

# DEMOCRATIC VALUES AND STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN SWEDISH EDUCATION: ESSENTIALS FOR A SUSTAINABLE AND EQUAL SOCIETY

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## INTRODUCTION

In line with the philosophical idea that society shapes education and education shapes the future, education plays a key role in the perpetuation of democratic and sustainable societies (Wals & Corcoran, 2012). Upholding democratic values within the education system in a sustainable fashion demands a well-developed educational policy. These foundational policies build on social justice and creating them is a vital first step toward inclusive educational systems that value student participation.

Education is one way to promote active engagement and participation as a form of civic responsibility (Dahlstedt & Olson, 2013). As Giroux (2002) points out, democracy needs to be made an issue of public good, and is both political and educational; therefore, education may function as a mechanism for young people's public voice and power as social agents while building and sustaining a democratic culture.

Future education systems will play a critical role in preparing youngsters to cope with a society in which the prevailing value systems are in a state of flux, even as rapid changes enable young people to participate in public debate (Bohlin, 2011; Burman, 2011; Dahlstedt & Olson, 2013; Wahlström, 2011).

The aim of this chapter is to review policy and research on democratic values in education. We focus on students' participation and influence with regards to inclusion and diversity at compulsory and upper secondary schools (students aged 6-19). The chapter emanates from a previous published research review that primarily focused on Swedish investigations about student participation and influence on school policy. We also review examples from international research in this field.<sup>1</sup> Swedish educational conditions are used as exemplification, and these conditions are critically discussed in relation to specific educational challenges in the northern part of Sweden; however, on a general level, they are also related to the Arctic region as a whole.

A lot of minority groups live in northern Sweden and the region is characterized by multiculturalism and multilingualism. The northern part of Sweden also has vast areas with decreased population densities. Immigration into the northern region is, however, increasing in the northern part of Sweden (Statistiska centralbyrån, 2018). In the sections below, we begin with a brief exploration of the Swedish school system and its governing documents, which include the Educational Act and curricula that have an emphasis on democratic values and their influence on education. We then focus more specifically on student participation and future engagements in society. We discuss education as way for creating a sustainable and inclusive society through student participation. We conclude by exploring significant conditions for education in northern Sweden and the values of a democratic and participatory education, which are essential for a sustainable and equal society.

<sup>1</sup> A major part of this text has previously been published in *Participation for Learning* (2016), the Swedish National Agency for Education, experts and authors: Eva Alerby & Ulrika Bergmark; however, these portions, to some extent, have been revised and rewritten for this publication. The text is re-printed with permission from the Swedish National Agency for Education.

## THE SWEDISH SCHOOL SYSTEM – A SOCIAL AND DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT

As a nation, Sweden has a history of orienting education as a social and democratic movement in order to promote educational equality, starting with the introduction of the national *folkskolan* in 1842, which provided basic knowledge in different school subjects, e.g. reading, writing, counting and Christianity, and which was the first compulsory school form for all children in Sweden (Richardson, 2010). Since then, democratic values and citizenship are a common thread throughout the policy documents that provide guidelines and conditions for how work and learning ought to be organised in schools in Sweden.

However, during recent decades, international educational systems (including Sweden's) have been affected by a contemporary global rationalistic agenda: educational policies and large-scale reforms have put measurable content knowledge, standardisation, documentation and evaluation at the forefront (Hargreaves, 2009). Measurable content knowledge that leads to success on international tests has, therefore, become prioritised at the expense of democratic values, citizenship and student participation (Biesta, 2011).

The fundamental democratic values that form the base of Swedish schools are described in their governing documents: the Education Act and curricula for compulsory and upper secondary schools (Swedish Government, 2010; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011a, b). These values include, for example, the sanctity of human life, freedom and the integrity of individuals, the equal value of all human beings, equality and solidarity between people.

On the basis of the governing documents of these schools, the work on fundamental democratic values is something that should permeate all activities of schools in a concrete manner. These democratic values should be included as a common thread during lesson planning and should be implemented and evaluated. Education will therefore create the conditions for learning and knowledge building, both in different school subjects and in our democratic and fundamental values (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011a, b).

Through education, students must be given the opportunities to develop knowledge regarding human rights and democracy. All school activities have to be characterised by democratic values throughout the schools – in classrooms, corridors, dining halls, changing rooms and outside in the school playgrounds. Democratic working forms are therefore a natural part of the education that enable students to develop skills that will help them to become active citizens of society, both now and in the future. It is important to emphasise that the work on fundamental democratic values should be assigned a central role in students' learning, regardless of subject. Creating the conditions to ensure that all students are given the opportunity to participate actively in issues affecting them and their learning is essential for the work of schools. It is about students participating and influencing the activities of schools (Giota, 2001; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011a, b).

