

This article was downloaded by: [University of Glasgow]

On: 26 April 2014, At: 03:29

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



International Journal of Leadership in Education: Theory and Practice

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tedl20>

The importance of student voice

Thomas Holsten Leren

Published online: 21 Nov 2006.

To cite this article: Thomas Holsten Leren (2006) The importance of student voice, International Journal of Leadership in Education: Theory and Practice, 9:4, 363-367, DOI:

[10.1080/13603120600895502](https://doi.org/10.1080/13603120600895502)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13603120600895502>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

The importance of student voice

THOMAS HOLSTEN LEREN

Introduction

Having read the articles by Smyth, Cook-Sather, Fielding, Mitra, and Osberg/Pope/Galloway, I will in this article form my statements regarding different topics within the concept of 'student voice'. My apprehension of how student voice is best implemented and organized is based, mostly, on my former experiences as a member and, later, leader of the student council at Bjørkelangen High School in Norway. The purpose of this text will at the same time be to give an impression of how students think when it comes to participation in school reform processes and influence on their own learning environment. The first part of this text concerns the ways of gaining influence in one's own learning environment, i.e. on the class level. Furthermore, it will discuss the different methods of organizing the student body and increasing the level of participation in decision-making processes. Last, I will at look at the challenges regarding students participating in powerful groups within the school.

Student involvement in planning of classroom activities

As a response to the set of problems that follow the fairly high 'drop-out' rates in the US school system, it seems proper to speak of the effect of ownership. By that, I mean the feeling of ownership which students have the possibility to acquire through participation in the planning of classroom activities. In most cases, the relevant curriculum is definite, but the methods used to communicate the knowledge can, I venture to say in most situations, be decided by the teacher and the students together. The methods could be such as a pure lecture from the teacher when dealing with difficult parts of the curriculum, but it could also be working with assignments in groups, watching an educational film about the relevant topic, going on an excursion or working individually. The teacher will often have an opinion of how the different parts of the curriculum are most efficiently communicated, and on the other hand, the students will have their own opinion of how they believe they will more easily absorb this particular knowledge. Anyway, the point is that the teacher and the students find, if necessary by compromising, a

Thomas Holsten Leren is a student at the Norwegian School of Economics and Business Administration, Helleveien 30, 5045 Bergen, Norway. Email: Thomas.Leren@stud.nhh.no. He is a former pupil at Bjørkelangen High School.

method of learning with which both parties can be satisfied. The fact that the students get to co-determine this will give them a feeling of ownership. That way they will feel more obliged to attend to the lessons. They no longer have the option of complaining about the method used by the teacher. Being given the opportunity to decide motivates people.

At my former school, the one mentioned in the introduction, this became a more and more common practice in most subjects. Nonetheless, there is, of course, a reason for why it took some time to implement the method. Uninterested students can be difficult to motivate and reluctant to participate in the planning work. They might be hard to persuade into joining the planning, simply because they cannot see the use of it. Therefore, I believe the key to succeed in this process is to persuade the students into joining the first time, and they will eventually become aware of the effect.

In addition to its direct effect, this model is also highly relevant to the discussion regarding relations between teacher and student. The class having a good relationship with the teacher cannot be overestimated. There are several ways to develop and refine these relations, and I will present some of those below.

Mid-term evaluation encounters

This is a very efficient tool for creating relations like trust and confidence between the student and the teacher. The idea of this mid-term evaluation has for its object that the teacher and the student meet once approximately half way through the semester. This meeting provides an opportunity for the student to comment upon his/her level of satisfaction with his/her own school effort, possible achievements, the teacher's methods, and his/her wellbeing in the class. It also provides a chance for the teacher to comment on his/her level of satisfaction with the student's effort, and so on. Arrangements like this not only improve student-teacher relations, they also can be useful as a means for the students to acknowledge what they must do to improve themselves. At the same time, the teacher will receive valuable feedback regarding the methods of teaching.

Class meeting

To detect whether the method of joint planning is working properly or not, it needs to be evaluated. This can be done during a class meeting, which I see as an informal forum in the classroom where the students and the teacher discuss the pros and cons of the system and find out if it yields the wanted effect.

Class committee

A class committee consists of the lead teacher, another teacher who is affiliated to the class, and three students from the class, of whom one is the

class representative (the student who represents the class in the student council—more on this topic follows). This forum can for instance be used by the students to give the teachers feedback that may not necessarily be suited to the class meeting, in respect for the teacher(s). The class committee can also take care of planning and carrying out social activities for the class.

Organizing student voice

This paper examines the consequences of how a student voice effort tries to gain acceptance in a school by considering the tradeoffs of positioning a student voice effort within school walls as compared to within the realms of an outside organization. (Dana Mitra, Student voice from the inside and outside: The positioning of challengers)

As Dana Mitra writes in her article, the way you choose to organize a student voice group when attempting to make school reforms is essential to the outcome. At Bjørkelangen, we were organized as a student council, with students only. This form appears to have most in common with the Student Forum at Whitman High School, but with some distinctive differences.

