Democracy and Participation in Secondary Schools in Spain

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1. Democratic Participation in Secondary Education.

The growing awareness on the part of schools of the need to improve democracy and student participation, particularly in secondary school, is evidenced by the creation of democratizing educational experiences for everybody. The assumption of the social reality present in a wide diversity of students in schools implies a change in the configuration and the functions of the secondary education stage that, in Spain, began to undergo profound changes regarding structure, function and working conditions starting in 1990, when a new education bill modified the configuration of the education system; the Act on the General Organisation of the Education System (LOGSE, 1/1990, 3rd October) substantially reorganized learning stages, schools and syllabae. The fact that secondary schools had since had to cater to 12 and 14 year old students—who up until then were schooled in primary schools by professionals whose experience and qualifications were completely different from those of secondary school teachers—has led to new challenges for secondary schools. **Therefore, since the enforcement of the 1990 education bill, the compulsory stage of secondary education encompasses all students aged 12-16. This process is on a par with similar processes in other countries and, as French sociologist François Dubet states**, this implies a modification of the institutional program for secondary education, where the learnt trade and discipline defined the teaching profession more than pedagogy and student participation. The changes brought along by the 1990 bill are still looked upon with mistrust and uneasiness by part of the faculty of secondary schools. That is why school life **conflicts** brought

about by parents and students are not just **inevitable incidents in a school system that is open to everybody**: these conflicts "become extraordinary, they are interpreted as symptoms of a generalized collapse of the institution" (Dubet, 2013: 165). And, ultimately, underlying the discourse of education for everyone, old extractive dynamics survive: different studies (OCDE, 2013) show that educational institutions are unable to compensate background inequalities, as demonstrated by the results of children who come from families with fewer social and cultural resources. This reality leads to a reassessment of the teaching activity and classroom life, though it is not an easy task:

> Granting access to compulsory secondary education, by right and duty, to all students from primary school without any prior classification meant an unprecedented challenge to one of the basic rules of thumb of Spanish secondary education: the classification of the students and their distribution in groups according to their capacities. Besides, a new space of meaning and expectations to which the teaching staff and the students could give direction was not created. Quite the opposite. The name was changed—high school institutions became secondary education institutions, but everything else remained the same: teacher training and mentality, spaces, time. However, the students were not the same, nor their needs, backgrounds, expectations, attitudes or their willingness to learn. (Hernández & Sancho, 2004: 55)

The assessment of this issue in the last decades has had, indeed, its highs and lows. It is true that with the advent of democracy in Spain, a new era began, bringing the possibility of wider participation dynamics that sought to improve the mechanisms and management bodies of public institutions, schools among them—or rather, in the forefront. Article 27 of the Spanish Constitution refers to the role of teachers, parents and students in the monitoring and management of educational centres. The first regulations appeared and the laws that established the bases to comply with the constitutional mandate were developed. Parents' Associations and School Boards were implemented and their role regulated as platforms and democratic participatory bodies. Everything seemed to indicate that educational centres were opening up to the different sectors that make up the school and to its surroundings. But in recent years, with the emergence of the Organic Law for the Improvement of the Quality of the Educational System (LOMCE, 8/2013, 9th December), the decision-making capacity which, for better or worse, had been

awarded to School Boards[1] has been taken on by the directors and owners of the centres, both in public and private schools, further undermining the role of the educational community when it comes to encouraging participation of students and families or promoting deliberative processes that are central to school life.

All these elements highlight both the need and the difficulties regarding the opening up of the centre towards practices of democratization and empowerment of student participation. In fact, raising questions about student participation in secondary education and considering the improvement of the relationships between the different agents that participate in the school life requires a constant effort and continuous reflection on the organization and operation of the educational centre that is not easy to implement (Freiberg & Stein, 1999). For many years, this has been a concern that lies with individual teachers and, as such, it is driven by the attitude and criteria of each teacher rather than a collective project of the school; but addressing diversity, the right to difference and bridging inequalities demand a more professional, collegial and active teaching approach to meet the needs of secondary school students:

> When learners are more diverse and demanding, caring must become less controlling, more responsive to students' varied cultures, more inclusive of their own ideas, perceptions and learning requirements, more ready to involve and not just compensate for the families and communities from which students come in their quest to lift their learning to higher levels. This is the social and emotional mandate for teacher professionalism today (Hargreaves, 2000: 60).