Students' participation is a common notion throughout the steering chain, which provides guidelines and conditions for how education should be organised in Swedish schools. The base of the steering chain is the Education Act's wording on quality and influence (Chapter 4, §§ 9–10 of the Education Act, Swedish Government, 2010) and the introductory provisions regarding a special focus on the child's best interest (Chapter 1, § 10 of the Education Act, Swedish Government, 2010).

The Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>2</sup> has served as guidance for the Education Act. For example, children are continuously encouraged to take an active part in the work to further develop their education and they are kept informed on *issues which concern them*; topics are adapted to children's *age and maturity*. Children ought to have the opportunity to take initiative on issues that concern them and their groups' work (Swedish Government, 2010).

The Education Act also stresses that the best interests of the child are the starting point of school activities. A child's point of view has to be clarified as much as possible and children ought to have the opportunity to freely express their views on all issues related to them. Even here, it can be seen how principles in the Convention on the Rights of the Child are the starting point for legislation (Swedish Government, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> A child refers to every person below the age of 18, according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In the steering chain, the Education Act's wording is then the basis of the curricula's part one regarding the fundamental values and assignments of schools. The Education Act's wording also impacts part two of the curricula's overall objectives and guidelines and, in part three, the course and subject syllabi. Student participation and influence should be part of teaching. For example, the students' own interests, experiences and notions of what their education must address should be used as a foundation in addition to student-active working methods in the classroom.

The curriculum for the compulsory school system, the preschool class and the recreation centre emphasises the importance of students' participation and influence:

The democratic principles of being able to influence, take responsibility and be involved should cover all students. Students should be given influence over their education. They should be continuously encouraged to take an active part in the work of further developing the education and kept informed of issues that concern them. The information and the means by which students exercise influence should be related to their age and maturity. Students should always have the opportunity of taking the initiative on issues that should be treated within the framework of their influence over their education (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011a, p. 12).

The quotation above illustrates that high expectations are imposed on Swedish schools in terms of the students' participation and that these expectations cover all students. The challenge is realising the intentions of the steering chain through concrete work on participation in schools.

## **STUDENTS' KNOWLEDGE OF DEMOCRACY AND ENGAGEMENT IN SOCIETY**

Students' knowledge of democracy and political decision-making is an important basis for being able to increase participation in schools in a concrete manner. The *International Civic and Citizenship Education Study, ICCS* (The Swedish Agency for Education, 2017), is an international comparison study of students' knowledge, attitudes and values concerning democracy and citizenship, but also about their

contemporary and future commitment(s) to society. The results can be compared over time because the study was done in both 2009 and 2016. ICCS 2016 (The Swedish Agency for Education, 2017) shows that the Swedish students have very good knowledge of citizenship, democracy and society, and this knowledge was significantly above the average of all participating countries. Only two countries, Taiwan and Denmark, performed better than Sweden. Sweden's results in the ICCS 2016 show a significant improvement compared to the results of the ICCS in 2009. Of the Nordic countries, Norway also performed better in the last ICCS. In the 2016 ICCS, Denmark and Finland achieved at a similar (high) level as in 2009, which indicates that the four mentioned Nordic countries all perform well.

The ICCS also asks questions about the students' engagement in society, now and in the future. It was found that the Swedish students discuss political and civic questions with parents and friends to a higher degree in 2016 compared to 2009. The discussions often relate to what is happening in other countries. Nowadays, the students have easier access to information on civic issues, both locally and globally, through the Internet. Being an engaged citizen also relates to the students' own civic self-trust. The students answered in the study to what degree they can, for example, speak about a political question in front of the class, write a letter to a paper giving their opinions on a political issue and organise a student group to make a change at school. On a general level, half of the Swedish students believe they could likely do these activities very well or pretty well. The Swedish results lie in the middle compared to other participating countries. In this section, the other Nordic countries have lower results than Sweden. It is interesting to note that while Swedish students generally showed a willingness to discuss political questions and to personally engage in civic actions, there are differences within the student body. Girls and students from a higher socio-economic group are more likely to discuss political questions and have higher self-confidence to engage in societal change than boys and students from a lower socio-economic status. The students' migration backgrounds also impact these characteristics. Students who were not born in Sweden or whose parents were not born in Sweden show a higher degree of willingness to discuss political questions and greater self-confidence for civic engagement.

