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## Class Council Between Democracy Learning and Character Education

- Logics of the school and logics of social pedagogy clash in class council.
- Possibilities for a democratic and social pedagogically framed school are inevitably limited.
- Participation in class council does not always contribute to democracy.
- Class council focusses on personal development, not on political or democratic education.
- In social practice class council camouflages a de-politicization of the school.

**Purpose:** Class council has become a popular approach for character education and democracy learning in German schools. However, it is not clear if the expectations are met in social practice.

**Approach:** The data was gained with an ethnographical multiple method approach within three contrasting secondary schools. The study is informed by practice theory, theory of school and theory of social pedagogics.

**Findings:** Logics of the school and logics of social pedagogy clash in class council. Opportunities for a democratic and social pedagogically framed school are inevitably limited. Class council focusses more on personal development and character education and much less on political or democratic education. Certain forms of class council subtly aim at student's approval of undemocratic practices; therefore, class council sometimes camouflages a de-politicization of the school.

**Research Implications:** A comparison of democracy learning and character education in different pedagogical institutions is recommended for further research. The methodology of reconstructing logics of school and logics of social pedagogy from a practice theoretical and ethnographical perspective should be elaborated.

**Practical implications:** Teachers need reflective competencies in order to recognize the limitations of participation in practice. While aiming at the ideal of the mature, civically engaged and socially competent citizen, the limitations of participation and the responsibilities of societal institutions like schools should be made subject of learning, as well.

### Keywords:

Character education, democratic education, participation, class council, school theory, ethnography

### 1 Introduction: Democracy and character education as pedagogical topics

Democracy is a very sensitive issue within society at present. The analysis of prevailing circumstances often shows a twofold focus: On the one hand, democratic states and their institutions are currently challenged by political developments of various kinds, whether it be the rise of right-wing populism in Western democracies, dealing with the refugee crisis, or regarding international conflicts like those in Turkey or Ukraine. On the other hand, traditional forms of participation within a parliamentary democracy, like exercising one's voting rights or engaging in a political party, seem to be increasingly unattractive. Thus, decreased political trust and general disenchantment with politics are currently prevailing in

society. At the same time, alternative approaches like liquid democracy or social media are gaining access into the political sphere. These approaches might enable people, who are hesitant to engage in public formations of opinion, to join in and shape socio-political debates. Accordingly, the Shell Youth Study documents an increasing number of young people who show an interest in politics that is also associated with a willingness to take part in political activities. However, disenchantment with 'traditional' forms of politics remains strong and young people place little trust in political parties (Shell Deutschland, 2015). These highly simplified remarks are merely to focus attention on the fact that democracy is a current and controversial topic within the public discourse at present. In the course of the latest developments, democracy has almost automatically been declared as a global issue for educational processes (prominent e.g. in the OECD-program 'The Future of Democracy'). By this, democracy becomes a subject of learning processes and in this process a specific pedagogical area has evolved. Democracy learning and development of democratic competencies become a task for schools, which – as public institutions – are always an effigy of transformations within society and are being held accountable for solving (alleged) problems of society with regards to educational policy.<sup>1</sup> This perspective on educational science is in the center of our text.

Edelstein currently warns about "the corrosion of the socio-moral resources of democracy" (Edelstein, 2011, p.

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1) and demands that democracy ought to be put in the center of schools' responsibilities (Edelstein, 2010, p. 323). Busch and Grammes (in a critical perspective) also assume that didactics of political and civic education is driven by the fear that the democratic function of society will be undermined, if the socialization into the political or economic system does not succeed sufficiently (Busch & Grammes, 2010, p. 95). However, concepts of democratic education, in which the idea of children's self-determination and participation as well as a democratic way of life in general play an important role, have a long history in the tradition of progressive education, as the works of John Dewey, Siegfried Bernfeld, Hugo Gaudig or Alexander Sutherland Neill, for example, show. Their concepts were similar reactions to (assumed) social or educational crises.

Keeping this in mind and with regard to assumed deficits within society, the current demand for encouraging character education and teaching social competencies in schools does not come as a surprise. There are certain assumptions behind these demands, e.g. that more and more parents are failing to raise their children appropriately, that children are increasingly being raised in individualized contexts and fragmented families, leading to the fact that their social skills are developing poorly. Also, companies and employers complain about lacking personal and social skills of young employees.

