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School democratic meetings: Pupil control discourse in disguise

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The aim of this qualitative case study is to investigate how learning in “democratic participation” is constituted by the social interaction and conversation pattern in school democratic meetings in a Swedish primary school. According to the findings, a pupil control discourse and the Initiation-Response-Evaluation pattern dominates the conversations. The teacher initiates by asking a question, the pupils respond by answering the question, and then the teacher evaluates that response. The findings show no discursive shift from traditional classroom talk to democratic deliberative talk. Instead there is an emphasis on the “right answers” and subordinating authorities rather than deliberative dialogue and democratic participation, which influences pupils to adopt a naïve or a cynical attitude to democracy.

Keywords: Democracy, Citizenship education, Pupil participation, Deliberative communication, Classroom communication, Power structure, Discipline

1. Introduction

School democracy and democratic education are viewed as essential components in the progressive movement of schooling with its roots in early Pragmatism (e.g., Dewey, 1916). An essential idea is that democracy is best learned by practising it in the school (Dewey, 1916; Gutmann, 1987). Since the end of the Second World War, one of the primary aims of public schooling in Sweden has been to prepare young people to be committed, active and competent citizens in a democracy and “vaccinating” them against totalitarian movements by the practice of democratic education and pupil participation (Hartman, 1995). According to their official curriculum document, schools in Sweden should conduct citizenship education in democracy as well as constructing a democratic arena where pupils can practice democracy in their everyday life at school (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1998).

2. A socio-cultural perspective on school democratic meetings

With reference to a national report in Sweden, one main way of working with school democracy, pupil participation, and democratic education in Swedish schools is to establish and conduct formal democratic meetings such as class councils (Skolverket, 1997). This could be compared with a Scottish study showing that when head teachers as well as teachers report their views, ideas and opinions on the meaning of pupil participation and how promoting this may be preparing pupils for active citizenship, many of them focus on pupil participation in decision-making in formal democratic meetings (Deuchar, 2003). Although many educational scholars argue that democracy in school should not be confined to formal democracy (e.g., pupil councils, class councils and other forms of school democratic meetings), but take place in everyday school life in terms of informal democracy such as deliberative communication in ordinary teaching situations (e.g., Englund, 2006; Leppard, 1993; Peterson, 2009) as well as in conflict management (Roth, 2007), and negotiating and having a say in the organisation of day-to-day classroom life, social activities, and peer talks (e.g., Tholander, 2007; de Winter, 1997), teachers often associate school democracy and pupil participation with formal democratic meetings.

2.1. A shift from a cognitive to a socio-cultural perspective

Empirical research regarding school democratic meetings has been conducted within the cognitive-developmental tradition, especially the Just Community approach (e.g., Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989; Snarey & Samuelson, 2008). Nevertheless, in contrast to tradi-

tional cognitive theories, which focus on individuals' thought contents and processes, a socio-cultural approach posits that learning is embedded in social settings and interactions in which the actors appropriate cultural and discursive tools mediated by the language (Salomon, 1993; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991, 1998). Pupils learn and develop as they participate in and contribute to cultural activities. They learn through their shared use of cultural tools and practices (Rogoff, 2003). Learning is about increasing participation in social practices. The meaning of the socially constituted world is produced, reproduced, and changed in the course of activity. Moreover, learning is a social process of identity construction (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Thus, the discourses and practices have an enormous impact on children's learning as they participate within them and appropriate their contents, norms and language. "Participation in an educational setting involves not only socialization to the cultural norms of the target culture, but also socialization into the interactional norms and practices appropriate to a specific classroom activity" (Cekaite, 2007, p. 46). The practices in school are not isolated phenomena but embedded in a larger socio-cultural context with historically constructed values and conceptions regarding children, school, power, and socialization (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). Scholars within the paradigm of the new sociology of childhood draw our attention to the socially constructed and taken-for-granted power asymmetry between adults and children in our societies, the socially constructed view of childhood as a state of ignorance and incompetence, and how children in school are being ranked in social and moral terms as subordinates (James et al., 1998; Wyness, 2006).

2.2. Traditional classroom discourse and deliberative democracy

Research has shown that the typical classroom discourse is teacher-led, disciplinary, and pupil controlling (e.g., Denscombe, 1985; Jackson, 1968). According to a study conducted by Psunder (2005), disciplinary techniques with a higher degree of teacher control and low pupil autonomy predominate. Many pupils report that they have little power and influence in the school and the classroom (e.g., Cothran & Ennis, 1997; Devine, 2002). The pupil control discourse construct and reproduce what Thomas and O'Kane (1999) call a disempowering system in which children's behaviour and experiences are shaped by controlling forces with few opportunities for them to have a say. By this exercise of discipline, children will soon learn adult rules defining appropriate and inappropriate behaviour; what, when, and where they are allowed to do things or not (James et al., 1998).