## **STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION AND INFLUENCE IN SCHOOL - OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**

There are different perspectives about what participation and influence in schools means. It is partly about students acquiring actual knowledge of how a democratic society functions and the rights and obligations of a citizen. Yet it also concerns them having opportunities to make their voice be heard and to be given the chance to be active in the education system. Thomas (2007) claims that participation can be understood as the students' *influence over decision-making processes* and their *participation in an activity*. However, it is important to point out that there are no sharp dividing lines between these different perspectives; in practice, they overlap.

Students' participation in schools is about their opportunities to exercise influence over decision-making processes in schools. Student-active education, which is based on students' experiences, interests and needs, provides students with an opportunity to have an active role in their education. Allowing all students to express their views about educational matters is therefore of great significance. Making different voices heard involves a will to facilitate diversity and an openness to different perspectives that impact a situation or a decision in school.

Rönnlund (2011) has studied participation in the form of decision-making in schools and she makes a distinction between formal and informal influence. The former entails influence in formal contexts, such as class and student councils, while informal influence refers to informal decision-making processes in education. Elvstrand (2009) terms participation in decision-making as political participation. Besides this type of participation, Elvstrand also studies social participation, which requires that students feel that they can participate and feel included in a social community and is linked to the rights of all students to participate in activities. Elvstrand also emphasises that participation is about whether the person in question feels that they can participate; thus, it includes the perception of participation.

The feeling of participation is also discussed by Aspán (2009). She claims that students may feel that they can participate without actively influencing the activities of schools. It may be the case that students are part of a community in which it is permitted to make their voice heard, but at the same time they understand that it is not always possible to influence and change decisions because there

are limitations to their influence. Despite this, students still have a feeling of participation in schools. The reverse may also happen; students may be given the opportunity to make their voices be heard, but the personnel of schools may not convey their thoughts and opinions further, which means that students are not given real opportunities to influence decisions and do not actually have a voice on matters that affect them (Johansson & Thornberg, 2014). Some activities may, therefore, concern both perspectives of participation, that is, participation both as an influence on decision-making processes and as active participation in education.

The Swedish curriculum and the ICCS theoretical framework (The Swedish Agency for Education, 2017) both emphasise that students have opportunities to influence school decisions and participate in education in order to develop democratic competence. How the Swedish students regard their opportunities to have an impact on school decisions relating to teaching, schedules and text books has not changed much since ICCS 2009. Their participation in formal decision-making, such as engaging in school councils, debates and other political meetings at school, seems to be high and is significantly above average. However, the students' belief that their participation results in school improvement is below average. This indicates a gap between their formal engagement and the perceived outcomes of change efforts.

The Swedish National Agency for Education (2013) has demonstrated that students perceive that their opportunities to have an influence have declined over recent years. The willingness of students to participate and influence their school situation is greater than their perceived opportunities. The willingness of older students to have an influence has also declined when compared to earlier surveys that measure attitudes. This trend is problematic; the steering chain clearly emphasises that the responsibility and influence of students should increase with age and maturity. As the willingness of older students to have an influence has declined in comparison to the surveys completed in 2003 and 2006, the perceived influence of older students has also declined.

A possible explanation for students perceiving that their opportunities for participation have declined may be that they feel that their opportunities for real influence are limited. If they feel that they are not taken seriously, or do not have real influence when they make their voices heard, their willingness to exercise their



influence most likely decreases. Therefore, it is important to continue the work on students' participation and influence in schools by developing the desire of younger students to participate more and, at the same time, encourage older students to make their voices be heard and allow them to actively influence their education.

One example in the Swedish school context in which students can exercise influence is through student councils. These can represent the foundation of the schools' democracy work by serving as an inclusive nursery where all students (at least theoretically) are seen and have the opportunity to make their voice heard. However, there are challenges associated with student councils (Almgren, 2006; Brumark, 2006, 2007; Elvstrand, 2009; Eriksson & Bostedt, 2011; Rönnlund, 2011). These challenges include making all students' voices heard and making the councils address educational issues and bring up issues that are considered to be important for students. In addition, the activities of the councils can be a lengthy process and students do not always see the results of the changes that they have suggested. Accordingly, the opportunity to practice participation through class and student councils seems to be limited, that is, what students can really influence and who participates in the decisions (Elvstrand, 2009; Rönnlund, 2011).

