



Students' Participation to the Decision-Making Process as a Tool for Democratic School

Selma DUNDAR^a

University of Zurich

Abstract

This research has been designed because it has been realized that there is only little research carried out about the student participation in the administration for the structuring of the democratic authority in the higher education system in Turkey. In the relevant literature, concepts of democratic authority and education have been approached from two different perspectives. One of these perspectives is the democratic school/education approach based on the alternative education paradigm, which is not practiced in Turkey. The second perspective is the democracy approach in school/education. This study seeks an answer to how the process in which students get involved in the administration of the higher education institutions works. In order to reveal students tendency between aforementioned paradigms their views and needs about their participation in the decision making process were analyzed. Within this framework, two focus groups including students at Marmara University in the 2011-2012 academic year who are taking part in the student council and those who are not taking part in the council have been focused on. The results of the study have been found by means of the content analysis of the data. The results that can be categorized under three content categories have been compared with the literature regarding the alternative education and democratic school. According to the results, significant differences were found between students taking part in the council and those who were not members of the council in terms of handling some facts and concepts using the terminology in the literature pertaining to democratic education/school. According to the results, some suggestions have been discussed. The results of the study are also likely to lead to a set of recommendations on the basis of barriers set in front of students' participation to shape the democratic authority at higher education institutions and their suggestions.

Key Words

Democratic School, Higher Education, Decision-Making Process, Student Participation.

The beginning of the democracy idea dates back to the Athens and Rome in many sources (Kaltounis, 1990; Ober, 2003; Singleton, 2004; Soder, 1996). Some of historians such as DeWiel (2000) and Woodruff (2005) indicate that before Aristotle and Plato the first known democracy idea goes back to discussion meeting of the sophists'. It could be stated that "Demos" (people) and "kratos" (power, authority, government) refer to public authority, government and power (Büyükkaragöz, 1990). In Athens, "demos" was a homogenous group holding the authority. The sociological equivalent of this group is religious community, class or clan (Doğan, 2001). Athens learned this lesson in the hard way. But Alexander the Great ended these experiences,

which was growing in 200 years by using Macedonian despotism (Woodruff). As indicated by Rousseau (2005) democracy idea, which has reascent in the age of enlightenment, based on the principle of keeping people's common benefits rather benefits of the groups by using "administration with one's consent" (Raab, 2003).

The presence of well-trained public is considered essential for success of democracy (Lindsay, 1973). Democracy refers to the attitude of people with self-determination who is courageous enough to act against every problem they encounter with. This can be secured with education and education can be secured with democracy. In other words, democracy should be born again in every generation

^a Selma DÜNDAR, Ph.D. Correspondence: Zürich University, Institute of Educational Sciences, Switzerland. E-mail: sduendar@ife.uzh.ch. Phone: +41 76 643 1158.

and education is the mid-wife of this birth (Dewey, 1996). Therefore, it would be true to say that democracy is an expression of a belief, which is based on logic. Apple and Beane (2011) emphasize that implementing democracy results in tension and conflicts. They point out that some people consider democracy and education as oxymoron, as well. For instance, democratic participation leads to anti-democratic opinions, such as the continuation of the historical inequalities in the school life.

At this point, it is important to highlight that the concepts “democratic school” and “democracy at school” are different in terms of their content (Dale & Fielding, 1989; Gatto, 1995; Gutmann, 1999 as cited in Morhayim, 2008). Student participation, which is a frequently mentioned dimension of the Bologna process, is an ideal example of democracy at school. However, democratic education depends on the individual and provides an education understanding on the basis of election. In a school where democratic education is provided, the major task of the educators is to reveal students’ wants and potentials, to encourage them and to give them responsibilities. The philosophical rationale of such schools lie behind the views of thinkers at the Enlightenment Period, especially J. J. Rousseau, J. H. Pestalozzi, E. Froebel, F. Freire, I. Illich, L. Tolstoy, J. Dewey, A. S. Neill, J. Holt, E. Goldman, R. Steiner, E. Ferrer as well as activists like L. N. Tolstoy, A.B. Alcott, O. Decroly, A.S. Neill (Dündar, 2007), A. Bastian, N. Fruchter, M. Gittel, C. Greer, K. Haskins, G. Wood, and J. A. Beane.