The need to reinstitucionalize secondary school, as a process of improvement and deepening of its democratization, is thus imposed; processes that will enable the transformation of the school culture, understood as "a system of shared orientations that hold the unit together and give it a distinctive identity" (Hoy et. al. 1991). In this case, reinstitutionalization refers to a collective dynamic in the school as a whole that leads to far-reaching and sustainable changes. Talking about democracy in educational centres

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[1] It is the participation body of the school community in the centre's government. The school board has representatives from all the groups involved in the educational community: director, faculty, students, administration and service staff, etc. Board members are elected for a period of four years and renewed by halves every two years.

means the possibility to create and experiment with new forms of subjectivity, relationship, collaboration, and collectivity (De Lissovoy, 2013). We know that this is not always easy. Innovation is usually hampered by the traditional mismatch among the more strictly pedagogical field, the institutional framework and the political context. Therefore, organizations may appear to be progressive but in fact they maintain institutionalized practices that prevent new projects from penetrating into the hard core (the classroom), with the exception of some very experimental contexts. There is a "decoupling" or "loose coupling", a critical factor that accounts for the lack of sustainability of innovations and reforms (Resnick *et al*. 2010).

In-depth democratization of educational centres is an opportunity to create a new institutional program for secondary education. It is neither a collateral issue nor should it be defined by individual wills or personal inclinations, but rather a crucial challenge in the configuration of a school's educational project that will actually provide better support to secondary students in their academic and personal trajectories.

2. Four Areas of Democratic Participation

Living a democratic daily life at school implies overcoming different obstacles to create, maintain and improve processes and structures in educational centres so that young people's actions take centre stage. Placing students at the core of the educational action involves mobilizing changes in secondary schools with wo objectives: first, regarding young people from a viewpoint of respect towards oneself and others; and second, transforming the centres into contexts of democratic life (Lawy *et al*., 2010).

The decisions taken by the teaching team to ensure that the centre becomes a site of democratic experimentation only makes sense if it is oriented towards the agreed goals. Accompanying this process, mobilizing students' ability to make decisions regarding those aspects that affect them, modifying the curriculum in order to share it, adapting spaces to foster new relationships among the people who inhabit the centre and building new ways of working in a teaching team are not easy to undertake or to maintain over time. There are centres that try to do it, and although they do not always succeed, they do move in that direction (Simó *et al*., 2016). In the hope of highlighting those spaces, we

will present four areas of participation in which the democratic quality of some secondary schools can be appreciated[2]:

- Tutoring, assemblies and councils[3]
- Project work beyond the school and **Service Learning** actions
- Appropriation of space and relationships
- Teaching teamwork and the role of the management

2.1. **Youths in the Foreground: Tutorials, Assemblies and Councils**

The schools that undertake the challenge of democratic education place subjectification (Biesta, 2015) as a fundamental objective. The growth of each youth in relation to himself and to others takes shape in the pursuit of what concerns them. Fostering participation spaces that these young people can experience at school involves performing actions that lie at the heart of the curriculum; paying attention to what young people have to tell us means being able to look at what they show and insinuate as a whole since, what is at stake here, even in understanding the relationship of young people with knowledge, has to do with each of their lives as a whole, not just with cognitive or school matters. The relationship with knowledge, the wish to learn and the relationships between being and knowing cannot be understood by looking only at the connections young people make with school matters, or their response to the demands of the educational system. At some point in their paths, when young people are broadening their horizons and wondering what their lives can be, secondary education must also wonder about its capacity to accommodate dimensions of development and personal growth of youths at times of delicate decisions and transformations (Hernández, 2006). Thus, individual and group tutoring become spaces where the educational relationship that each adult builds with each of these youths, as well as among them, takes place.