The student council is a permanent way of organizing the student voice, and it provides, in Bjørkelangen High School, a high level of influence in decision-making processes. The level of influence will, at all times, depend on the level of involvement and participation of the students who run the student council, and will therefore vary. Despite that fact, the system will always make sure the possibility for influence is present. The student council is run by the student council management, which consists of six students elected by the student body. This is student democracy in practice. The leader of the student council management, and the student council, is actually elected after an electoral campaign and a presentation at an assembly with all students present. The students then vote for their favourite in secrecy, and that way, the leader will hopefully be a person suitable for the job. The student council itself consists of the class representatives from each of the school's classes. These representatives are elected by their class. The remaining five members of the student council management are elected at a student council meeting. By electing the student council and the management this way, you get as many students as possible involved in the election process, and the student democracy reveals itself. This model secures continuity, since the management (elected in January) and the class representatives (elected in September) are elected for one year only, and will probably not be bothered with the same problems as the Student Forum (see Mitra, this issue).

It is not enough to have an election process in a system in order to gain influence, although it appears as a foundation in the student voice work. Gaining influence requires affiliation to the school management, and for the staff to have a positive attitude toward the work done by the student council. This is often a door opener. The student council has meetings approximately every third week, whilst the student council management has responsibility for the day-to-day conduct. At Bjørkelangen, a person from the staff, called the student council contact, attended almost all

meetings, with both the student council management and the student council. This was an important factor for the student council management's influence on the school management, because this person provides continuous communication with the school management. Most important of all, this person makes it possible for the students to receive an instant response to their ideas and plans, regarding whether they are possible or letting them know not to go through with them, and how the management may respond. This increases the efficiency of the student council management, and spares the school management from enquiries regarding impossible projects and ideas. It is important to emphasize the fact that the student council contact is only meant to be a consultant, and does not have any real power in the student council. It is important to have the right person in this position because this person can restrain the creativity and innovative abilities of the student council management. The school has, by this, the possibility to suppress the activity in the student council, but the outcome that would undoubtedly be dissatisfied students, and after all, that is what we are trying to avoid.

At Bjørkelangen, the student council management had meetings with the principal every other week. In these meetings, we discussed projects we wanted to launch and ideas we needed to get approval for. The principal would give us information about what the management were working with, especially things that would have direct consequences for the students. We would inform the principal of what was happening in the student council. In addition to these more formal encounters, as leader of the student council, I used to speak with the principal about different student council matters at least every other day, and this ensured fluent and continuous communication with the school management. This is conditional on a principal and a school management who are genuinely interested in the students' opinions and wellbeing; although I cannot see any reason why they should not be, especially when we can lean upon the fact that students who feel comfortable and involved in their own learning learn so much more than those who are not.

This brings us further to the relevance of the cases with which the student council work. The school management's lack of motivation is perfectly understandable if the student council's main concern is for the presence of a drinks machine in the canteen. If the students' interest in participation in decision-making processes does not go beyond that level, we have a completely different situation. The school management will then have a job to do making the students understand that their contribution in much more serious concerns is extremely valuable to the school. One of the school reforms that was carried through by the student council, the school management and the staff was the change in the daily time schedule. The initiative came originally from the students, and was raised as a case by the student council. Propositions were presented, and after being discussed internally by the staff, the school management and the student council, a compromise was made. The new time schedule came into force about one-and-a-half years after the first proposition. This profound change would most probably never had come about without the forceful involvement of the student council.

As we are told that both Fairview, Redwood, and Glenhaven High Schools do in the Osberg, Pope and Galloway article (this issue), it is also common practice at Bjørkelangen to arrange an annual survey for the students on the internet, which makes it possible to analyse their attitude towards the student council, the teaching methods, and other interesting factors. This survey is being used both by the school management and the student council management to improve their work in the best interests of the students.

Students participating in powerful groups

Something that is definitely worth commenting upon is the fact highlighted by Osberg, Pope and Galloway; that a student put in a group consisting exclusively of adults in most cases will be the same as not having a student present in the group at all. Standing up for an opinion on behalf of the students in a room with solely teachers and administrators is not an easy job, and the student will quite often be left out of the real work and the real decision-making. By letting two or more students attend groups and executive committees, one will at least provide a more comfortable setting for the students to put their opinions forward.

Conclusion

The willingness to cooperate both from the teacher and the students in the classroom is essential to make a fertile learning environment and to make both the teacher and the students feel comfortable. The importance of having the students attend all relevant groups and committees in the school system cannot be emphasized strongly enough. Students know which methods and models work for them, what they see as interesting, and what they do not profit from. Their expertise as users of the school system should therefore be made the most of. I am not saying the students should determine everything, but I believe including them in the decision-making processes is a wise thing to do.