Levi and Graves (2007 cited in Morhayim, 2008), categorize the common characteristics of democratic schools. Apple and Beane (2011) voice some of the common issues regarding the practices in a democratic school environment. Westheimer and Kahne (1998) cite two major assertions of participatory democracy in education. Generally, in democratic schools, school staff or professors do not have arbitrarily power to make a decision. Responsibilities are shared by the school community are determined by the whole school community (Mintz, 2005). The administrative approach applied at such schools can be named as follows: “the administration of the school by commissions and committee”, “equal voting right”, “participatory democracy”, “self-administration”, private sessions and consensus” (Hesapçioğlu & Dündar, 2008). Oakes (2005 cited in Apple & Beane) suggests that all the youngsters have the right to get access to all the programs and outcomes of the school.

Decision-making process means to power of the

ability to make choices based on learning objectives (Dewey, 1996). Participating in decision-making process supports the personality of the participants and fosters less supervision by using sense of belonging mechanisms (Bursahoğlu, 1997). The first example of the school where students are represented in the school administration is the Village Institute (Köy Enstitüleri) in Turkey (Güven, 1998). The term “democratic education” first appeared in the National Education Council in 1959 (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 1949). The democratic education principle was included in the 11th article of the National Education Main Law in 1973, and students were supposed to have the power to think independently and scholarly, to hold a wider world view, to respect human rights (Alışkan, 2006). However, an appropriate democratic schooling rationale is not represented in Turkey today. Students’ increasing value when compared to the democratic school paradigm is still ignored. It can be said that, articles and researches found in Turkish literature (such as Özcan, 2010; Sadık & Sarı, 2012; Şişman & Turan, 2003; Şişman, Güleş, & Dönmez, 2010; Yavuz, 2004) don’t based on democratic school approach within the framework of an alternative paradigm. Therefore, there is a need for research dealing with students’ views and opinions about the issue.

Purpose

This study is aimed to investigate of the students’ views and needs with regarding their participation in the decision making process at higher education institutions.

Method

The study was based on the qualitative approach. In line with the qualitative research design, the focus group technique was used among other qualitative data collection means. Krueger (1994) maintains that focus group is a carefully planned discussion in which participants can freely share their ideas. One of the advantages of this technique is that it reveals new and different perspectives as a result of the inner group interaction (Çokluk, Yılmaz, & Oğuz, 2011). The main purpose of using this technique is not to make overgeneralization, instead; it is to identify these differences and to show that how certain facts or concepts are perceived by the participants (Krueger) by helping quotes (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Mill (2007) explains this process within seven steps. Accordance with these directions, the data collected via focus group interviews

was subjected to content analysis. For this reason, the collected data first needs to be conceptualized, and then to be organized logically on the basis of the appearing concepts. Finally, the themes explaining the data need to be determined. Neuman (2009) points out that themes or concepts make the researchers generalize the findings in such qualitative research studies because there are generally fixed concepts or simple variables in studies like the current one. As a result, it would be fair to state that a researcher carrying out a qualitative piece of research analyzes the data by categorizing it depending on the themes, concepts or similar features.

Research Group

All the students studying at Marmara University made up the sample of this study. In accordance with the aim of the study, both convenience sampling and homogeneous sampling techniques were used. In the first focus group for which easily convenience sampling was used, students studying at Marmara University were selected considering the variety in their departments. Among 26 students interviewed for a further focus group interview, 8 students making up the first group of research cluster accepted to be interviewed in the focus group. On the other hand, in the second group for which the identical sampling technique was used, 29 students who were member of the Student Council at Marmara University were interviewed and the second focus group including 5 students who were all elected by the faculty/institute representatives was organized. In the second group, the aim of the homogeneous sampling was to establish the subgroup containing students sharing certain common features. By this means, students who are members of the university student council and those who have nothing to do with this council have been involved in this study.

