entire analytical approach for making sense of the present data involved a back-and-forth process between open coding, restricted or guided by theoretical assumptions, and the collected data. This means that we negotiated various theoretical perspectives with the collected data to achieve interpretations and extract meaning, in accordance with the analytical assumptions from the grounded theory (Chamberlain-Salaun, Mills, & Usher, 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The entire analytical process started with identification of key school arenas and several 'markers' of democracy based on relevant literature. We then sharpened this process by developing an interview guide where key questions were further crystallised. In the third step we attempted to suspend our judgement and theoretical assumptions and apply an open

coding process, reducing the number of markers to the three most prominent that combine the theoretical background with the collected data in a meaningful manner. Thus, the result of this second step was a short list of categories, e.g. experiences of being listened to and experiences of disagreement. In accordance with Miles and Huberman (1994), the next step of the analysis was to cluster some of the codes derived from the coding process into the three overriding categories. In the final fourth step, we directed our focus on the attempt to understand and discuss principles of democratic practices in the light of statements from the participants in the study. Thus, in this final step we have summarised the findings and singled out sequences of text that offer insight into the purpose of the study. Even more importantly, in the end analysis, we looked for nuances and further illuminated the chosen categories by identifying a number of interrelated subtopics in each category. In short, the contours of initial markers of democratic practice developed during theoretical preparations proved relevant in the final stage of the analysis when the multiple thematic categories and then subsequent overriding categories were identified and presented to the reader as findings from the study.

Due to the young age of the informants, all ethical guidelines (The Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees, 2016) have been meticulously followed during the entire research process. For instance, to ensure that the pupils felt comfortable, all the interviews were conducted at their own school. The interviewers also spent some time with the pupils before the interview started in informal conversation so there was a smooth segue into the interview situation. The researchers were specifically focused on avoiding leading questions that would perhaps result in pupils unintentionally providing us with answers that they believed were 'correct'. And finally, we were specifically focused on explaining the requirements of confidentiality in order to reassure the pupils that the researchers would not, under any circumstances, refer or communicate contents of the interviews to the teacher. In sum, the purpose of the study was explained to the informants, they were guaranteed anonymity and the right to withdraw from participation in the present research at any point along the way was especially emphasised.

Findings

As noted in the introduction, the search for traces of the pupils' democratic practices in various school arenas was supported by three important democracy markers identified in the current literature, namely contextual openness, participation and the ability to discuss various matters of importance. Across the arenas, all 12 cases showed to varying degrees the types of experiences where these three markers were clearly visible. However, and as expected, we found that occurrences of these processes were not distributed equally throughout all arenas. For example, in the mandatory-dialogue arena we found strong markers of contextual openness where the pupils expressed a high degree of being listened to and being heard. Similarly, we found the most elaborated versions of participation in the pupil council meetings, while the strongest indication of the ability to discuss various matters of importance was found in classroom discussions. It is important to note that our intention was not to compare and rank these three arenas in terms of importance. We found the arenas to be complementary, all of them containing different markers of democracy where opportunities for engaging in meaningful discussions were

present (Biesta & Lawy, 2006; Biesta et al., 2009). Thus, we presume that there were strong synergies between these arenas leading to the experience of the pupils' democratic practice in the daily life at school. Nevertheless, this represented an interesting finding in the sense that it showed that the specific democratic behaviour of pupils is associated with specific contexts or aspects of school practice.

Mandatory dialogues

We started this part of the interview by asking how the participants understood the intentions behind the mandatory dialogues. The typical replies described them as an opportunity to talk about *'our well-being, how we perform in the subjects, and what we can improve.'*

We continued the interviews by asking the pupils to recall the last pupil-teacher dialogue and asking them open questions, such as how the talk was set up, how they experienced it and so on. Only two of the 12 participants used negatively loaded descriptions and portrayed this activity as waste of time or an unnecessary measure. The following excerpt from the interviews, among several similar ones, describes a teacher who is clearly attentive, listens to pupils and is prepared to act on behalf of the pupils:

She is completely serious about this and then she does what she can if you raise something. This means – if I'm hurt or pushed by somebody – she does something about it immediately. So, I can express my opinion clearly, and what I want her to do and stuff like that.