Therefore, in order to create deliberative democratic meetings with authentic pupil participation in school settings, I would argue that a discursive shift is necessary. The traditional pupil control discourse has to be replaced with a deliberative democratic discourse. In Sweden, the National Agency for Education has advocated an application of deliberative communication based on the so-called deliberative democracy model as an essential aspect of citizenship education (e.g., Englund, 2001). The main idea is that pupils as well as others in school take a stand by listening, deliberating, seeking arguments, and evaluating, in a collective effort through these conversations to find values and norms on which everyone can agree. Roth (2006) argues that democratic deliberation can be characterised "by speakers expressing themselves linguistically in communication, willing to give reasons for their claims to validity /.../ They are prepared to give reasons, as well as to let the other try out both the judgements and reasons given for them" (p. 587). Not only talking but also listening and empathy are essential features (Peterson, 2009). According to Englund (2006), deliberative communication with its philosophical roots in Dewey, Mead, and Habermas, implies communication in which (a) different views are compared with each others and arguments for them are given time and space to be articulated and presented, (b) there is a tolerance and respect for others and with all participants seriously listening to all the arguments, (c) there is a motivation to reach consensus or at least temporary agreements or draw attention to differences, and (d) authorities or

traditional views can be questioned, including opportunities to challenge one's own traditions. In relation to liberalism and communitarianism, the deliberative democracy paradigm is a third way of democracy in which communication is viewed as the formal essence of democracy, valuing rationality as well as community (Schou, 2001).

Nevertheless, we can expect that school democratic meetings and pupil participation projects in schools can easily be undermined by the typical pupil control discourse in school and its underlying assumption of childhood as a state of ignorance, incompetence and subordination. For instance, according to Denscombe (1985), teachers' strategy of democratisation, i.e., promoting a high level of participation by pupils in the policies of the school, such as school councils, "tends to be illusory and is geared primarily to securing a certain commitment on the part of pupils to the existing social order" (p.111). According to an ethnographic research conducted by Devine (2002) in primary schools in Ireland, pupils usually neither have any say nor are consulted regarding rules or other aspects of their school lives. Interviews with them show that they actually want greater democracy and participation including voting for rules and expressing their views on school matters of direct concern to them. Nevertheless, "children's construction of themselves as a group with subordinate status within the school was also evident in their perception that teachers did not always listen to them or take their frustrations seriously, by virtue of their child status" (Devine, 2002, p. 314), relating themselves to a position at the bottom end of the social hierarchy within the school. Furthermore, the findings also indicate a developmental discourse among teachers, which centred around children's immaturity to justify their need to be contained, directed and controlled. In a survey study conducted by Stafford, Laybourn, Hill, and Walker (2003), pupils report that they want to be consulted, if it is done properly, about issues directly affecting them. At the same study, many of them view consultation with pupils in school councils as "in name" only, "knowing there was no point in asking for certain changes because the school had an inflexible policy on them" (p. 369). According to a British survey study, only 19 percent of the pupils think their school council helps to make the school a better place to be in (Alderson, 2000). Furthermore, teachers' efforts on school democracy can be undermined by organisational structures (Jones, 2006; Westheimer, 1998).

2.3. The aim of this study

Education is not a neutral enterprise, but rather it is immersed in ideology, power, cultural control and reproduction (Apple, 2004). The schooling process produces a hidden curriculum, which can be defined as "all the things that are learnt during schooling in addition to the official curriculum" (Meighan & Siraj-Blatchford, 1997, p. 65). Little is known about the talk produced in school democratic meetings such as pupil councils and class meetings. Classroom talk in democratic meetings is a resource through which the mediation of teaching and learning takes place, and as such, it needs to be investigated in order to elucidate how it constitutes learning opportunities for pupils in democratic participation. The aim of this study is to investigate how learning in "democratic participation" is constituted by the social interaction and conversation pattern in school democratic meetings. Investigation of the classroom interaction in these meetings reveals how learning processes about democracy are constructed by the discourse itself.

3. Method

The empirical data examined in the present paper are part of a larger ethnographic study of formal and informal values education in everyday school life. In contrast to input-output studies of school achievement, if the researcher "lives" in classrooms, seeing the complex forms of interaction that occur in classrooms, the moral influence and the tacit teaching of a hidden curriculum can be documented (Apple, 2004). To examine the discourses produced by

conversation patterns in school democratic meetings, I analysed these patterns in five school democratic meetings. Furthermore, these five meetings were compared with each other, with observation data of everyday classroom life, and with interview data regarding these meetings.

3.1. Setting, participants, and data collection

The school was chosen for its typical Swedish elementary school characteristics. It is located in a socially mixed area of a medium sized Swedish town and the sample represents pupils from working class as well as middle class families. The main data for this study consist of observations of five so-called “plenary meetings” during the year 2002.