All of this leads to a pedagogic demand for schools to promote social learning and character education. Huffman defines character education as "planned and unplanned things that adults do to nurture the development of moral values in youngsters" (Huffmann, 1995, p. 7). This pedagogic approach has become more and more important: "Since the late 1990s character education grew worldwide" (Edmonson, Tatman, & Slate, 2009, p. 15). The aim is referred to as "balancing the demands of producing both smart and good students who will be the ethical and productive citizens of tomorrow" (ibid.). However, this approach seems problematic in the sense that it lacks sufficient focus on contents of didactics of political education and procedures of parliamentary democracy. In fact, the focus is put on the individual student, whereas societal conditions are being ignored. Another point of criticism, especially expressed in American discourse, is an emerging conservative backlash going along with moral education as part of character education. By addressing the individual's responsibility for society, conservative values are being promoted. Semantics appeal to the individual's responsibility, as well as to general values.<sup>2</sup> Claimed are "key virtues as honesty, dependability, trust, responsibility, tolerance, respect and other commonly-held values important for Americans" (ibid., p. 4).

Both strands of criticism – the lack of democratic culture and values due to scarce participation, as well as the lack of social competencies due to missing character education – are countered by pedagogical measures, which implicitly and explicitly promote the ideal of a mature, socially engaged and democratic citizen. Schools are supposed to enable "a democratic form of life"

(Edelstein, 2011, p. 3), comprising "learning about democracy", "learning through democracy", and "learning for democracy" (ibid.). Therefore, "social competencies" (ibid.) are needed in order to help students develop a democratic habitus (Edelstein, 2008, p. 1). At this point, both strands are linked to each other.

Against this background, the emergence of democracy pedagogics that has been established in German schools, predominantly by the federally funded programs "Demokratisch handeln" (literal translation: 'Acting Democratically') and "Demokratie lernen und leben" ('Learning and Living Democracy'), becomes understandable. In contrast to school subjects like political or social sciences, political engagement is supposed to be experienced in a more direct and authentic way and to be a matter of personal engagement. The idea is to foster students' willingness to actively participate and engage in the democratization of classes and school life in general. The key assumption is that schools have the opportunity to educate students into becoming mature and responsible citizens through authentic and direct experience of democracy. Special emphasis is put on occasions of direct participation within school, because according to Coelen, participation is a limited, yet indispensable aspect of democracy (Coelen, 2010, p. 37). This argument is connected to the criticism that schools themselves are not democratic institutions because traditional forms of codetermination in schools are always faced with systematical limitations (ibid., p. 40).

From a democracy pedagogical perspective, there is strong criticism regarding the ideal of a student committed to actively participate in civil society, which is strived for by pedagogical measures. Leser, for example, states that participation in schools does not automatically lead to democratic consciousness. Instead, the permanent experience of limited participation rather leads to democratic pessimism (Leser, 2009, p. 77). In this context, some representatives in the field of didactics of political education criticize the emphasis on actions and practice of democracy in democracy pedagogical approaches that are often inspired by the ideas of John Dewey. Thus, a critical reflection on democracy and politics fades into the background. Next to action-oriented political education in schools, processes of cognitive understanding of democratic politics as a condition of society, as a way of life, and as a form of rule, are needed as well (for a brief summary of the dispute see, for example, May, 2008). Therefore, these educational programs and approaches are in danger of recognizing participation solely as an academic subject-matter regarding individual development of competencies, while missing political dimensions of the school system (Coelen, 2010). Furthermore, the causal assumption that experiences of participation will encourage students' political activities, which will then form them into democratic citizens, is criticized. Busch and Grammes summarize that so far, democracy pedagogics seems to be programmatic, idealistic, and little analytical (Busch & Grammes, 2010, p. 102). From a quantifying perspective and with regards to theories of competence, it is argued

that moral education as part of character education, e.g. discussing ethical dilemmas in class, does not directly go along with political science or democracy pedagogics because political questions are often more complex than mere moral questions (Weißenö, 2016). Furthermore, an empirical verification of knowledge and skills regarding didactics of political education is requested (Weißenö, 2012).

## 2 Class council in theory and empirical analysis

An outstanding instrument of democracy pedagogics is the class council, which has become popular in schools (and beyond, see Wyss, 2012) since elements of the federally funded program 'Learning and Living Democracy' have been established in many German schools. The class council's main objective is to shape students' personalities in the sense of developing and improving skills regarding conflict management, communication and reflectivity. It aims to strengthen students' democratic competencies through direct and authentic experiences of participation. The main idea is to provide a platform or opportunities for students to solve conflicts within their peer group. Overall, class council takes social pedagogic principals, such as orientating on the individual and individual cases, referring to students' living and social environments, as well as spontaneity and codetermination into account (Olk & Speck, 2009; Coelen, 2007). It is supposed to be *something different* than regular classes or school lessons, an alternative to hierarchically structured, one-sided, cognitively oriented teaching approaches with no reference to the students' environments. Thus, programmatic contributions and articles evaluate class councils as a democratic way of life very positively (Edelstein, 2008, p. 4).