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[2] We got to know those secondary schools during the course of the *Demoskole* Project.
Proyecto Demoskole: Democracia, participación, y educación inclusiva en los centros educativos. Universitat de Girona (UdG) i Universitat de Vic – Universitat Central de Catalunya (UVic-UCC). Plan Nacional I+D. Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación. (EDU 2012-39556-C02-01 y 02). 2013-2016.

[3] The council is the communication body between the students and the governing bodies of the school, which channels student participation in the school life. The council is made up of delegates and sub-delegates elected by each class and by the representatives of the students in the school board.

From the students' perspective, individual tutoring is a well-valued space for support and reflection that each student shares with a teacher who provides individualized monitoring of their academic and personal development. This kind of relationship with each teacher is key for consolidating the environment of the school. For the students interviewed, the role of the tutor is pivotal in establishing a wide sense of trust with his or her group and a climate of dialogue in the classroom:

> Researcher: But are tutoring sessions a space for debate?
> Student 1: Well, in our case, we would say no.
> Student 2: It also depends on the tutor. [...] but M. and I have a tutor who trusts us. We can talk to her about anything and she will try to help us. She is always very close to us, especially in our studies.
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> [P35: DKV_GD_Gurb_Alumnes_01.pdf - 35:17]

In addition, these tutoring groups are an excellent test laboratory to initiate participatory processes where the teacher's role is key to encouraging students to express their own opinions, and in which they are required to understand the viewpoints of others and establish dialogues in order to further their understanding of a problem. Students expressed the need to find more spaces, during school hours, where they can express their opinions and discuss them in an open and spontaneous dialogue, and not only in planned learning activities. In short, students themselves demand more spaces where they can be able to express themselves and be listened to.

In Class Assemblies and Student Councils young students give their views on aspects that directly affect them. Students value the opportunities for participation and decision making regarding their academic life that the school offers them. They are aware of the fact that there is margin for shared participation, but they also stress the limits of participation. As stated by Thornberg and Elvstrand (2012), students express their participation in everyday life in terms of process and relationships rather than results, since they realize that they can decide on some issues but not on others. Being fully aware of these limitations, students value the chance to make some decisions that concern them and directly affect them in Assemblies and Councils. The result of these practices impacts

on their coexistence and the decisions that the students take, as well as on school climate, as stated by a student:

> Student 2: For us to give opinion, we are given a topic that has been a problem or something, and we have an assembly and we all give our opinion and then that goes to the Student Council or, I don't know, we make a proposal or something and then they take it to the Student Council and they check if it's OK or not.
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> (P49: DKV_GD_Sils_Alumnes_01.pdf - 49:8)

Turning Assemblies and Student Councils into real decision-making spaces for youths is only possible in contexts where adults respect the students' voices and the school has the organizational will to include these spaces in a global pedagogical project, beyond isolated educational initiatives or circumstances.

2.2. Rethinking the Curriculum with the Community: Project Work and Service Learning

Schools that take on the challenge of democratic education question the educational sense of the curriculum by offering spaces for participation in which young people can become co-researchers (Fielding, 2012). Formulating the educational sense of projects from the viewpoint of democratic education means dealing with organizational, structural and institutional changes, thus posing many questions to the teaching teams instead of offering easy and immediate answers.

Organizing project work implies, first and foremost: rethinking what relevant school contents are and adapting old school time and space structures; that the teacher be a companion in the learning process; and that information and communication technology become an essential tool in this process. From this perspective, project work is not a matter of methodological innovation but is based on a political approach that aims at a deep-seated change in the conception of academic knowledge.

The organization of academic knowledge in an integrated way through project work guides student participation towards a community perspective. It creates opportunities in which young people can listen and be listened to and can make decisions in spaces of shared responsibility that not only affect their individual and group growth, but can also entail possible improvements for the community. The service learning activity seeks to ensure that students experience and be at the forefront of civic engagement activities, learn in the active exercise of citizenship and put into play their knowledge and capacities to serve the community. Using service learning methodology, the acquisition of skills in the classroom (10 hours) and competence development are combined with social action (10 hours minimum), responding to a previously detected need in either a local or distant environment. One of the strengths of this activity lies in the wide range of services being carried out simultaneously, including aid in schooling, intergenerational exchange, environment, heritage, sustainability, digital literacy, etc.