There are also challenges related to students' participation in different educational activities. One is the opportunity for students to be involved in and influence the activities of schools. The second is whether students take advantage of the opportunities that allow active participation in their education and influence their learning. Dovemark (2007) discusses participation that is based on the aspect freedom of choice. She claims that often students' influence covers *when*, *where* and *how much*. Consequently, someone else (often the teacher) still tells the students *what* is right and wrong and *what* is important. Whether students choose to participate and have an influence largely depends on which working methods prevail at the time for the school in question. According to Rönnlund (2011), there could be some restraining factors for students' participation and influence in education. For example, knowledge objectives and grading criteria may be limiting because they are strongly governed by the subject content. As a result, students are given few opportunities to negotiate what their education should contain and cover.

To sum up, student participation creates opportunities for the inclusion of all students in a school context and enables diversity in which multiple voices are

heard. However, despite the promising aspects of student participation, there is a need to promote the issue in school at both a strategic- and classroom-based level.

## **MEETING THE EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES OF THE ARCTIC REGION THROUGH STUDENT PARTICIPATION**

Student participation in schools is a contemporary issue in the Swedish education system and therefore, student participation is also relevant for educational systems in the wider Arctic region. The Nordic countries of Europe have similar, but not identical schooling systems that build on comparable, but not identical cultures. Educational systems in the Nordic countries face profound challenges in meeting the needs of the community and the education of tomorrow. We believe that some of the educational challenges in the Arctic region can be met by organizing education so that students actively participate in their education and also in the improvement of their school because they can provide useful perspectives in the process. Examples of educational challenges in Sweden, especially its northern region, are shared with other parts of the Arctic; these challenges include how to deal with schooling for newly arrived students, multilingualism, high dropout rates (especially for indigenous students), students with special needs and young males. These problems are further compounded by a large and peripheral geographical area and a low population density, which results in a decreased number of students and often necessitates a thin distribution of resources for the educational systems. These factors demand new ways of approaching and providing education that are tailor-made for local circumstances, place-based and grounded in local knowledge; the ultimate goal is to identify prerequisites for a school system that is based on the notion of equity for all.

For the education of now and tomorrow, issues of democracy and student participation are crucial; the utmost aim is to promote educational equality and a sustainable and inclusive society. The transition into such a society acknowledges the necessity of developing young people's ability to make ethical and responsible choices with regard to economic, social and private life. Sustainability and inclusion in schools will affect the issues of competencies and skills for the future labour market and young people's access to it. These issues involve young people's lifestyles as well as the economic and social sustainability of our society. A sustainable and inclu-

sive society recognizes and appreciates the diversity among all citizens. Such a society needs to be built upon a sense of belonging, valuing personal and cultural differences, and appreciating people's experiences and skills (Osler & Starkley, 2003; Quintelier & Dajaeghere, 2008).

Education that is based on all students' perspectives and the best interests of students is founded on participation and the students' influence throughout their schooling, from the meetings between teachers and students during lessons to the principal organiser's work on fulfilling the needs of all schools. Students should have the opportunity to inform adults in the school about how their daily life in school functions and about their safety and comfort. Students' experiences ought to be taken seriously and, if necessary, result in the appropriate changes. Students should also, as a part of their education, be able to continuously inform teachers about how the education system is functioning, both the positive and negative aspects. This information can be integrated into education by working with feedback on the students' learning or by allowing students to participate in the planning of different components of their education. Teachers then will have a continuing basis for being able to make decisions on whether changes need to be made for the improved education of students.

In turn, teachers may require support and resources to implement the necessary changes to the education based on the needs of students. Needs that teachers address with the principal may create the necessary conditions for the education and collegial work of teachers. In addition, the principal organiser has the ultimate responsibility for the school unit. From this perspective, in which schools use the students' needs as a starting point, it becomes clear how students' participation and influence forms a foundation and influences the school's local steering chain.

Education in the northern part of Sweden has special conditions that are characterized by multiculturalism and multilingualism, long distances and decreasing population. However, migration is increasing, and in connection to issues of democracy and student participation, it is of significance to note that students who were not born in Sweden or whose parents were not born in Sweden have a greater willingness to discuss political questions and greater self-confidence regarding civic engagement. Based on the research reviewed in this chapter, we will highlight the need to work actively with democratic values in education at all

levels and to address all students, independent of age, gender, social-economic status, ethnicity or nationality. These are the essential dimensions for inclusion, which in turn are fundamental for a sustainable and equal society in the northern part of Sweden, in the greater Arctic region and world-wide.

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