Scientific findings, however, are more critical and point out limitations regarding the theory of school. Especially ethnographic studies analyze the discrepancy between the commitment to students' self-determination and autonomy on the one side and institutional heteronomy on the other side. This seems to be constitutive for class councils, thus Budde refers to 'simulated participation' (Budde, 2010). This constitutes a difference between teachers and students. On the part of the students, this might lead to considering participation as a task required by school (de Boer, 2006). The teachers in turn are trapped in the contradiction of providing opportunities for participation, while at the same time limiting these opportunities (Budde et al., 2008). Another difficulty arises out of the antinomy between autonomy and heteronomy (Helsper, 1995). Even though a form of non-academic, social pedagogic learning is intended by providing opportunities for autonomy, self-determination, and participation – driven by the aim of increasing students' ability for reflection – institutional framing with the context of school remains in force. Wyss captures some key issues and concludes, "The gap between ideals and practice is a constitutive characteristic of class councils" (Wyss, 2012, p. 59).

The expectations regarding democracy learning and character education – as a measure inspired by social

pedagogic methods within the institution of school – do not seem to be met entirely. Therefore, in the following, we analyze and evaluate empirical data and examine what kind of possibilities, but also what kind of limitations and de-limitations (i.e. the blurring of boundaries) can be found in class councils with regards to its focus on character education and democracy learning through participation. Behind this lays the assumption that, from a school-theoretical perspective, the central premises of social pedagogy (like orientating on the individual and individual cases, referring to students' living and social environments, as well as spontaneity and codetermination) are limited by schools' societal functions, like selection and allocation. Based on these (critical) empirical findings, it has to be analyzed what students can learn with regards to democracy as well as to their personality within class council. With this work, we follow up on the desideratum that "further research is needed to reconstruct in detail the extent and quality of deliberations in class councils" (Whyss, 2012, p. 60).

## 3 Empirical research on class council

The analysis is based on data (participant observation, interviews) from an ethnographic research project PeBS, which focuses on pedagogical practices in three schools in Germany (Budde / Weuster, 2016). The research project presumes that human activities are based on practices, which are expressions of social orders. With regards to practice theory, the focus of analysis is on space- and time-bound activities in their materiality (Schatzki, 1996; 2002). We define schools as organizations which are, according to Schatzki's practice theoretical account, composed by interconnected practice-arrangement bundles – just as any social phenomenon (Schatzki, 2005; 2006). We aim to identify the actions that compose the school as an organization which also means to identify the net of overlapping and interacting practice-arrangement bundles of which the actions are part of. Additionally, we try to identify other nets of practice-arrangement bundles to which the net composing the school is tied closely, such as educational boards or local governments. Furthermore, studying an organization like the school needs to take its material arrangements into account, i.e. the ways humans, artifacts, organisms and things are ordered in it (Schatzki, 2005, 476 f.). Besides class councils (where research was conducted in 5<sup>th</sup> grade), the research project also analyzes schools' project weeks, vocational orientation programs, as well as different workshops dealing with character education and democracy learning. This was conducted in a sample of three contrasting schools. The first school is a traditional-humanist secondary school (the German 'Gymnasium'), located in a medium-sized city. The second one is an urban comprehensive school with a very heterogeneous student body. The third one is a secondary school with a focus on principles of progressive, reform-oriented education, located in a medium-sized city. The research design is based on the concept of an 'ethnographic collage' (Richter & Friebertshäuser, 2012), which focuses on collecting and



evaluating data with a multiple methods approach regarding different measures for character education and democracy learning. Participatory observation was used in order to analyze the practices. The main interests of ethnographical observations are the implicit, unconscious activities and routines. Participatory observation is based on the assumption that the researcher can learn about the discursive and physical practices that constitute social orders by observing and participating in the natural setting of the people under study (Troman, Jeffrey & Walford, 2005). The observations are written down in form of field notes and protocols and can thereupon be transformed into analyzable data (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). In order to explore and evaluate the students' and teachers' perspectives, focused interviews were conducted (Friebertshäuser, 2010). Document analyses supplement the analyses of students' and teachers' practices and views in order to analyze the programmatic objectives.