The data collection started in the spring semester and includes two meeting observations, recorded by field notes. Three classes – a pre-school class (six year old pupils), a first grade class (seven year old pupils), and a second grade class (eight year old pupils) – participated in these two meetings. The data collection then continued during the autumn semester, in which three meetings were observed and recorded by audio recordings as well as field notes. Two of the three earlier classes, which had moved up from the pre-school grade and the first grade to the first grade and the second grade respectively, participated in these three meetings together with a new pre-school class. In total, four classes (with 22-26 pupils in each class) and six teachers (two pre-school teachers, three class teachers – the class teachers follow their classes from first to third grade in Sweden – and one additional teacher) participated in the study. The length of the plenary meetings was between 20 and 30 min with four to five teachers present in each meeting.

In addition to plenary meetings observations, I conducted everyday ethnographic observations in the pre-school class and the first grade class for three weeks between the two plenary meetings during the spring semester, and then in the new pre-school class and the second grade between as well as after the three new meetings during the autumn semester. Thus, in addition to the plenary meeting observations, I observed everyday classroom interaction. I also conducted group interviews with pupils as well as individual interviews with teachers. During the pupil interviews, I asked questions like “What are these meetings you have together with the other two classes?”, “What do you do in plenary meetings?”, “Why do you have these meetings?” and “Who decides in these meetings?”. During the teacher interviews, I asked questions like “What are the motives/rationales behind plenary meetings?” and “What do you want pupils to learn from these meetings?” In the fieldwork and pupil interviews, I avoided positions of authority and used a child-friendly, “least-adult role” (see Mayall, 2000). While some interviews were conducted at the end of the spring semester, i.e., after the two first plenary meetings, most of them were conducted at the end of the total period of fieldwork, and hence, after the five plenary meetings. Thus, the pupils were familiar with me when I interviewed them. Furthermore, in order to avoid unnecessary power influence and social desirability bias, the teachers were not present during the group interviews with the children.

3.2. Data analysis

The qualitative analysis of the data started from the outset of the fieldwork and was accomplished by procedures from a mixed grounded theory approach (e.g., Charmaz, 2000, 2006; Glaser, 1978, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), informed by a socio-cultural perspective, theories of democratic education, and research on school democracy and classroom interaction. Neither the socio-cultural perspective nor the other pre-existing concepts found in my result were adopted and uncritically used as “pet codes” (cf., Glaser, 1978) from the outset of the study. Instead, they were chosen as a result of my ongoing theoretical sampling of research literature during the analysis process. They were adopted because of their usefulness and fit with the data and initial codes. Thus, in contrast to the classic

grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1978, 1998), I reject the idea of pure induction and the dictum of delaying the literature review until the analysis is nearly completed. In line with the constructivist grounded theory approach rooted in pragmatism and relativist epistemology (Charmaz, 2000, 2006, 2009), I assume that neither data nor findings are discovered, but are constructed by the researcher as a result of his or her interactions with the field and its participants, and are coloured by the researcher's perspectives, experiences, scholarly knowledge, and knowledge of the substantive field under study. Hence, I did not analyse with an empty head, but with an open mind (cf., Dey, 1993) and, as Strauss (1987) puts it, with "data in the head".

The analysis involved coding, theoretical sampling, constant comparison method, memo-writing and sorting (Charmaz, 2000, 2006; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). When I analysed, I flexibly moved back and forth between open coding, selective/focused coding, and theoretical coding. In open coding, I conducted an open-minded and data-sensitive word-by-word or incident-by-incident coding of field notes and transcriptions from plenary meetings, interviews and ethnographic data. I asked questions about the data such as "What is this data a study of?", "What category does this incident indicate?", "What is actually happening in the data?", "What is the basic social process or basic social psychological process that processes the problem?", "What is the main story here, and why?" The aim of open coding was to construct provisional codes and identify a core category, i.e., the most significant and frequent code. In selective/focused coding, I used the core category as well as other significant codes from the open coding to guide and confine the analysis of data in order to synthesize and explain larger segments of data. In theoretical coding, I analysed relationships among the core category and other codes in order to create and "tell an analytic story that has coherence /.../ [and move the] analytic story in a theoretical direction" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 63).

When I conducted theoretical coding, I used my knowledge of theoretical coding families (cf., Glaser, 1978, 1998) as well as extant theoretical concepts such as IRE exchanges and deliberative democracy as heuristic tools (cf., Kelle, 1995) or tentative tools (cf., Charmaz, 2006). Extant concepts were not uncritically adopted in the analysis but used as a source of seeing, imagining and inspiration, judged in terms of their relevance, fit and utility. Most of them were therefore sorted out during the analysis. They had to earn their way into the analysis in the same way as Glaser (1978, 1998) argues that theoretical codes must earn their way, i.e., by constant comparison, theoretical sampling, memo-writing, and sorting. The pre-existing concepts "deliberative democracy" and "deliberative communication" derived from school democracy literature provided a source for making comparisons at the dimensional level. "If a concept emerges from the data that seems similar or opposite to one recalled from the literature, then the concepts can be compared in terms of their properties and dimensions" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 49). I actually used what Strauss and Corbin (1998) call the flip-flop technique, i.e., looking at opposites or extremes to bring out significant properties and dimensions. My idea of the importance of a discursive shift from the traditional pupil control discourse to a deliberative democratic discourse emerged from abductive thinking and constant comparison between data, coding and extant literature. It was inspired by socio-cultural concepts such as situated action, situated learning and discursive practices, the theory of deliberative democracy, and research on classroom interaction. This idea was not only shown to be useful in the analysis. Via rigorous coding and constant comparison, the maintaining process of the traditional pupil control discourse was shown to be so significant that it actually was identified and constructed as the core category of the study.