Data Collection

The data were collected via focus group interviews with two focus groups. A particular place of meeting was chosen for each group, and the groups gathered in the predetermined places. The focus of each meeting with two different groups was defined as "the challenges and needs of students in the process of their participation in the administration as well as their suggestions about this issue." After the review of the relevant literature, the questions to ask in the focus group interviews were prepared. An expert in the field of research methods checked these

questions. Another expert in the field of education administration and supervision also gave feedback about the questions. Considering their suggestions, necessary modifications were made. As for piloting of the questions, after the final set of questions were determined by the researchers, the researcher had interviews with a classroom representative and two students who did not take part in the study so that the comprehensibility and the answerability of the questions could be evaluated. The interviews were conducted in the Special Education seminar room and a particular classroom (number 423) in the Department of Educational Sciences so as to maintain a standard seating arrangement and security of the recording. As emphasized by Creswell (1998), it is important to give time to each participant one by one in focus group interviews; therefore, a certain amount of time was allocated to each participant. During the interviews, techniques like note taking and filling in information forms were used, and the meetings were recorded after taking the participants' permission to tape-record the interviews. In order to organize the interview data, the interview forms that developed by Krueger (1994) had been used.

Participants

Aiming to reveal Marmara University students' problems with which they encounter in the process of participating in the administration to form a democratic authority in the 2011-2012 academic year, this study was administered with 5 student council members who were students at Marmara University, and 8 students who did not take part in the student council. Table 1 illustrates information about 13 students who participated in the study voluntarily.

Analysis of the Data

One of the techniques to the analysis of focus group data is content analysis as well (Millward, 2006). In the content analysis of the data collected through the focus group interviews, the first stage was to identify meaningful data units. As suggested by Neuman (2009) this step is followed by four different stages of analyzing qualitative data: Coding the data, finding the themes, organizing the codes and the themes, defining the findings and interpreting them.

In the coding stage, the first thing to do was to separate data into meaningful parts (Ryan & Bernard, 2003), and each part was focused on to interpret what each part conceptually meant. The parts constituting meaningful wholes within themselves

were named or in other words codified on the basis of questions. This process described as coding according to predetermined concepts by Yıldırım and Şimşek (1999; 2005) led to a common coding list to be used for the data collected from both focus groups. In the coding process, Neuman's (2009) open coding technique was firstly used. Namely, the initial codes were determined according to the draft themes. Later, coding with axis technique was secondly used to revise the data. This technique applied in accordance with the stages, which determined by Strauss (1987). The themes codified at the initial stages were focused on rather than the data. By bringing the similar themes together and by splitting some of them into subgroups, the data could be interpreted. As suggested by Kümbetoğlu (2008) as in the analysis of the in depth interviews, the aim of such coding is to split participants' expressions, words and opinions on the basis of predetermined themes, to organize them later by categorizing and finally to interpret them considering their relationship with one another. Lastly, as stated by Neuman, with the selective coding technique, the data was revised and the draft theme was reviewed in accordance with the determined categories and codes. After necessary modifications were made, the draft themes were determined. In order to determine the themes, the first thing to do was to identify whether the data under the theme makes up a meaningful whole or not and to decide whether all the themes appearing later meaningfully explain the data collected throughout the study. The last stage of the analysis was to establish the links among the themes, to describe the data and to analyze them in line with the organization of the research questions. As pointed out by Balcı (2001), in the content analysis, which is actually a structured document analysis, the researcher first organize categories excluding from one another, and later note the frequency of the category in the document for the document analysis.

Reliability and Validity

In order to increase the internal validity of this research, the time triangulation technique was used suggested by Miles and Huberman (1984). Time triangulation increases the double sided and concurrent validity (Bryman, 2004; Hanson, Creswell, Clark, Petska, & Creswell, 2005). The researcher deals with the findings and the analysis again and again at three different times. In addition to that, global themes were tested with 19 people studying at the Department of Guidance and Psychological

Counseling on 21.12.2011. General information about the aim of the study was given to this group. Global themes and subthemes were introduced and their views and thoughts about the issue were compared with these categories. In addition to that, in order to maintain internal reliability, referees' judgments were obtained regarding the determined general field categories and subcategories. Two different ways of sampling were used so as to maintain external validity.

Results

In this study, within the framework of three global themes, relevant 9 sub themes were organized as follows:

Participatory Democracy

The codes voiced by both groups under the global theme of participatory democracy: "obligations", "communication barriers", "effective using of communication tools", "lack of communication", "abstracting from administration", "not being taken seriously", "not being an active member", "the anxiety regarding the grades", "political discrimination", "inability to reach the administrator", "passive studentship". The total number of codes obtained from the students who are not members of the council is 45 while the total number of codes collected from the council members is 32. The common issue voiced in these characterizations is being open to communication.