In the above excerpt it is easy to see that the teacher's attitudes and actions had positive consequences for this pupil. These types of attitudes are quite common in our data material and can be detected in the statements made by several of the participants. In fact, our data material suggests that the pupils were encouraged to propose novel ideas or improvements in relation to various aspects of subject teaching and class organisation. For example, one participant said: *'I think he likes it when people express their own opinions and stuff like that.'*

Overall, these excerpts show the signs of contextual openness, where it was possible to speak out and where the teacher knew his/her pupils. It is reasonable to assume that the actions of the teacher in question contributed to the experience of contextual openness and freedom to speak freely, increasing the pupils' chances and motivation to speak out in the future.

When we asked participants about criticising the teaching programme and teaching in general, some pupils said: *'If I'm not satisfied, I usually speak out'*, or similarly *'If there's something I'm not satisfied with, I express this right out.'*

The participants also expressed the belief that the teachers were understanding even though criticism was directed at their colleagues. This is, to some degree, also the case when criticism was directed towards the teaching itself. For example, one participant said:

If for example I had said 'this teacher is no good' – he would not have replied 'mm. . . are you sure? I disagree with that' or something like that. He would have listened to what I said and considered that as a starting point.

The excerpt clearly indicates the high levels of trust that are characteristic in open contexts that nurture confidence and feelings of being respected. However, although there was a strong belief in the teacher's willingness to listen and efforts to help, the participants in the study also reported an awareness that the teachers were restricted in their opportunities to act.

I can express my own thoughts and ideas concerning alternative ways of doing things. And yes – they listen to me. But of course, the teachers run their own races, and they cannot always do everything. But they try to do their best to give help and assistance.

We also found excerpts describing how discussions with teachers resulted in pupils changing their mind:

I have just listened to what he has said, and he has listened to what I have said. ... But maybe I have changed my opinions a bit compared to what I had initially.

These excerpts show that the tendency towards deliberative communication indeed occurred between our participants and their teachers where both sides were prepared to listen and attempted to understand the other's perspective. In sum, the overall interpretation of the separate statements from the 12 interviews connected to mandatory dialogues clearly indicates high levels of contextual openness and the opportunity to freely express one's own positions.

The pupil council meetings

One prominent arena in the school context where participation was visible in practice was the pupil council meeting. During these meetings, the pupils had the opportunity to actively exhibit involvement and partake in their areas of interest. However, in contrast to relatively positive descriptions associated with the mandatory dialogues, where the pupils reported high levels of contextual openness and freedom to express their own understandings, the tone describing the pupil council meetings was somewhat distrustful. We started this part of the interview by posing fairly simple and open questions about their experiences of the pupil council, for example how the class elected their representative and which topics the council addressed. It must be remembered here that this is an arena where it is highly expected that concrete propositions and discussions will lead to expectations of tangible consequences and results. Our data indicated that 10 out of 12 participants in the study expressed a low degree of experienced influence, objecting that their initiatives were not taken seriously. Several utterances from our informants were characterised by a sense of resignation, as we can see in the following excerpt:

The principal doesn't work that much with the cases. After nagging for many, many years, we got hot showers. It took five years. ... It took a long time before they decided to hear what we want. A very long time.

This attitude of scepticism to change is further nuanced in this excerpt:

They [the pupils] can present good suggestions and opinions and that sort of thing, but usually nothing happens. ... So, the principal just says, 'we'll look into the matter', and then nothing happens.

Under the assumption that this attitude is representative of the pupil population in general, it is reasonable to assume that the abovementioned excerpts might show that there has been an unfortunate effect on the pupils' motivation to participate in pupil council meetings. Indeed, one of the participants clearly and bluntly stated: *'In fact, it [the pupil council] doesn't mean that much to me'*.

To investigate this picture further, we explored the nature of the pupils' requests and expectations. The participants in the study reported a wide range of expectations that varied in terms of realistic possibilities. One of the participants expressed this lack of realism in the following manner:

They present many unrealistic wishes, like in primary school, where everyone should have a trampoline in their school.

Although one of the participants pointed out that it is easier to obtain approval of non-material suggestions, such as social and inclusive events, the dominant tendency in the data material points towards a materialistic orientation. A typical answer to the question of what sort of issues were usually discussed in the pupil council meetings is related to strong demands for material improvements. Examples of these demands included having an ATM at school, a microwave, toaster, basketball nets, playgrounds, hot meals in the cafeteria, curtains in the showers, 'Vipps' access (for telephone transfers of money) and so on.