4. Traditional power asymmetry and negotiation loss created by IRE exchanges

Once a month the pre-school class, the school class in first grade, and the school class in second grade come together in the preschool classroom in order to conduct their plenary meet-

ings. During these meetings they deal with issues about common activities, social climate, rules, playground activities during the breaks, the dining hall etc. The discussions often deal with things that are not working well, and need to be changed or be dealt with in a better way. Let me describe one of these plenary meetings that I have observed.

The pupils and their teachers gather as usual in the kindergarten classroom. One of the teachers is the chairperson, and one of them is the secretary. The chairperson stands by a flipchart in front of the room. Beside her is a table, and the secretary sits at the table, ready to take notes. The pupils sit on the floor. The remaining two teachers sit on chairs behind the group of pupils. There is a murmur of voices among the pupils, while the chairperson writes the following agenda on the flipchart (Fig.1):

Plenary meeting 22/4

Agenda :

1. Minutes
2. Sports day 24/5
3. The dining hall:
 - How do we leave the dining hall?
4. The break
 - Take in things
 - Inlines-rules
 - Fruit
 - Bags
5. Any other issues

When the chairperson has finished writing, she turns around and looks out to the pupils seated on the floor. The secretary hushes the children, and one of the other teachers starts to hush the children too. The buzz in the classroom quietens down. The chairperson begins by welcoming them all to the meeting. She draws the pupils' attention to the first item on the day's agenda.

"At the last plenary meeting we talked about how we should behave with each other. What did we talk about then?"

A lot of the pupils put up their hand.

"Anna?" the chairperson says and looks at her.

"Well, that when it's Friday, we can say: "Have a nice weekend!", Anna answers.

"Yes, right", the chairperson says and then looks at Oscar.

"Oscar?"

"If I see someone who is lonely, I can ask if he wants to join in the game", Oscar says.

"Mm, so good that you remember", the chairperson says and smiles. "There are many children putting up their hand and who seem to remember. I think that's great." The chairperson is quiet for a moment then she asks the pupils: "How many of you think that you have said something nice to someone else since the last time?"

A lot of the pupils put up their hand.

"How many of you think that you can do better?" she asks.

Some of the pupils put up their hand.

"You can always be better", a boy among the pupils says.

"Yes, precisely", the teacher responds.

(Field notes, Plenary meeting, K-2 classes in preschool classroom)

The conversation here is characterised by the format of the so-called Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) pattern, which is a typical interaction pattern in lessons found in other studies (e.g., Mehan, 1979; see Cazden, 2001). This pattern, sometimes also called Initiation-

Response-Follow-up (IRF) pattern or exchanges (see Giordan, 2003), allows the teacher to control classroom discourse, because she is the one who ask questions (e.g., “At the last plenary meeting we talked about how we should behave with each other. What did we talk about then?”), gives pupils permission to respond, and then evaluates their answers (e.g., “Yes, right” and “Mm, so good that you remember”). “Using this strategy, the teacher is able to interact with the class while he or she keeps control over the agenda /.../ IRF exchanges disguise cultural reproduction through simulating the students' participation while the teacher guides the interaction and performs the role of conveying information” (Giordan, 2003, p. 818). By this classroom discursive practice, the power asymmetry between teachers and pupils is clearly reproduced in line with their traditional roles as teacher and pupil. The IRE exchanges teach the pupils that they are learners while their teachers are experts.

Observations of the five plenary meetings actually show that a pupil control discourse, constructed by IRE exchanges and other power processes (see below), is the prevalent discourse in these meetings. By the interaction and conversation pattern of pupil control discourse, the children are constructed as unequal and less competent participants in the same way as in other classroom situations. They are expected to listen to teachers, answer teachers' questions and show that they have learned their lessons (i.e., give “correct” responses) or be quiet and passive. By raising their hands and responding to teachers' questions, it appears that they are actively participating in open negotiation and decision-making processes. However, a deeper look at the interaction pattern reveals that IRE exchanges maintain teacher power and create negotiation loss among the pupils. Instead of deliberating and negotiating, they have to figure out the “right” answers and to continue playing the role of the subordinate pupil as they are expected to do in other classroom situations.