The Right to Speak: In terms of the right to speak and respect, students not taking part in the council emphasize that there is no freedom at school, abstain from sharing their views and feel uncomfortable due to factors like politics, grouping, discrimination, ethnical problems and being labeled. For this reason, the increasing number of international students is regarded as positive, and it was emphasized that students cannot arrive at a consensus in their common problems. While students in the council do not feel themselves comfortable and independent in the classroom, students not taking part in the council feel themselves more comfortable as they are taken seriously. Also, while students who are not members of the council state that position and authority are respected, students who are members of the council point out that people are not open to any criticisms. Administrative restrictions, off administration and the problem of access are the issues mentioned by both groups.

Democratic Authority: In both groups, there is a common idea that students do not have any authority in the administrative processes of the university. This idea is more strongly favored by the students who are not taking part in the student council. From the perspective of groups, communication barriers and access problems are their main concerns. However, students taking part in the council specifically focus on the bureaucracy and the issues regarding the student participation system as major problems. On the other hand, students not taking part in the council claim that they could make their voices heard through one to one relationships with the instructors and thus not taken seriously and canalized to out-of-school activities. It is worth mentioning here that students not taking part in the council do not mention the members of the student council as people through whom they can make their voices heard. While council members regard themselves as a means to student authority, the students who are not members of the council never mention the department or the faculty representatives.

Paying Attention to Students' Ideas: As far as the value given to the students' views is concerned, students not taking part in the council state that the administrators are inapproachable, always busy and getting more isolated from the students as they are promoted to higher positions. On the other hand, they maintain that their views and ideas are given enough attention to by their instructors as they are familiar with their instructors. Conversely, students taking part in the council point out that the dean appreciates their opinions and try to solve their problems while the instructors do not make an effort to do so. Furthermore, they claim that instructors differentiate between their students depending on the closeness of students to the instructors' political views. In parallel with this, students' anxiety regarding their grades comes into play.

Taking Part in the Decision Making Process: It was found that the students who did not take part in the decision making process of the administration define their roles as passive and perceive their roles as robotic, programmed and compliant. The only way to take part in the education process is to have interviews with the instructors and to share feelings in the classroom. On the other hand, students who took part in the student council indicate that they are not actively involved in the decision making of the administration, and they point out that students do not pursue their rights and act unconsciously. Moreover, contrary to the first group, they perceive the "instructor initiative" as something negative.

Under the theme of students' right to speak, the members of the council also mention codes, such as "forced choice", "not being taken seriously" and "being political" in terms of their participation in the administration. But the fact that all participants commented on the effect of media and the use of school against students is worth mentioning.

Independence

The codes mentioned commonly by both groups under the global theme of independence are as follows: "communication", effective use of communication tools", "being non-free", "anxiety about grades", "direct relationship", "passive studentship", "inability to reach the administrator", "meetings", "political discrimination." The total number of codes obtained from students who are not members of the council is 33 while the number of codes gained from council members is 29.

The Role of the Student: Students who are not taking part in the council describe the role of the student as passive, figurant, digital, consumer, isolated from the life itself and as forgotten. However, the ones taking part in the council respond differently to the same question. Characterizations like self-development, developing leadership skills, making rehearsals about life, socializing, learning, being active shows a more proactive manner.

Freedom of Expression and Respect: Both groups mentioned issues the difficulties arising from differences of opinion and the environment for free expression. At this point, open university environment to the international students emphasized by the students who they not taking part in the council.

Student-teacher Relationship: It was found that the social activities and students' needs add up to the problems in the use of schools. The fact that there is no media organ addressing to the whole of the school community strengthens this possibility. The regular formal meetings emphasized by the council members and the sharing meetings highlighted by students who are not members of the council are practices observed in the school community. Such meetings including instructors, students and other staff contribute to the maturation of the democratic culture in terms of the knowledge and experience.

As far as student-instructor relationship is concerned, the needs of the students who are not taking part in the council become important. It was realized that this group focus more on the social activities and the organizations, such as projects

and private sector cooperation carried out under the umbrella of the university. They also agree on the importance of the communication among other students. On the other hand, the council members make suggestions more about the application of things. It was also revealed that these students give importance to the regulatory processes on the basis of their own experiences and they leave no space for administration initiatives.