In sum, data based on questions concerning the pupil council reveal poorly utilised potentials for practising democracy considering that this forum was established with the aim of providing pupils with the opportunity to freely express their own positions and concerns. Several statements from the participants disclosed a somewhat restrained atmosphere of contextual openness to promote arguments. In addition, relatively negative attitudes were detectable in the data when it came to the hope for change; there was also a small and petty focus and a materialistic orientation. All this points to the failure of the original intention behind the councils when it comes to the pupils' participation. The obvious consequences of these tendencies could lead to pupils losing interest in democratic practice and thus having lower participation when it comes to influencing the decision-making process in school.

Classroom discussions

The classroom context and the nature of classroom dynamics is the specific arena where skills and competencies concerning the quality of discussion tend to emerge. The pupils were asked open questions about how the classroom discussions take place and how the pupils participate in these settings. One issue was to a large degree initiated by the pupils themselves, namely the lack of instruction on how to participate in such discussions.

It was easy to detect in our data that there was general agreement among the participants that they received very little systematic teaching and instructions related to development of abilities that can be used in democratic discussions in the classroom. For example, one of the participants said:

We were not actually taught about these things, we merely tried to figure it out on our own. We discuss it as we like. No, it comes . . . on its own, it just happens.

A fellow participant concurs:

We have never been instructed on how things should be done. It is we ourselves, I suppose, who run discussions alone.

Moreover, the participants reported that they seldom experienced the type of teaching that stimulates democratic discussions and expressed the desire for more knowledge and training on this issue:

... I think so, if we could be taught to discuss, – how to do it ... not only use examples. I think it would be much better if we could take an hour a week just to do that properly.

Thus, the last three extracts clearly show that some of our participants perceived that the lack of systematic instruction related to the development of their abilities that could be used in democratic discussions was regrettable, while at the same time they expressed appreciation for this type of communication and strong engagement. This is aptly described in the following excerpt:

There's a lot of screaming going on because many are passionate. ... Plenty of enthusiasm one might say.

We continued the interview with more specific questions on the pupils' own participation in the discussions and asked them the following questions: Do you often speak out? Do many pupils participate in classroom discussion? Who are the ones who take the floor?

Although some participants stated that they took part in discussions, they also reported a relatively low general participation rate in the class, estimating that perhaps only a third or less of all the pupils contributed. Moreover, the participants pointed out that in fact only a few pupils dominated the discussions:

Only two or three people talk in class. So, there are only discussions between the teacher and two or three others. ... we have tried to get others to be more involved, but it didn't work.

Statements from the participants reveal that a possible reason why pupils were reluctant to join discussions was related to insecurity and fear caused by offensive comments and laughter.

From time to time I dare to say what I mean, but I'm afraid to get comments and stuff like this. ... Yes, after class I'm thinking that I'm going to get some barbs in my direction.

Furthermore, it seems that those pupils who dominate have certain characteristics that inhibit others from speaking out. They were described as having '*strong meanings and strong personalities*', being '*the popular ones*', '*the smartest ones who know more than others*', '*the boys more often than the girls*' and so on.

However, traces of the willingness to understand the position of others was clearly detectable in our findings. Several of the participants said that the teacher pushed them to be better listeners and pay attention to others when they talked. They emphasised the importance of attempting to understand the positions of others during classroom discussions.

It's important to get the opinions of others. Because you might change your mind and you have to think about the stuff being said.

Bearing this question in mind, we also asked our participants if they ever had changed their opinion and viewpoints during classroom discussions. Several, or more accurately four participants directly stated that the nature of the discussions influenced their own positions, leading them to change their minds in some cases:

If I state something that I didn't think through, somebody can point out aspects I haven't thought about. So, after a while I change my opinion.

Most of the participants in this study also showed a strong willingness to credit different viewpoints and manage disagreements. However, one relatively surprising finding was that very few pupils were able to understand what we meant when we asked questions about the use of arguments in discussions. In sum, our data indicate that, compared to the two other previously mentioned arenas, the classroom discussions seemed unorganised and random, and lacked a guiding and premediated pedagogical structure. Certainly, it must be pointed out that our data material has at times somewhat opposing messages concerning the pupils' participation and involvement in classroom discussions. For example, we reported a low participation rate, but also reported signs of engagement and joy concerning these discussions, as well as a strong willingness to credit different viewpoints. But still, there is little awareness of the importance of the quality of argumentation. Nevertheless, the classroom discussions were confirmed as an important arena where traces of the pupils' democratic practice emerged. It seems that this arena has a great potential for development, similarly to the pupil council meetings. This refers to structure and planned pedagogical pursuits, but also didactic approaches for stimulation of partly spontaneous discussions that could have learning benefits and lead to valuable 'democratic moments'.