### 3.1 Traditional secondary school

At the traditional secondary school, topics to be discussed in class council are always chosen the day before. In form of homework assignments, students are asked to reflect on topics by themselves and write down their thoughts in a chart, as described in the protocol:

"The teacher reminds the students of the three topics that were chosen for discussion the day before. The topics are written down one below the other in a chart on the blackboard. Lengthwise, there are three headings: current state, target state and measures.

Mr. A. addresses Sue and Matt, who are in charge of moderating class council today, "Alright, you know about your responsibilities, right?" Sue and Matt agree by saying "yes". Mr. A. continues, "And you also know: discussing one topic takes no longer than five minutes, which means Matt has to watch the time. If there is a lot to discuss, you may extend for one minute, of course, but it is not allowed to do it longer."<sup>3</sup>

One of the characteristics of this class council is the use of a structure originating from the field of economics or business administration. The desired mode of solving problems is strongly regulated: there is exactly one way, resulting in the exclusion of any other possible way of solving problems. The term "measures" implies that all topics and problems can be solved, whereby a strong emphasis is put on the manageability of arising problems. However, manageability is not only suggested, it is also demanded. A "current state" that is not being transformed into a "target state" by means of "measures" is not designated. Furthermore, the path model suggests that via measures, a causal relationship can be established between current state and target state. By this, current state and target state are complementary placed towards each other. The focus is not on a profound search for causes of problems, but on the development of measures in order to change practice. What is interesting, is the suggestion of linearity: starting

from the current state, one reaches the target state via measures. Associated with this is the assumption that every process can be clearly defined. As a pedagogic model, this is a quite causal concept. Possibilities for participation, for approaching and solving different problems, and also for subjectively different character education are strongly limited due to a standardized procedure. Overall, this model is shaped by a clear rationale relying on causal solutions of problems by putting resolved measures into practice.

Another characteristic is the assigned homework before class council. Students have to write down their thoughts on specific topics into the given structure of current state, target state and measures and have to bring their notes to class council. The focus is not on spontaneity and collective reflection and discussion of topics and problems, but rather seems to be on the easiness to plan this process and task, which appears to be a form of academic assignment due to the requirement to write down thoughts into charts at home.

Roles, positions and time structure are clearly defined in advance as well. The teacher reassures himself that Sue and Matt know their responsibilities as moderators and determines that every topic may be discussed for five minutes only. This limits the possibility for a profound process of deliberation. Every topic is treated equally, at least concerning the time perspective, no matter what the students' individual interests and needs are.

Sue says, "We now start with class council. And we have a topic. It is bullying and offending students in other classes. Does anyone have to say anything about this?" Some students raise their hands, while Sue adds, "So, what is the current state?"

Matt directly picks John, who is raising his hand. John states, "So, at the moment, some of the students of the parallel class get teased by their classmates. And insulted, as well. Yes." Matt asks, "Does anyone else want to say something about the current state?" Nobody says anything, so Matt asks, "Then the target state, does anyone have to say something about this?" Several students raise their hands and Steve gets picked. Steve says, "Umm, it should be that no one feels somehow uncomfortable at this school. There should be harmony, so to say, between the classes." Tyler interrupts Steve, "That is, if I may interrupt shortly, these are the measures." Several students say "no" and Steve also says, "No, that is the target state." Tyler concedes, "I see, okay, yes."

Without any difficulties, Sue and Matt take over the position of moderators. Sue names the topic and asks the students to share their thoughts. Several students show their willingness to participate by raising their hands and Matt calls on the students to express their opinions. Matt and Sue assume responsibility, which could be interpreted as a learning experience with regards to character and democracy education. They can try themselves in a new position and practice to moderate a conversation with authentic topics, while also having the responsibility to actually reach results. At this point, however, the





prefiguring structure comes into effect, as can be seen by Sue's added question regarding the current state. This leads to a strong limitation of Sue's self-expression because she does not really have any other choice but to transform into a teacher-like position. The case of students performing like teachers, being acknowledged as such, and for rules and routines being followed accordingly, can be seen in this class repeatedly. This means that the logic of school – which is supposed to be transformed during class council – persists, but exactly in this, the project works out well, yet in a simulated arrangement: In the end, Sue and Matt can only act like teachers – as students. The mode they act in, is the mode of the teacher, and thereby one that only cites institutionally provided positions. The freedom of expression is limited. Sue and Matt execute their task within an academic context in the form of (assistant) teachers. This can be a precarious undertaking, if it creates a distance between Sue and Matt as 'teachers' and 'their' students. At the same time, it can be interpreted as a reasonable course of action because what kind of an out-of-school position could possibly be established here? Class council remains within the academic context. Therefore, it can also be seen as a 'protection' from dissolution of boundaries in order to not be forced to show oneself as 'whole person'.