This diversity adds organizational complexity to the project but fosters student autonomy, encouraging them to make their own decisions about the project they wish to develop. The students interviewed mentioned that they could choose a specific community service that everyone would like to take part in, and each group analysed the needs and defined their own goals with the community partner. As a consequence, there is a mutuality to this kind of project: while it clearly impacts on the community, it also needs it to develop the project.

2.3. Greater Presence of Young People in the School Space and Educational Relationships

Schools that have a more democratic will are committed to organizing both spaces and working times according to a coherent educational sense oriented towards student participation. In this line, we find, for example, two-hour blocks that enable different means of participation and establishing relationships with flexible and heterogeneous student groups. In fact, this breaks away from the formula 1 teacher / 1 classroom with 25-30 students / 1 hour of class in different educational activities, such as project work,

cooperative group work or support brigades[4] at the school, opting instead for classes of 20 students organized in five groups of four students each, plus two teachers per classroom for some class sessions. In these sessions, research, debate and development of ideas among members of each subgroup prevail, as well as the joint agreement on results that in many cases offer answers to problems that the community is trying to solve. These learning spaces become articulating axes of different horizontal relationships between students and teachers through which young people express a shared sense of belonging in the school and a feeling of personalized support that helps them grow individually. They feel that they are listened to and are confident in making decisions, despite the fact that these educational situations pose new challenges:

> Student 1: I remember that at first we complained about cooperative groups, I guess because we weren't used to that, there were always problems, and just once in a while you were in a group that you liked, but now, well, I don't know about the others, but at least I think in general you begin to like all the groups because you learn to adapt, because with co-evaluation we can give grades, when we do group work we can grade our group mates for the work they've done.

> (P35: DKV_GD_Gurb_Alumnes_01.pdf - 35:49)

In the centres with greater democratic participation, students stated that the teachers are close, they feel that they are available for whatever they may need: "here the relationship is closer and we are more like friends" (GD_CC_A2:2). Students say that there is a good climate that is directly related to the opportunities young people have to participate and voice their opinion (Leitch & Mitchell, 2007). This can be seen in intangible or anecdotal aspects, for instance that the teachers' room is in fact a space where young people are constantly coming and going, that the director's office is actually the same teachers' room, or that students start to work on their own initiative when the teacher is not in the classroom. In short, students from the centres with greater democratizing participation know that the way in which the educational activity is organized in these schools is unique. However, students also highlight that the spaces and times for participation and

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[4] In Support Brigades, students are responsible for participating and taking decisions regarding improvements in different areas of school life (e.g. decoration, computer maintenance, providing academic support to other students, etc.). They are an open and dynamic experience that encourages students' active participation, involvement and sense of responsibility.

debate are subject to the school's schedule, which consists of fixed times that are strictly structured around the subjects included in the curriculum.

Giving voice to students has consequences at the level of school organization, and must therefore lead the centre to reflect on what it prioritizes over the course of a school day as well as on how to balance the need for flexible times and spaces while ensuring a proper quantity, quality and distribution of time dedicated to instruction and studying. Indeed, school culture or *"school grammar"* (Tyack & Tobin, 1994) implies a set or rules, structures, practices, codes and organizational forms of government that define the concept of space and time, transmissions, grading, teaching… A "hard core" that the educational centre has maintained over time and that society in general and some of its actors still perceive as the mold of what 'true school' is. Delving into the democratization of school thus demands addressing the characteristics of its organizational arrangements and parameters, and once again students themselves express that school practices are hierarchical:

> Student: There are powers that we can't deal with here at school because if we want to change subjects or if we want to change the schedule, we can't change that, but we can change, for example, tutoring activities, or ask for, for example, here in the schoolyard there was nothing before and now it's full of sand; with proposals we made, they have brought tables, soccer goals, ping-pong tables, a volleyball court, those are things that we had asked for and they have listened. And [these requests] are voted on by students themselves in workshops.

> Student: We have a kind of little service, which is service, I don't know if it's 20 students from the whole school that on Fridays get together and make a list of things that can be fixed, that can be improved.