Discussion

The aim of the present study has been to analyse the pupils' experiences of democratic practice in the context of the Norwegian school. We focused on three prominent school arenas where markers of basic democratic principles were expected to be found: the mandatory pupil-teacher dialogue, the pupil council and classroom discussions. Although traces of pupils' democratic practices were detected to varying degrees in all three school arenas, the overall findings nevertheless indicate that there is a large potential for further development of practices supporting pupils' possibilities to be heard and taken seriously when it comes to decision-making processes in school.

On the one hand, our data clearly show that the participants in this study were satisfied with their opportunities to practise and exercise democracy in their educational contexts. This is especially visible in the pupils' statements connected to the mandatory dialogues where they clearly describe feelings of being heard, taken seriously, trusted, able to criticise and with opportunities to influence pre-planned actions. Thus, the informants describe the mandatory dialogues as having high levels of contextual openness, with clear democratic markers where the pupils' initiatives concerning individual needs and wishes were seriously considered. This is a rather surprising finding, considering that the school organisation is based on a rather firm hierarchy when it comes to reaching decisions and making plans (Kovac, 2018; Yilmaz, 2009). In Norway, the purpose of the mandatory dialogue is to discuss each pupil's development in relation to the objectives and aims in

the national curriculum. Our data suggest that teachers seem to succeed in getting the pupils to feel they are being heard during these dialogues, thus fulfilling the criterion that democratic educational contexts should be characterised by active participation (S. Hart, 2013).

On the other hand, the experience of contextual openness that is reported in connection with the mandatory dialogues seems to be more restricted in the pupil council meetings. More specifically, our data show that the pupils describe the council meetings with a distrustful tone, saying they have a low level of influence, and basically the informants do not seem to care about the council. The pupils explain that they are listened to, but the findings indicate that there are few tangible consequences of their initiatives. Similarly, the informants in our study report that classroom discussions are characterised by low participation, dominated by few voices and influenced by fear of embarrassment. Furthermore, there are indications that the pupils possess very little knowledge about how to promote their own arguments, as well as how to respond to the arguments of others. This is attributed to a lack of competencies, insufficient instruction in classroom discussions and inadequate guidance on how to act during these types of discussions.

The main point that seems to emerge is that there is very little systematic instruction when it comes to the development of the pupils' abilities to use democracy in practice. Thus, even though we find in our data a relatively high degree of the contextual freedom to express one's own positions, participants in the study also report that they receive little guidance when it comes to development of the abilities to discuss various matters of interest. This is surprising considering that educational institutions are by definition places where pupils' have chances to systematically develop capacities to understand different perspectives, to present their own views to their classmates or the teacher, and to engage in give-and-take arguments in order to arrive at mutually justifiable decisions (A. Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). For example, our data indicate that pupils and their representatives need more information and guidance to fully understand that the mission of the pupil council might go beyond the materialistic topics that seem to dominate the meetings' agendas. This could be achieved if the teacher who is assisting the pupil council provides additional guidance to explain the educational aspect of the council meetings and the limits the pupil council is operating within. Making clear what these meetings can and cannot decide might certainly benefit the young peoples' views on democracy. Thus, schools should also be clear in advance about the format of the pupil council and explain the potential limits that are embedded in these types of pupil participation. Similarly, in the situations when the council does not achieve a breakthrough in favour of the pupils' viewpoint, the school and the teacher should then make an effort to explain the reasons for not taking the pupil council's point of view into account (A. Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). Our main point, based on the present data, is that school has an educational mission and mandate to prepare young people to be active stakeholders who are participating in the decision-making process in their respective cultural contexts. Thus, school needs to provide a deeper framing of democracy for their pupils compared to the short materialistic orientation that is visible in our data. If this is not done properly, it is not a given that the pupils' democratic practices and experiences in school will have any transmission value outside the four walls of the schools nor that there will be much learning outcome (Børhaug, 2018). More bluntly, considering the positive attention the

concept of democracy receives when it comes to education, it is rather disappointing to find that pupils use their opportunities primarily on materialistic topics and individual concerns. This potential ‘playing the democracy game’ based on school experiences that is visible in our data can indeed backfire and create a certain degree of apathy if/when pupils later in life are expected to practise democracy in their adult lives (Biesta & Lawy, 2006). It is reasonable to assume that such indifference and disappointment that are coloured by the ‘hidden’ nature of the school context could be generalised to society at large in the future.