5. The missing shift from pupil control discourse to deliberative democratic discourse

Within the framing of traditional pupil control discourse in which teacher power and IRE pattern dominate the teacher-student conversation, deliberative democracy and communication are counteracted by embedded norms, expectations, power relations, and social constructions of the immature, incompetent, and subordinated pupil in need of discipline and teacher authority. Observations of the five plenary meetings actually show no discursive shift from traditional classroom talk to democratic deliberative talk. The classroom conversation proceeds as if it was a part of an ordinary teaching lesson. The pupil control discourse maintains and counteracts deliberative communication and democratic decision-making.

“Now we'll leave the first item and go on to the second item. Sports Day – the twenty-fourth of May. We grown-ups have decided that we'll arrange something fun. Do you think that's a good suggestion?”

All pupils put up their hand.

“Good, then we'll go ahead with it. Now we'll go on to the next item.”

(Field notes, Plenary meeting, K-2 classes in preschool classroom)

In this excerpt we can, in addition to the IRE pattern, notice another pupil control technique among teachers in the plenary meetings. They made a lot of decisions outside the plenary meetings and thus without any pupil presence, consultation, and participation. These decisions are then presented in the meetings as proposals and often, as the example above, labelled as something good or positive. Together with the day-to-day moral construction of “the good pupil” as a pupil who complies with all school and classroom rules and subordinated to teacher authority (cf., Thornberg, 2009) such positive labelling of teacher suggestions guides pupils how to respond, i.e., to comply with and do what teachers say. The excerpt above is also an example of the IRE pattern. The right pupil response is clearly to put up their hand, i.e., to say, “yes”, to the teachers' decision already-made, as the teacher's evaluation of

their response confirms. Moreover, in this specific example, the pupils obviously do not know what they are saying “yes” to. In line with the traditional pupil control discourse, they are just expected to trust that the teachers already have made a good decision and simply subordinate their power. Another pupil control technique used by teachers is to ignore or dismiss pupils’ suggestions when they are in conflict with their own agenda, as the following excerpt illustrates.

“Item number three. The dining hall. How do we leave?” The chairperson tells the pupils, “we disturb the other people eating when we are in hurry or run”. [Comment: A rule already exists stating the pupils are not allowed to leave the dining hall before a certain time. When I was in the dining hall together with the pupils, I often observed how some of them finish their lunch, hand in their plate, fork, knife, and glass, and then go back to their table again, sitting and waiting, now and then looking at the clock on the wall. When the minute hand comes to the magic time, a lot of the pupils leave their tables and rush off.] The chairperson’s serious gaze now sweeps over the pupils. “If you want permission to speak, then put up your hand, if you want to make a good suggestion.”

Five pupils put up their hand. Each of them gets permission to speak. The suggestions the pupils offer are:

“You walk and don’t run.”

“You can leave whenever you want.”

“I also think you should be allowed to leave whenever you want.”

“You should just run more quietly.”

“You can leave whenever you want, and then you walk.”

After the five pupils have made their suggestions the chairperson turns to the other three teachers in the classroom and asks:

“What do you teachers think? I have come to an agreement with the parents of pupils in my class that we will wait for a while, a certain time, so it isn’t so stressful.”

“I think that’s a great suggestion”, one of the other teachers responds.

The remaining teachers agree.

“We’ll try to follow the rules today”, the chairperson says. “You wait until it’s time to go. You can still sit and have a sandwich if you can manage to eat any more, or sit just still and talk to your neighbour at the table. Then, when it’s time, you should walk out of the dining hall quietly and walk straight down the corridor. Has everyone understood?”

A lot of the pupils put up their hand.

“Good, we have now made that decision. Now we have to leave the dining hall. We have decided that we will try to follow these rules. Now we’ll go on to the next item.”

(Field notes, Plenary meeting, K-2 classes in preschool classroom)

Instead of initiating a collective discussion or a deliberative communication regarding the pupils’ proposals, the teacher begins to act as if the pupils were not participants in the meeting conversation and as if their proposals have not been outspoken. Instead she only talks to the other teachers in the meeting and refers to an existing rule in her class (which are the same as in the other classes). By excluding the pupils in the following decision-making process, the teachers made the decision on their own, in the presence of the pupils as a passive audience. The communication is therefore clearly disciplining rather than democratic.

The conversation, as it is described in these excerpts, goes on in the same pattern, in this meeting as in the other four meetings. The teachers introduce suggestions and rules. The pupils bring up some suggestions. Nevertheless, the typical patterns when pupils put forward suggestions incompatible with the existing rule system or teachers’ intentions and proposals are that: these pupil suggestions (a) do not come up for discussion (as in the example here), (b) are verbally dismissed by teacher (e.g., “It doesn’t work.”, “We can’t do.” etc.), or (c) receive doubting questions from the teacher (e.g., “Do you really think that.?”) at the same time as he or she expresses doubts or dislike by his or her voice, gestures and body language,

which in turn invite pupils to answer “no” in chorus, leading to a dismissal of the pupils’ suggestions, in line with the IRE pattern and the pupil control discourse. Consequently, the line of decisions in the meetings goes hand in hand with the thoughts the teachers have already had before the meeting. If this “democracy” theatre is directed successfully, it is reasonable to argue that it may promote the pupils, as they participate in this school cultural activity labelled as a democratic meeting, to accept false democracy and to be gullible and uncritically compliant yes-people instead of genuinely democratically-oriented citizens.