The current state is quickly identified: a short description by John is enough. There is no reaction to Matt's question, if there is anything else to say. Then, the target state is discussed. In Tyler's opinion, Steve's suggestion that there should be harmony between the classes, is not the target state but a measure. The expectation of a clear model due to the precise procedure is not met in practice because the articulated problems are much more complex than current state, target state and measures suggest.

In the course of the protocol, several students complain about students from other classes who are not present. Different measures are discussed. The scene ends as follows:

Jessy asks if they should go to the students of the other classes. Matt suggests that he himself and Sue could go to two of the bullied students and ask them what they think about the problem.

Mr. A. interrupts and says, "Alright, my suggestion is that you keep out of this completely. You've already passed this into my hands. I spoke to Mr. B. and he is already taking care of it. So you don't have to do anything to fix this issue."

While Jessy and Matt suggest different options on how to deal with the issue, the teacher interrupts their discussion. His suggestion is for the students to "keep out of this completely" because the issue has been delegated to him and he took care of it already. The students "don't have to do anything to fix this issue". This raises the question, why the topic was discussed at all – obviously the corresponding measure was clear beforehand.

What is striking in other council sessions of this class, is that the taken measures are usually neither controlled, nor ever put into action. Thereby, the processing model maintains a simulative character. Apparently, deciding on measures in class council is more important than ever putting them into practice. In the case under analysis here, students' non-participation is obvious and can be demonstrated by the teacher saying that the students are not supposed to do anything and that this was clear from the beginning. Therefore, the participation procedure in situ is predominant in the council sessions of this particular class. The mere focus is on practicing a particular way of working things out, whereas the results in their content are less important than the fact that a procedure for deciding on measures took place at all.

### 3.2 Urban comprehensive school

At the urban comprehensive school with a particularly heterogeneous student body, teachers play an important role, as well. The opportunities for participation are also strongly limited, as the following scene documents:

Both teachers stand in front of the class. Mrs. C. says, "Alright, next topic, umm, the class representative, I just mentioned it. If the class representative himself gets into trouble too many times, so that we as teachers have to take care of it or need to address it during class council, then he is in the wrong position. Unfortunately, Sam behaved badly during the last weeks. So we as teachers have decided: we have to revote. Of course, you may now shortly express your points of view on this issue and say, well, I don't feel good about this decision because I think, he did this or that, or, yes, I think it's good, I believe it is good for someone else to get the chance to carry out this position in a different way. So for now the decision that we are going to revote is final, but still, I would like to hear a bit about how you see this."

This scene describes how the teachers let their class know that they will dismiss Sam from his office as class representative. Considering the objective of becoming a (more) democratic school, this course of action is highly problematic. Sam has been democratically elected class representative by his classmates. This includes representing and defending students' interests against teachers and the institution in general. All of the students inevitably must feel powerless, with their voices not being heard and not counting. The teachers do not disguise the prevailing structures of power, in fact they declare that they are the ones who decide upon dismissing class representatives in social practice in a very transparent way. As a crucial factor for their decision, the teachers state that Sam himself has gotten into trouble too many times. This is not being clarified any further, therefore it does not become clear what exactly it is in the eyes of the teachers that disqualifies Sam in his position. The teachers allow that the students "may now shortly express" their points of view. This, however, is a weak opportunity for participation because the decision is already "final" anyway.



A remarkable turn can be identified in the teacher's phrase, "[...] and say, well, I don't feel good about this decision because I think, he did this or that [...]". At this point, the offer to express one's agreement or disagreement with the teachers' decision shifts into a request to position oneself emotionally. This is heightened by the fact that the teacher shifts into the narrative perspective of a student ("I don't feel good"). The request strongly prefigures the way in which the students may react to the dismissal of Sam: requested is a statement about one's own emotional condition. Not requested is an (oppositional) statement about the decision itself, let alone a debate on the question if it is generally legitimate for teachers to dismiss class representatives in a highly undemocratic manner. Even though students may express their impressions and feelings, the decision is final. Regarding the dismissal of Sam, the students' opinions do not matter, but obviously do with regards to the acceptance of the decision within the class (Leser, 2009). Therefore, in the sense of an affirmative educational concept, this also contributes to the legitimization of power structures.

Several students raise their hands. The teacher picks Pat, who says she agrees with the decision because Sam has sometimes been bickering with Liam and also did not always have the strongest interest in ensuring the rules, but preferred playing instead. It is Amelia's turn. She turns to the teacher and says that Pat said something about playing but in her opinion Sam has every right to play. The teacher turns to Sam and tells him that he can also say something about the issue if he likes, he is not left out in any way. Sam slightly nods with a neutral expression on his face.