Bearing this in mind, we argue that schools should certainly continue to aspire to be democratic spaces in terms of allowing pupils to practise democracy, but more importantly schools should represent an educational arena where democratic abilities are learned in one way or another. It is important to note that this argument expressing concern for young people’s apparent political passivity, although rarely based on empirical data as is the case in our article, is frequently emphasised in the contemporary literature (Amnå & Ekmann, 2014; Hansen & James, 2016; Kahne & Westheimer, 2014; Kovac, 2018; Lipman, 1993). It is fair to say that the concept of democracy is connected to a higher degree to human rights and fairness, and less to the quality of decisions. This is the reason of why democracy is and should be a complex concept involving a gradual learning process and maturation, from child-initiated shared decisions with adults to full participation in adult decision-making (R. A. Hart, 1992). In other words, non-participative experiences of democracy in school, connected to a poor teaching focus on development of competencies, could easily lead to indifference when it comes to the expression of one’s own opinions. The present findings, however, could easily be interpreted as encouraging and supporting the idea that school is primarily an educational arena where democracy should be gradually learned, and only secondarily an arena where democracy is indeed practised by pupils in a limited capacity. In sum, teachers and other educators should use classroom discussions and other appropriate arenas strategically to develop pupils’ abilities in democratic participation, and more importantly serve as moderators during these discussions, guiding pupils towards higher levels of democratic experiences (Kovac, 2018). Afterall, the school is, beyond a doubt, the most important institution where deliberative democratic principles can be systematically learned with the aim of preparing children to take constructive roles in a future democratic society (Amy Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Labaree, 1997).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

- Alivernini, F., & Manganelli, S. (2011). Is there a relationship between openness in classroom discussion and students’ knowledge in civic and citizenship education? *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 15, 3441–3445.
- Amnå, E., & Ekmann, J. (2014). Standby citizens: Diverse faces of political passivity. *European Political Science Review*, 6(02), 261–281.

- Backman, E., & Trafford, B. (2007). *Democratic governance of schools*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Biesta, G., & Lawy, R. (2006). From teaching citizenship to learning democracy: Overcoming individualism in research, policy and practice. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 36(1), 63–79.
- Biesta, G., Lawy, R., & Kelly, N. (2009). Understanding young people's citizenship learning in everyday life. The role of contexts, relationships and dispositions. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 4(1), 5–24.
- Børhaug, K. (2018). Oppseding til medborgerskap [Education for citizenship]. *Nytt Norsk Tidsskrift*, 35(3–4), 268–278.
- Briseid, L. G. (2012). Demokratiforståelse og intensjoner i demokratioppdragelsen. Norske læreplaner mellom 1974 og 2010 [The understanding of democracy and intentions in the education of democracy. Norwegian curriculums between 1974 and 2010]. *Nordic Studies in Education*, 32(1), 50–66.
- Chamberlain-Salaun, J., Mills, J., & Usher, K. (2013). Linking symbolic interactionism and grounded theory methods in a research design: From Corbin and Strauss' assumptions to action. *SAGE*, 3, 1–10.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Education Act. (1998). *Act relating to primary and secondary education*. Last consolidated: LOV-2018-06-22-83. Oslo: Ministry of Education & Research.
- Englund, T. (2000). *Deliberativa samtal som värdegrund – historiska perspektiv och aktuella förutsättningar* [Deliberative communication as core values – historical perspectives and current assumptions]. Stockholm: Skolverket.
- Englund, T. (2006). Deliberative communication: A pragmatist proposal. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 38(5), 503–520.
- Englund, T. (2016). On moral education through deliberative communication. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 48(1), 58–76.
- Farstad, S. A. G. H. K. (2015). *Searching for democracy. A study of democracy in education in English and Norwegian secondary schools* (Master). University of Oslo, Oslo.
- Gutmann, A., & Thompson, D. F. (1996). *Democracy and disagreement*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Gutmann, A., & Thompson, D. F. (2004). *Why deliberative democracy?* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Habermas, J. (1996). *Between facts and norms. Contributions to a discourse theory of law and democracy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Hansen, D. T., & James, C. (2016). The importance of cultivating democratic habits in schools: Enduring lessons from democracy and education. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 48(1), 94–112.
- Harber, C. (1997). International developments and the rise of education for democracy. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 27(2), 179–191.
- Hart, R. A. (1992). *Children's participation. From tokenism to citizenship* (Vol. 4). London: Unicef, United Nations Children's Fund.
- Hart, S. (2013). *Thinking through teaching: A framework for enhancing participation and learning*. London: David Fulton Publishers.
- Kahne, J., & Westheimer, J. (2014). Teaching democracy. In E. W. Ross (Ed.), *Social studies curriculum: Purposes, problems, and possibilities* (pp. 353–371). New York, NY: SUNY Press.
- Kovac, V. B. (2018). Schooling through democracy: Limitations and possibilities. *Project Innovation (Alabama)*, 139(1), 9–22.
- Labaree, D. F. (1997). Public goods, private goods: The American struggle over educational goals. *American Educational Research Journal*, 34(1), 39–81.
- Lenzi, M., Vieno, A., Sharkey, J., Mayworm, A., Scacchi, L., Pastore, M., & Santinello, M. (2014). How school can teach civic engagement besides civic education: The role of democratic school climate. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 54(3/4), 251–261.