6. Teachers' ambivalent approach to pupil participation

According to the teachers, the main intentions behind plenary meetings are (a) to put school democracy and pupil participation into practice, and (b) to promote democratic skills among the pupils (e.g., teach them how democratic meetings work, develop competence in listening to others and to participate in discussions and democratic decision-making).

Robert: Why do you have these plenary meetings in school?

Teacher: Well, it's clear since according to the Swedish curriculum policy document pupils should have a say at school, that we should put school democracy into practice as far as we can.

Robert: Is it something you have to do?

Teacher: Yes, and to teach them to be democratic, to understand how democratic meetings work, and how to behave in democratic meetings.

(From an interview with one of the pre-school teachers)

Nevertheless, in contrast to their intentions of school democracy, pupil participation, and democratic education, at least some of the teachers also reported to me a belief that pupils are actually not mature enough to make good decisions, and therefore there is a necessity of being in command. “They are too immature, and perhaps too selfish, if I might say” (a teacher in first grade). To control and use their power as teachers may then be a strategy to teach and help the pupils to act “well” in these meetings and to make “good” decisions. “They are actually too young for democratic meetings, so we have to direct them a little” (a teacher in grade two). This uncertain or rather negative attitude to children's agency could perhaps contribute to an explanation of why the pupil control discourse dominates in these meetings. While some of the teachers appear to think they are being democratic and thus unconscious of being directive during the meetings, others are concerned with democratic ideals as well as with children's developmental deficiencies in away which construct an ambivalent approach to school democracy and pupil participation. Furthermore, interviews with the teachers show that they are unfamiliar with theories of ethics, democracy, democratic education, and values education (cf., Thornberg, 2008). A lack of a professional language regarding school democracy and pupil participation may contribute to the absence of deliberative democratic discourse in these meetings.

7. Pupils' sense-making of decision power in plenary meetings

How do the pupils make sense of decision-making power in these plenary meetings? We spoke about this issue in the group interviews, and this is how some first grade schoolgirls reasoned:

Robert: Who makes the decisions at this meeting then?

Daniella: It's the children and the grown-ups together. All together.

Robert: Children and the grown-ups together?

All: Yes [in chorus].

Lina: We choose what to do like this, who thinks like this and like that.

Daniella: And sometimes we perhaps do it like this: how many of you think that? Put up your hand like that, and maybe it's most people for this.

Lina: And it'll be like this.

Daniella: Yeah.

Jenny: I haven't exactly put up my hand once, but.

Robert: You haven't?

Lina: Not me either.

Jenny: But I feel I decide anyway.

Robert: You feel you decide anyway. How do you mean?

Jenny: Because I am at the meeting.

Robert: Yes?

Jenny: And then, like, you have to... eeh, like... yeah, it feels like I decide anyway. It feels that I'm the one who decides.

Robert: It feels like that?

Jenny: Mm.

Robert: All right, what do you others think? What do you think when she tells us that?

Maria: I think it feels like I decide a bit too.

Louise: Yes, I think so too.

Daniella: Yes, I think so too.

Lina: Me too.

Robert: How do you feel that? I'm curious about that.

Jenny: Well, you sort of feel it inside.

Maria: Yes, it feels like that, if you, then it feels like: yeah, I am the one who is deciding. No one decides over me.

(From a group interview with five schoolgirls in first grade.)

Despite the pupil control discourse and the lack of deliberative democratic discourse, these pupils seem to perceive that teachers and pupils are making decisions together at the plenary meetings – that they are participating in the decision-making. Although they cannot remember that they have put up their hand, they still interpret it as they are participating in decision-making just because they are present at the plenary meeting. Furthermore, Jenny refers to a feeling: “I feel I’m deciding”. Maria agrees: “Yes, it feels like that, if you, then it feels like: yeah, I am the one who is deciding”. In an interview group with first grade school boys, the first spontaneous answer in this issue is that the teachers are deciding, but soon this statement is contradicted by others in the group, who claim that both the children and the teachers are making decisions together – they even go further and claim that the children decide more than the teachers:

Robert: Who do you think makes the decisions at this meeting, the plenary meeting, then?

David: The teachers do.

Linus: The teachers do.

Robert: You think the teachers do?

Tobias: I think both do. I think both do.

Henrik: The teachers do a bit, but the children do most because they are the ones who decide how they want things.

Tobias: Yeah, it is. The teachers decide a bit like. I think like Henrik does.

Some: Yes.