Now it is Fabienne's turn. She says that Sam has helped her several times. The teacher comments, "This was a statement in favor of him, that's great, too!" Another boy mentions that one time it was very loud in front of the classroom and it was Sam who took care of it by telling the students to be quiet. The teacher asks, "Alright, so you think that he did take his position seriously at that moment?" The boy confirms that. It is Tam's turn and she says, "I like that Sam sometimes helped me when I had difficulties." After that, the teacher picks Nancy, who says that she likes it that Sam was never bossy and never acted as if all the other students had to do whatever he said. Some of the other class representatives would actually act this way.

The only student approving the teachers' decision is Pat. The reason she mentions, Sam preferring to play, is questioned by Amelia right away. All the other students argue that Sam did a good job by giving various examples to substantiate their points of view (helping, imposing order, not acting in a bossy manner). However, no one deduces that he or she does not want to accept the teachers' decision. Accepting the decision while insisting that Sam did a good job, reveals a high level of resignation and self-marginalization. Considering the clarity, in which the teachers mark their decision as final, this might not come as a surprise. Nevertheless, complaining about young people and their (alleged)

disenchantment with politics seems quite inexpensive, if – like in this case – students are not granted the chance to experience self-efficacy within a federal institution that is as relevant to them and their future lives. The teachers end the discussion as follows:

The teacher says, "Alright, this is our decision, we will stick to it and revote after the holidays. Decisions can be revoked and if the next one doesn't work out as well, then we'll keep on going according to our concept. We gave you a precise description of the tasks you have to fulfill as class representative and if someone is not acting accordingly, then it is just like that and we have to revote. We will do it after the holidays, that's the decision, too many things have happened within the last few weeks, that's why the decision was made quite fast."

Sam asks if he is allowed to vote, as well. The teacher confirms that he is.

The teachers do not take the students' viewpoints and arguments into consideration at all. Instead, the teacher mentions that they provided the students with a precise description of a class representative's tasks and that too much has happened in the past. The phrase "if the next one doesn't work out, as well, then we'll keep on going according to our concept" includes the announcement or threat that the next class representatives will be dismissed as well, if they do not behave accordingly. This message strongly limits the class representative's possibilities to shape this position in an individual way. In this class, rules seem to be more important than participation. Certainly, various rules have to be applied in school life, just as in any institution or society in general. That these rules – at least in democracies – are always subject to debates and are negotiable, cannot be learned in this class council. There is no critical, reflective discussion and students are not given any room for negotiation, possibly due to the fact that it is not clear, what exactly went wrong with Sam. Finally, for Sam to consider the possibility of not being allowed to participate in the revote due to his dismissal, shows the obvious failure of democracy learning in one single question.

### **3.3 Secondary school oriented on principles of progressive education**

A completely different type of class council can be found at the third school of our sample. The responsibility for the course of action is mainly put into the hands of the students. During the week, students can put written notes about their problems or complaints into a box that is set up in the classroom. At class council, they discuss the topics more or less by themselves. Striking is the fact that it is one student in particular, Don, who is made the center of discussions over and over again.

A student complains that Don was fidgeting with his sandwich in front of her face, which was totally disgusting. Don denies this, whereupon many of the classmates shout "of course you did" and "yes, you did". Another student

says that it smelled really bad and Aiden adds that afterwards, Don threw it into the paper bin.

Sophie, who is in charge of moderating class council today, picks Jason. He explains that at first, Don put his lunch box into the sink. He then went up to Clara and Piper and there he was fidgeting with his sandwich in front of their faces. Again, Don defends himself and says that this is not true. Many of the other students interrupt him by shouting collectively “no” and “of course”, sounding like a choir. For a while it is so noisy, it is almost impossible to understand a single word. Olivia shouts out, “Don, we all saw it!” Sophie picks Piper. She explains that Don came up to her and Clara. They asked him what the matter was. Then he started fidgeting with his sandwich in front of their faces. Don denies this, “I was not fidgeting with my sandwich!” Don’s body is full of tension, he places his hands on his thighs and his upper body leans forward. He looks around the circle in a frantic way, always at the person who is accusing him of things the loudest. Whenever he catches something, he tries to argue against it. One student for example says that the sandwich was mushy and disgusting, whereas Don answers, “Well, that is why I threw it into the bin.” This answer, however, leads to the discussion that he threw it into the wrong bin and that he always throws things into the wrong bin. One student adds that Don always sharpens his pencils in the bin for waste paper and this is wrong, as well. Another student says that Don was once running water over his sandwich, whereupon the choir yells, “ugh” and “yuck”. This continues for quite a long time, more and more accusations against Don are brought up, Don tries to defend himself, but the choir is always louder than him, yelling “yes, you did” and other things. At one point, Don shouts, “You are just trying to make me look bad!” This is denied by the choir immediately. Olivia says, “Now he is just trying to make excuses!” Others add that all students were witnesses of what he did.<sup>4</sup>