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All in all, committing to the students' voices and enforcing young people's right to be heard implies setting in motion processes of change in educational centres that impact on the school's day-to-day life.

2.4. Rethinking the Teaching Participation of Faculty and Management

The centres that take up the challenge of democratic education need to develop a great degree of complicity with the people who are part of the educational community, first of all, among the teaching team when the time comes to share and promote the education project. This is the means for the teaching body to be in a position to experience student participation as a collective and not an individual challenge, and to take this responsibility as part of the teaching task. Needless to say, a certain stability and duration certainly facilitates the continuity of the initiated processes of change. The size of a centre is revealed as a significant element when it comes to thinking, methodologically, how to address the question of the centre's democratization. We have observed that in schools that have one or two lines (one or two classes per grade) it is easier to implement projects that generate changes in the practices than in schools with three or more lines. In recent years, organizational complexity, schedule, the number of teachers, groups, lines, spaces, etc. have undoubtedly been major obstacles to changes in vision and practices, unless there are strong coordination and decentralization capabilities in terms of stages, seminars, cycles or teaching teams.

With regard to the leadership of the project, the role of the management is key to giving it institutional coverage on the one hand, and adding momentum, effectiveness and pedagogical depth to the process and the proposed actions on the other. If the school management does not prioritize student participation, with the endorsement of the teaching staff, the project cannot move forward. In this regard, the institutional configuration of each centre, its ownership (public, private, chartered, etc.) must also be taken into account. The burden of time and working conditions is also a factor to bear in mind. In this situation, the management teams become keys to democratically sharing democratic experience. This task demands listening and negotiating skills in the exchange of interests—particularly towards the voices of those teachers that might be sceptical about the project—trying to find collective solutions to individual situations. This requires spaces for debate and time to reach agreements:

> Teacher 1: If you offer participation, it's obviously longer, more expensive, there's more debate, but it's all enriching and educational. If you don't want debate, don't ask for participation, the same goes for the teaching staff. The management team could decide everything, but it's not the case, we agree on and make decisions about many things.

Improving democratizing practices at school requires determination on the part of the teaching team to promote this way of working and learning, and reaching agreements to include the most participatory activities during school hours and in the curriculum. For the teaching team, working in this direction implies facing new opportunities in which to take risks to innovate, exercising complicity and cohesion, learning new methodologies and forms of assessment, gaining insight into the working methods of work colleagues and trusting that you learn from and with others, as well as questioning whether the decisions taken have been the most appropriate ones.

In these situations, the management team has the responsibility to lead the process, communicate it and learn to value the personal efforts of each actor involved, with the common goal of creating relevant learning environments. For students, the visibilization of this leadership is also essential, and they request a management that is close to their activities and participation spaces.

Organizational and academic flexibility is crucial to progress and overcome obstacles along the way, to improve the quality of educational processes and results in a climate of respect and trust that configures the culture of the school and which poses challenges to new uncertainties every time the school makes new decisions. In this context, new dilemmas arise, such as deliberation and representation in centres that grow, thus making participatory democracy more difficult, as stated by a teacher who works for one of the schools that has taken participation to the highest degree of development:

> Teacher 2: We also participate, less than some people would like to and less than when we started, because when we started the school was very, very participatory, really assembly-based… that is, there was a management team because there had to be one, but we decided everything together... Now, of course, we are bigger, the current management team has a different approach, which is also more practical because there are many open fronts in the day-to-day and sometimes you, it's never ending, there are many hours of discussion, many hours of... so in the end you say 'we don't have time, you decide'.

And in all, in this democratizing process, the teaching team faces the complexity of the profession. According to Connell (2009), sustainability, emotional management and collective work are essential for moving towards the improvement of the participatory processes that define the collaborative culture of the schools:

> Good teaching must be *sustainable*; and that can only be planned when we see teaching as a practicable labour process. Further, teaching involves a great deal of emotion work. Classroom life involves a flow of emotions, both on the part of the teachers and the pupils, ranging from simple likes and dislikes to enthusiasm, anxiety, boredom, joy, fear and hope. Any teacher has to manage this flow, and make it productive for the pupils' learning and survivable for herself or himself. Also, recognition of the collective labour of teachers is essential for a better understanding of good teaching (Connell, 2009: 226).