Philip: I think the teachers decide quite a lot, but the children decide hundred per cent more.

(From a group interview with five school boys in first grade.)

Hence, a number of these pupils seem to construct the meaning that they are participating in

decision-making. In front of this audience of pupils, the teachers seem to have directed the theatre of school democracy and joint participation in decision-making very persuasively. These pupils believe in the teachers and in their plenary meeting theatre. However, in terms of hidden curriculum, the teachers and these activities risk socialising these pupils to adopt a naïve attitude to democracy and to be gullible and uncritically compliant yes-people. However, not all pupils believe in the theatre. Some of the pupils, like Erik in the excerpt below, seem to see through the false democratic character of the plenary meetings.

Robert: Fredric, you said that at the plenary meetings you sort things out, and Eric, you said that you make decisions. Who decides then?

Fredric: It's the teachers.

Erik: The teachers, they make up the stuff like that. And they ask if things went OK, and then we answer yes or no.

Robert: Do you think that you get to decide anything at the plenary meeting?

Erik: Well, not much, but a bit.

Robert: What do you think?

Daniel: I have never made any decisions.

Erik: Not me either.

Fredric: Not me either.

Erik: The teachers make most of the decisions on their own.

Robert: How do you mean?

Erik: Well, it's a lot. Someone maybe makes a suggestion, but they don't accept it. They only accept their own suggestions.

(From a group interview with four boys from the kindergarten class.)

Also in other group interviews with pupils this kind of “seeing through” is expressed. Thus, one citizenship education consequence of these “democratic” meetings, as far as these pupils are concerned, is that the teachers and the meeting activities risk socialising these pupils to adopt a cynical attitude to democracy, that democracy is just humbug, directed by those in power positions, to hide their real power behind an illusion of joint participation in decision-making. Furthermore, the mistrust among the teachers regarding children's agency can be interpreted as a manifestation of the widespread social construction of children as immature, incompetent, and subordinated in our society (e.g., James et al., 1998; Wyness, 2006), and this may, at least in part, explain (a) the loss of a deliberative democratic discourse in the meetings, and (b) pupils' appropriation, as a result of this sort of guided participation or situated learning, of either a naïve or a cynical attitude to democracy, as it is presented and practiced in school.

8. Conclusions and reflections

The Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) pattern dominates the conversations in the school democratic meetings observed in this study. The teacher-led IRE pattern is commonly seen in other studies of classroom interactions regarding teaching lessons. The teacher initiates by asking a question, the pupils respond by answering the question, and then the teacher evaluates that response (see Mehan, 1979). Hence, teachers typically ask questions in order to evaluate pupils' knowledge, not to give pupils opportunities to think aloud, formulate ideas, make suggestions, or have a say. There is an emphasis on the “right answers” rather than deliberative dialogue. Pupils have limited opportunities to ask questions, make their own suggestions, argue, or add to the interaction in an IRE pattern. It provides little or no opportunity for pupils to voice their own ideas or comments on the views of others. Such a pattern prevents or counteracts critical or dialogical interaction. It communicates power and authority and “seems to be an inevitable result of the institutional constraints of schooling, which re-

quire teachers to control, as well as teach, large numbers of potentially disruptive pupils” (Stables, 2003, p. 8). Thus, the discursive practice in the school democratic meetings observed actually constrains and counteracts pupils’ participation in democratic negotiation and decision-making. As in school subject lessons, teachers know the point they are trying to make, and therefore, they know the answer they want to hear from the pupils. Pupils have to figure out the “right” answer and teachers openly judge their answers. Hence, this confirms the point Denscombe (1985) makes by arguing that democratisation in school tends to be illusory, aimed at binding pupils to the existing social control.

By the pupil control discourse and its dominant IRE pattern observed in the school democratic meetings, there is also a risk that pupils acquire a view on democracy and negotiation as something they do not have any participation in, but instead regard it as “another exercise in trying to figure out the right answer or say what they think the teacher wants to hear” (DeVries & Zan 2003, p. 65). By applying socio-cultural theoretical concepts such as the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978), guided participation and appropriation (Rogoff, 2003), the teachers can be interpreted as “the more competent participants” in the school democratic meetings, scaffolding the pupils to appropriate the discursive tools of these activities (cf., Wertsch, 1998), i.e., how to participate (talk and act) in democratic meetings. However, without the mediation of deliberative democratic discursive tools such as open negotiations, deliberative communication, critical thinking, etc. in the meetings, the pupils can hardly appropriate these democratic discourse tools. Instead the zone of proximal development and the guided participation processes appear to mediate so-called fallacies in reasoning such as the fallacy of claiming that something is true simply because someone in authority says it is, rather than because it is supported by evidence or rational arguments (fallacy of appealing to authority), as well as the doctrine of “might makes right”, i.e., the assumption that those in power enforcing their opinions on other people have the correct opinions (see Fox & DeMarc, 2001). Furthermore, the analysis of the pupils’ sense-making of these plenary meetings indicates a two-sided hidden curriculum of school democratic meetings when actually these are about pupil control discourse in disguise. Some pupils appear to appropriate a naïve attitude to democracy and to be gullible and uncritically compliant yes-people. Other pupils seem to appropriate a cynical attitude to democracy, i.e., that democracy is just a deceptive drama, directed by those in positions of power, to hide their real power behind an illusion of joint participation in decision-making.