In this class council, a problem with Don is discussed. The starting point of the complaint is that Don had been fidgeting with his sandwich. The accusation, however, is quickly extended by various details. It is criticized that his sandwich smelled, that he poured water on it, that he used the wrong dustbin. It is obvious that Don broke several implicit and explicit rules and that his classmates perceive his behavior as disgusting. Taking the approach of class council seriously, in the sense that it should provide the time and place to bring up problems as well as to enable students to collectively take responsibility and participate, a legitimate case is being discussed in this scene. However, in the course of social practice, an interesting phenomenon becomes apparent. This scene hardly represents an appropriate school’s approach for democratic education, but rather a lesson in exclusion. Due to the permanent shifting of accusations, as well as the collectivizing “choir” of his classmates, which rejects or ironizes all of his explanations, Don is denounced in a tribunal-like way. His tense body posture is a figurative expression of the scene, he “looks around the circle in a frantic way, always at the person who is accusing him of things the loudest”. There are no moments of understanding or clarifying things, instead only permanent repetitions of similar accusations. Many of Don’s class-

mates use the situation to confront him with accusations and then disappear in the crowd of the “choir”.

The exclusion takes place in full public. Class council increases the precarious character of the situation due to the fact that the entire class becomes witness of this spectacle. It is not possible to escape the situation. Additionally, the situation becomes extremely precarious for Don because the mode of the course of action is indeed legitimate. The students do exactly what they are supposed to do, which is ‘speaking about problems’. While the other two class council examples demonstrate the limitations for participation due to the strong control of the teachers, in this example, the complete opposite can be shown. There are two teachers present in this situation but they do not intervene. On the contrary, they hand over the responsibility to the students. By doing this, they undermine their pedagogic obligation to ensure a fair and rational discourse based on arguments and they do nothing to prevent the ‘tribunal’. In accordance with this, the moderator Sophie organizes the course of the spectacle and ensures the formal legitimacy of class council since participation is ensured – at the expense of Don.

#### 4 Conclusion

In different ways, these three cases illustrate how the expectation of contributing to character education and democracy learning by promoting participation in class council is not met in social practice. The first example shows that the discussion within class council does not result in a participative solution because the measure was already predetermined in advance. Especially at this point, the students are not only not involved, in addition, they are explicitly denied participation. Here, class council has the sole purpose of collectively raising complaints against students, who were not even present, and which have to be without consequences. To put it bluntly, students can learn that sharing feelings of disappointment will not lead to a possibility to take action.

The second example also reveals strong limitations for students to participate. The teachers’ drastic intervention of dismissing the democratically elected class representative is not made subject of discussion. Instead, the teachers strive for an affective acceptance of their decision within the class. The focus is not on limiting participation, but on the emotional approval of it. What can be learned in this situation, is that school hierarchies override democratic procedures. Subject matter is not justice or political participation but the acceptance of the decision.

The third example shows practices that – unlike the other examples – are characterized by the absence of heteronomy. The teachers pass responsibility over to the students. Out of this participative arrangement, an environment of bullying emerges, which is even supported by the institutional arrangement of the class council. The school hierarchies are not out of order but transferred onto the students.

Our results corroborate critical findings regarding possibilities for participation in class council. Due to the

fact that difficulties were found in all three schools, it is not likely that this can be explained by coincidence or individual inabilities of the teachers. The analyses of the practices particularly point out an empirically based criticism of normative pedagogic programs, like class council, in a particular manner. By taking a look at the presented ethnographies, the *fundamental* failure can be documented in the course of the social practice. Therefore, argued from a school theoretical perspective, it can be plausibly assumed that the possibilities of a democratic and social pedagogic school are inevitably limited. The attempt of dissolving school hierarchies within an approach like class council seems to be destined to fail: Either traditional structures remain in force, or it is the students who adopt the institutional hierarchies themselves. The absence of a generational order does not lead to a democratic room but instead to rooms in which the 'right of the strongest', shaming and exclusion prevail. The students – at least in the third school – obviously do not meet the expectations of assuming responsibility.