Ethics

Under the global theme of ethics, there are codes voiced by both groups: "the problem of student-human value", "grouping", "the problem of professional ethics", "the need for the ethics training", "individualization", "the demand for solidarity." The total number of codes for students not taking part in the council is 25 while the total number of codes collected from students who are taking part in the council is 13.

Moral Values: The students who are not taking part in the council evaluate the university environment in terms of ethics by mentioning issues like human value, personal development and the need for ethics training, expanding the dialogue to cope with prejudices, the lack of information, not being able to recognize, the majority of characterizations, political discrimination, favoritism, grouping, lack of social amenities and lack of communication. Supportively the importance and the meaning of student participation in the decision making process, students are not yet in unity and integrity, which means a school community unaware of each other and the functioning of the administrative process.

The fact that students talked about the instructors behaving against the ethical considerations of their professions gives a clue about how important instructors' responsibilities are. Students taking part in the council hold similar beliefs with the ones who are not members of the student council in that both groups mentioned issues like the problems of the value of students. Sided attitudes of the instructors on the basis of students' political views is an important piece of data collected from students not taking part in the council as an example of instructor behavior not appropriate for professional ethics. This result highlights the importance of both instructors' and students' responsibilities for the development of the university in terms of professional ethics.

The Culture of Solidarity: For students not taking part in the council, the school is a place for grades, is competitive, individual and full of exam anxiety. Also, issues like political divisions, grouping and

discrimination result in the impression that the culture of solidarity is weakening. Conversely, students feel the need to integrate to other members of the class and to be a whole by means of activities including all the students. It was revealed that for students not included in a group, this need gets more important. Students who are members of the council emphasize this need in order to increase the sense of belonging and point out that there is more solidarity in the councils. Students mentioned the campaign organized after the earthquake in order to help earthquake victims in Van (the city in Turkey) as an example of such solidarity. Another example is the organization of book exchange and cooperation among students via Facebook. However, because just one council member voiced this idea, and other examples could not be obtained from other participating students, it would be fair to suggest that the characteristics of the representative affect the solidly culture of the faculty.

Discussion

As can be seen in findings section, there are significant differences between the characterizations of some concepts and facts made by students who are taking part in the council and those who are not members of the council. The results concerning with themes within global themes can be discussed as follows.

Participatory Democracy: Differences between of the groups' codes (45;32) should be discussed first. It might be two results of these differences: The sheer number of students, who are not taking part in the student council, has increased the number of the code. Or the same group has more criticized of the practices. In any case, the theme has presented the most differentiated rates of the groups.

The other point that should be emphasized here; it was found that students who are taking part in the council have never mentioned student representatives and the right to speak within the themes of students' participation in the administrative decisions. Moreover, it was revealed that these students think that the representative is not sufficient within the theme of the student-instructor. On the contrary, Students taking part in the council hold the idea that they are somewhere in between the administration and students and they represent the general students population. These findings show that more responsibilities should be given to students in both groups. As sharply stated by A.D. Lindsay (1973), the democratic theory is never satisfied with the representative. The representative

is an affliction that is required. Whereas, beyond the representative approach as stressed by Greenberg and Sadofsky (1998), each member of school community is an active voter who have alternative information sources in democratic schools.

Another difference between two groups is related to some of the issues that were never touched upon by the students who are members of the council: "The use of regions", "to be involve in the training program", "integration request", "abstraction of the student's from process", "programmed", "robotisation" and "ethnic discrimination." As for the approach to these concepts considering the literature regarding the democratic/school, significant differences were found between two groups. It could be concluded that there is a difference in terms of knowledge and experiences among members of the school community. The other probability; the council members more politically. Or, the candidate representatives would like to address some issues unnecessarily in the process of the elections.