As Leitch and Mitchell state, we also need to include the students' voices in this process. Given that cultural change is a slow process, it seems reasonable to postulate that there is a connection between the health or toxicity of a school's culture, as perceived by students, and the potential for student rights and student voice to be cultivated therein (Leitch & Mitchell, 2007: 56).

3. Moving Forward on Participation as a Strategy for Democratic Life

Democracy and participation—one of its fundamental instruments—in educational centres allow children and young people to exercise their rights as citizens, which contributes to the construction of a more democratic society; this fosters their personal development, and provides them with substantial knowledge and practical skills. In those schools that generate more spaces for teachers and students to experience democratic processes, these are articulated through learning activities and methodologies such as cooperative groups, project work or service learning, and mentoring and class assemblies play a prominent role; in these schools, spaces for student debate, opinion and decision making are frequent, common and regular, thus generating many and varied situations

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where decisions are valued from different points of view. There is a better bonding with the group, an overall improvement regarding reflection on rights in balance with shared and agreed responsibilities, as well as a commitment to community participation. At the same time, taking students—with their criteria and opinions—into account turns them into competent citizens instead of passive recipients of services aimed at them, but not thought out for them (Checkoway, 2011).

At the same time, deepening democracy at schools necessarily involves opening up to other community agents, favouring the creation of public meeting points based precisely on the actions and democratic practices carried out in the school. The idea is to generate relational spaces and spheres in which teachers and students experience democratic processes through strategies such as those that we have briefly commented on. These must be areas where debate, opinion and assumption of co-responsibility by students are relevant; areas in which new situations are generated where decisions are respected and valued by the different agents of the community.

This democratic approach goes hand in hand with the collaborative culture of the teaching team as an integral part of the teaching practices. Bearing in mind that the life and work of teachers are influenced by their personal and social background, the management team is responsible for bringing forth the discourses and representations that teachers build around their professional identity and their positive or negative experiences towards the commitment to educational challenges (Day & Gu, 2014). Complicity in the educational relationships with students—the central figures in secondary schools—presents a way of working that subverts traditional and standardized power relationships through participation. In these cases, student participation broadens the decision-making areas already in place and, as a result, students have higher degrees of freedom and responsibility when exercising decision making about school matters. Accordingly, genuine student participation (Simovska, 2004, 2007) requires a transfer of power from teachers to students when it comes to taking decisions that affect the boys and girls in secondary schools.

We would also want to point out that, beyond what is established by regulations, it is important to make the most of all communication channels, both formal and informal, without them substituting one another. Together with the rules governing educational

centres, the ways of organizing academic and curricular activities—as well as school life in general—are planned according to high standards of ethics, awareness and reflection on the part of the different sectors involved, knowing that, in an educational centre, human relations are put into play among people of different ages that occupy different positions within a framework that, by definition, is hierarchical. In short, democratic education involves welcoming, negotiating and deciding on agreements regarding a way of living in a community that is nurtured by the multiple social and economic conditions, lifestyles, biographical trajectories, aspirations and hopes of those individuals that are part of a school.

There is something that is not formally included in the legislation and which would roughly translate as 'institutional warmth'; it does not equate to very many meetings, but to spaces and times that foster personal exchanges that, however brief, might be intense. The experience of democracy on the part of students does not depend solely on the participation bodies that schools have in place, but rather on relationships and the existing school climate. Close, human relationships with the teaching staff, as well as participation spaces and activities, are the key condition for well-being in the centre and for the development of democratic practices. Actually, participation spaces are valued as the places where participation is enabled and where people feel they are an integral part of the institution. In fact, if such spaces are not enabled, students demand them.

Improving times and spaces for listening and understanding is an important matter, not only in terms of formal structures and pre-established norms, but also in informal spaces and relationships. As proposed by Biesta *et al*. (2009), young people should feel what it means to 'live citizenship'. Experiencing citizenship in secondary schools implies the construction of a facilitating context for transversal democratic values, with a view to improving educational centres and the willingness to extend them to their closest community.

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