There are at least two reasons for this. The impact of occasional activities and learning opportunities is limited – one hour of class council a week can hardly change established conditions. School remains within its logic and this cannot be easily irritated by a social pedagogic addendum. On the contrary, in social practice it even leads to radical restrictions of participation and self-determination caused by the teachers who decide on the measures in advance, suggest them and carry them out themselves, or suspend democratic rights. To put it bluntly, one could argue that this externally controlled form of class council aims at organizing students' approval of undemocratic and non-participatory practices. Even if schools succeeded in systematically integrating social pedagogic principles of democracy pedagogics, the societal functions of schools would most likely still prevent extensive participation because schools are specific forms of institutions. Due to their educational purpose, they are necessarily built upon generational hierarchies and differences in knowledge.

At this point, another contradiction becomes apparent: Due to their obligation to symbolic learning, schools' opportunities to follow social pedagogics logics are institutionally limited. Yet, the institutional limitations can also be seen as a form of 'protection' because schools – unlike a tribunal or individualizing social pedagogics – are a universalistic good, not a particular one. Modern schools have to be measured by the (primordially democratic) claim for equality, even with reference to the fact that schools cannot meet this demand (OECD, 2010; Mehan, 1992).

It is not only the limitation of participation that one can study at schools as institutions, but also societal institutions' universal and equal demands. At this point, the discrepancy between political education and the ideal of a competent, politically engaged student becomes clear as well. To put it bluntly, one could argue that democracy education within class council is primarily focused on personal development and character education, not on political or democratic education. Thus, one can venture

the hypothesis that in social practice, class council serves less as a practice for participation, but in fact to camouflage a de-politicization of school. This is due to the fact that the focus is not on societal questions of power but on individual questions and personal attitudes. Behind this lies a general development in society that can be described as governance techniques of the self. These are participative only in the sense that they aim at self-activation, not at involvement and criticism (Lemke, 2001; Fejes, 2010). There is a tendency that students are supposed to take responsibility for social interactions themselves – while neglecting social and hierarchic contexts.

It can be criticized that a certain form of social-pedagogization of schools rather encourages neoliberal techniques of self-governance, especially because the individual and its ability to act are the center of attention of social-pedagogic premises like orientation on the subject and on the particular case. Therefore, social and collective, as well as structural conditions of the subject are lost sight of. Individualization necessarily depoliticizes democracy learning because social contexts are not being dealt with. Thereby a governmental regime (Foucault 1991) becomes obvious: in this, individualization ensures larger amounts of freedom to act. However, this is accompanied by larger amounts of individual responsibility, as well. Individual responsibility, again, submits the freedom to act under the limiting regime of self-regulation.

Therefore, there are less perspectives regarding a shortened ideal of a mature, civically engaged and socially competent citizen, but more regarding two other aspects. At first, teachers need reflective competencies in order to recognize the limitations of participation and excessive external control in practice. Furthermore, it is necessary to reflect on the contradiction that students are supposed to solve conflicts in a democratic and participative way, while still learning how to do so at the exact same time. The underlying confidence in the students comprises the opportunity for personal *development* in the sense of accessing new areas of responsibility, while getting accessed by those at the same time, as it could be put in regards to the educational theory. Learning, in this case, would be learning in the "zone of proximal development" (Wygotski, 1971) and not learning in the 'zone of the last development' (first two schools) or learning in the 'zone after next development' (third school). However, the empirical findings show that this is not fulfilled, and instead, learning opportunities are shaped in a different way.

Secondly, out of a democracy theoretic perspective, it would be reasonable to make a societal institution's – particularly a school's – limitations of participation and responsibilities the subject of learning. In this way, the teachers of all three schools could have broached the issue of this problematic practice and therefore, could have provided opportunities for (political) education. Instead of naïvely undermining academic orders by formally establishing social-pedagogically-inspired participation, a discussion regarding the public, conflicts, co-





munity or institutions would have probably contributed much more to the development of a politically oriented 'democratic habitus' than the choice between simulation and tribunal.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This also holds for preventing violence or teenage pregnancies, teaching health education, implementing gender responsive pedagogics, etc. Schools are expected to solve an enormous variety of social problems. Considering this, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that Hamburger (2010), for example, argued that pedagogics cannot replace politics.

<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that character education was especially approved in the era of George W. Bush.

<sup>3</sup> The translation of the protocol was predominantly done literally but still tries to capture the sense of the scene.

<sup>4</sup> Note that the sequence is much longer in the original protocol. The accusations against Don and his attempts to justify or defend his actions fill a couple of pages.