- Lin, A. R. (2014). Examining students' perception of classroom openness as a predictor of civic knowledge: A cross-national analysis of 38 countries. *Applied Developmental Science, 18*(1), 17–30.
- Lipman, M. (Ed.). (1993). *Thinking children and education*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing.
- Lipman, M., & Sharp, A. M. (1986). *Wondering at the World. Instructional manual to Accompany Kio and Gus*. Montclair: First Mountain Foundation.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis. An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Miller, R. (2002). *Free schools, free people: Education and democracy after the 1960s*. Albany, NY: State University of New York.
- Ministry of Education and Research. (2006/2017). *National curriculum for knowledge promotion in primary and secondary education and training*. Oslo: Ministry of Education & Research.
- Mncube, V. (2009). The perceptions of parents of their role in the democratic governance of schools in South Africa: Are they on board? *South African Journal of Education, Citizenship and Social Justice, 29*(1), 83–103.
- Nishiyama, K. (2019). Enabling children's deliberation in deliberative systems: Schools as a mediating space. *Journal of Youth Studies, 22*(4), 473–488.
- Noddings, N. (2013). *Education and democracy in the 21st century*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Parliament white paper 28. (2015–2016). *Subjects -In depth studies-understanding- Renewing of the education reform introduced in 2006 in primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education and training (from Norwegian, own translation)*. Oslo: Ministry of Education and Research. <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/meld.st.-28-20152016/id2483955/>
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Phillips, M., & Lu, J. (2018). A quick look at NVivo. *Journal of Electronic Resources Librarianship, 30*(2), 104–106.
- Regulations for the Educational Act. (2017). Regulations for the act relating to primary and secondary education and training. Last consolidated: FOR-2021-05-18-1550. Oslo: Ministry of Education and Research.
- Reid, A., Jensen, B. B., Nikel, J., & Simovska, V. P. (2008). Developing perspectives on education and the environment, health and sustainability. In A. Reid, B. B. Jensen, J. Nikel, & V. P. Simovska (Eds.), *Participation and learning* (pp. 1–18). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Schmitter, P. C., & Karl, T. L. (1991). What democracy is. and is not. *Journal of Democracy, 2*(3), 75–88.
- Schnack, K. (2008). Participation, education, and democracy: Implications for environmental education, health education, and education for sustainable development. In A. Reid, B. B. Jensen, J. Nikel, & V. P. Simovska (Eds.), *Participation and Learning* (pp. 181–196). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Schostak, J. (2019). Towards a society of equals': Democracy, education, cooperation and the practice of radical inclusion. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 23*(11), 1103–1115.
- Solhaug, T., & Børhaug, K. (2012). *Skolen i demokratiet – demokratiet i skolen* [The school in democracy – democracy in school]. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Straume, I. S. (2016). Democracy, education and the need for politics. *Studies in Philosophy and Education, 35*(1), 29–45.
- Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. M. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- The Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees. (2016). *Guidelines for research ethics in the social sciences, humanities, law and theology*. <https://www.forskningsetikk.no/>
- Tormey, R., & Gleeson, J. (2012). The gendering of global citizenship: Findings from a large-scale quantitative study on global citizenship education experiences. *Gender and Education, 24*(6), 627–645.

- Tursunović, M. (2005). The Swedish school as an arena for nurturing the democratic impulse. *Kakenien Revised*, (1), 1–10.
- Vuori, J. (2014). Student engagement: Buzzword or fuzzword? *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 36(5), 509–519.
- Yilmaz, K. (2009). Democracy through learner-centered education: A Turkish perspective. *International Review of Education*, 55(1), 21–37.