Independence: It could be said that the two groups have most approached each other in this theme, especially about difficulties arising from differences of opinion and the environment for free expression. This result can be interpreted that they have realized similar problems in the school environment. The most important distance between the groups is related to self-perception: Unlike the other group, the ones taking part in the council respond differently to the same question by distinguishing between the ideal student model from their perspective and from the instructors' perspectives. Getting involved in various administrative positions, developing leadership skills and awareness of the school-related objectives might be considered as the reasons of the differences in the characterization of both groups. It is normal to have different perspectives about the objectives of students who perceive school as a theater of life and of students considering school as something isolated from life. The passive and figurant students who feel isolated from the life expect to be encouraged while students who see life as a theater stage for life focus on developing themselves, finishing school, being active and developing leadership skills without the expectation to be encouraged by an outsider. Still, these differences do not mean that the institutional ventures about the role of students in the administration are sufficient, and this cannot conceal the fact that the school does not carry out the tasks required to make students feel that they are active members of the school community.

However in generally, it is an important point that to figure out problems of the groups. When we consider to importance of self-confidence on moral values (Freire, 2001), it can be interpreted that this result has verified to the "ethical value" theme.

It is not a coincidence to have the most frequent code as communication and the communication tools. Students who are not taking part in the council urge for sharing meetings while students demand for the same thing through a formal meeting. Council members hold the idea that these meetings should be formal, as these meetings require decisions about the application of administrative processes. They also state that all the planned activities and promises should be brought up in these meetings. Routine meetings were needed as a means of democratic schooling by both of these groups. Reboul (1971 cited in Büyükkaragöz, 1990) states that the main issue is not only to plan lessons for programs aiming at democracy training but also to increase the awareness that democracy is a way of living. Similarly, Derrida (2004) claims that among ten wounds surrounding the new world order, the top second is the lack of participation in the democratic life. Giroux (2009) emphasizes that the meaning of the university lies on the fact that students at the universities must be trained to become the active actors of a participatory democracy. His term "regaining the university" refers to the common sense, understanding, dialogue, the possibility of opposition engagement for all faculties and students, a place where learning cannot be degraded to militarism or propaganda or in other words, a public place for real democracy. This term is also used as a reference to the restructuring of the university by means of instructors, students, parents and the other staff. To put it in other words, the university functions as a concrete and symbolic facility of the democracy war. As pointed out by Dewey (1996), for a society to be democratic in essence is only possible when the school trains real democrats. With Medici's (1972) words, we should think more on "life by way of the school."

Ethics: As indicated in findings, the students who are not taking part in the council evaluate the university environment in terms of ethics by mentioning issues like human value, personal development and the need for ethics training, expanding the dialogue to cope with prejudices, the lack of information, not being able to recognize, the majority of characterizations, political discrimination, favoritism, grouping, lack of social amenities and lack of communication. As emphasized by Kuçuradi

(1997), the second content of education requires comprehending the values of the others. With Osler and Starkey's (1994 cited in Singleton, 2004) words, ethics is the foundation of democratic societies. It can be suggested that ethical guide for higher education draft prepared by Gerçek, Güven, Özdamar, Yelken, and Korkmaz (2011) should be widened by considering student participation requirements.

When consider to democratic school literature (Bode, 1927; Greenberg & Sadofsky, 1998; Kyle & Jenks, 2003; Mintz, 2005; Morhayim, 2008; Schugurensky, 2003; Şahin & Turan, 2004), it can be said that demands of the students' correlated with the democratic school practices. They demanding (i) representing higher rates (ii) participatory democracy, (iii) considered as valuable (iv) freedom for individual choices (v) reduction of institutional barriers, (vi) having more authority in school management, (vii) equality, (viii) to get rid of the passive student image, (ix) taking more active roles in the educational program. In other words, school is requested to transform a democratic life place. These demands are directly accord with democratic school characteristics, which classified by Graves (2006). At this point, Forbes (2003) has pointed out the relationship between rights and responsibilities balance in a democratic society.

These results gained in this study provide different views and recommendations about the problems of higher education institutions in the process of forming a democratic authority by means of student participation in their administrative processes. Such a study should have the main aim to evaluate students' suggestions about the problems and obstacles they encounter with in the process of their participation in the administration so that the democratic authority can be shaped in Turkey. For this purpose these results should be carried out at the level of a national student council. Further research should focus on the representation of students in higher rates of boards and committees. Views of the teaching staff on the subject should be examined. Ethics training needs in higher education should be analyzed. And different solutions should be investigated to able to involve students for program arrangements.

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