Finally, there is always a risk of blaming the teachers in critical classroom interaction research like this study. However, I reject a position of simply explaining flaws in school in terms of “bad” teachers. In accordance with a socio-cultural approach, pupils as well as teachers are embedded in cultural, historical, institutional, and social context (e.g., Rogoff, 2003; Salomon, 1993; Wertsch, 1991). Even if they actively act upon social structures they are also constrained by them (James et al., 1998). Without creating institutional structures that empower teachers to be democratic participants in school and encourage and make room for teachers to put school democracy in practice, pupil participation in democratic decision-making is likely to be ignored, suppressed or distorted (cf., Jones, 2006; Westheimer, 1998). Without challenging the hegemony or dominating discourse of the subordinated and incompetent child in our society as well as in school culture, school democracy and pupil participation will not be priority and taken seriously (cf., Alderson, 1999; James et al., 1998; Rudduck & Flutter, 2004). If teacher education – as a result of its socio-cultural settings – mediates intellectual and discursive tools for school democracy and democratic education in a deficient manner, a sufficient repertoire of such critical tools will not be available in classroom activities (cf., Rainer & Guyton, 1999; Thornberg, 2008). Therefore, blaming the teachers is too superficial by not taken into account the socio-cultural context.

Nevertheless, in accordance with a socio-cultural approach, teachers are not just passive

subjects of social structures and processes but active agents in the construction of their school practices (e.g., Salomon, 1993). Thus, it would be possible for teachers, if they collaborate with each other as well as with the principal, the pupils, and the parents, to initiate important changes in school culture and structures in order to improve pupil participation and democratic education in school (cf., Jones, 2006; Rudduck & Flutter, 2004).

8.1. Implication for teachers and teacher education

The findings in this study have some practical implications. Firstly, teachers have to consider the effects of their own “democratic” practices and raise self-reflective and critical questions about the conversation and discursive practices during school democratic meetings: How are power, communication, and decisions, as well as categories such as “teacher”, “pupil”, “participation”, “democracy”, and “decision” constructed as we talk? How do I ask questions and invite pupils to participate in the conversations and decision-making activities? How much of the meeting practice expresses a pupil control discourse instead of a democratic discourse? What kind of assumptions of children and childhood as well as democracy and participation underlie and guide our school democratic meetings? How can I create opportunities for pupils to become genuine participants in deliberative communication and decision-making practices?

Secondly, the socially constructed view of childhood as a state of ignorance and incompetence, and the tradition of ranking children in school as subordinates in social and moral terms must seriously be challenged in school, teacher education, and educational research (cf., James et al., 1998; Wyness, 2006). For instance, Rainer and Guyton (1999) have shown that modelling democratic practices in teacher education can influence the use of such practices in the classrooms of elementary teachers. A strong theoretical foundation for, as well as experiences of, democratic practices in teacher education will prepare and support teachers to be better able to implement democratic practices in school. Thirdly, it is important that principals avoid a non-democratic top-down leadership style and instead empowering teachers and involving them as active participants in decision-making processes in order to promote a democratic climate and culture in school. Together they can initiate a bottom-up oriented collaborative learning organisation process (cf., Jones, 2006) in order to develop or improve democratic processes and structures in school and enhance their professional skills in school democracy and democratic education. In addition, they can collaborate with researchers in order to develop school democracy (cf., Power et al., 1989). Democracy has to be lived and practiced in the whole school system, not just talked about.

If people are to secure and maintain a democratic way of life, they must have opportunities to learn what that way of life means and how it might be led (Dewey, 1916, p. 8).

Fourthly, teachers and principals have to consider how organisational and institutional framings constrain pupils' opportunities to have a say and participate in deliberative communication and democratic decision-making (e.g., time pressure, the number of the participants in the meetings, and the social constructions taken-for-granted and embedded in school and society of childhood, teacher and pupil roles and power asymmetry). If teachers are too occupied with classroom management and pupil control when conducting formal meetings and act in them as if democracy was an issue of direct instruction, IRE questioning pattern, and lecture-style delivery of content to pupils (traditional pupil control discourse), and do not promote deliberative communication, critical thinking, and pupil participation (deliberative democratic discourse) then the underlying reasoning in these meetings reminds us of what the boat captain (Gene Hackman) in the movie “Crimson Tide” said: “We are here to defend democracy, not to practice it”. Nevertheless, according to a socio-cultural (as well as a pragma-

tist) approach, democracy is best learned – and thus defended at schools as well as in the future society – by letting pupils practice it.

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