

Summary of the Danish Ministry of Education's theme booklet "Democracy in teaching and schools – examples from Danish VET schools", (UVM 7-344) (ISBN 87-603-2079-6) Danish Ministry of Education, 2001-11-02

Summary

We start by noting that the concept of democracy in Denmark is part of two different traditions, leading to two different views of the concept. On the one hand, Alf Ross¹ defined democracy as a constitutional principle founded on a number of formal procedures and rules that celebrate freedom but without defining what freedom is. On the other hand, Hal Koch², originating in the folk high school tradition, viewed democracy as content – a way of life. In this instance, freedom is also celebrated, but in a content-decided form, e.g. economic democracy and cultural democracy.

The two traditions still give rise to the many different conceptions of the relationship between education and democracy. We explain this in the first chapter in which we introduce seven common arguments for democracy in the education system. We differentiate between a consumer, (cross) political, pedagogical, economic, philosophical and social and a financial argument. Finally, we propose that as a support for debates, discussions and negotiations we need to describe our own and other people's basic beliefs about democracy and education. We propose that such descriptions be made in accordance with the concepts means, goals, process and result.

Finally, we become more specific. We look at how a specific conception of democracy has affected teaching and teachers in recent years. We maintain that the relationship between teacher and student is asymmetrical: the teacher should have the authority and final responsibility for teaching, no matter whether the efforts of recent years have gone in another direction. From an outline of the didactical triangle, we discuss where and when students can be given influence on their education and the way they are taught.

The next article is written by the philosopher Mads Storgaard Jensen. He mentions two notions, i.e. the harmonious democracy and the critical democracy. According to Mads Storgaard Jensen, they give rise to different ambitions and different rules when it comes to how you should act within a democracy. He does not see a radical difference between the two forms, rather a difference in degree. The conclusion of the article is that democracy is largely founded on an attitude, where we communicate, debate and challenge each other. This has consequences for the way students are taught and the way teachers relate to students and teach them to relate to each other. Democracy is what happens while the students are absorbed by learning, Mads Storgaard Jensen says.

In the next chapter, we summarise our survey of students' views on student participation. A number of group interviews gave basis for the conclusion that students expect that teachers maintain overall responsibility as professional guarantors and initiators. The students also expect teachers to create variation in their teaching and that they take action when conflicts occur among the students. Finally, demands were made concerning the personality of the teacher, i.e. that he or she must be able to inspire respect while at the same time speaking *with* and not *to* the students.

¹ Alf Ross, a Danish jurist and philosopher, 1899-1979

² Hal Koch, a Danish theologian and professor, 1904-1969

According to former minister of education Ole Vig Jensen, democracy in the Danish education system will come into play in three different areas:

1. "Teaching the way democracy works".
2. "Democracy in the specific teaching situation".
3. "The representative democracy"³.

The rest of the booklet gives concrete examples of how students have achieved practical participation structured according to the three headings mentioned above. The examples show how the school can work with democracy and participation at all three levels so that it becomes part of school life and not just something that is given attention on special occasions.

In the section on teaching in the ways of democracy, we give a case example. The case demonstrates how a teacher using the process writing method at the same time introduced the students to a subject that they had not given much consideration before. It turned out that the method made the students interested and they got a better grip of their own understanding of democracy.

With regard to democracy in the concrete teaching situation we differentiate between what happens before the lesson; that which relates to what happens during the lesson; that which happens after the lesson; and finally initiatives around lessons.

As an example of initiatives directed at what happens before lessons, we start out by describing an experiment in which students took an active part in the development and maintenance of the school's choice of optional subjects. An initiative which, among other consequences, meant that students could take optional subjects in other departments of the school or a number of departments cooperated on offering a number of optional subjects together. Then we introduce an example where the students themselves organised the handing in of written assignments. This ensured that the students' frustrations at having to hand in several assignments at the same time and the teachers' frustrations at not receiving assignments were reduced.

We introduce the examples of initiatives in relation to lessons themselves with a case where we present a portfolio as a method to give students influence on their Danish lessons. After reviewing the method, we follow up with a description of events seen from the point of view of the teacher. The next example deals with evaluation as a way of giving students influence and as a planning tool for teachers. It turned out that the students' motivation increased when they saw that their evaluation influenced subsequent teaching. The next example deals with the future workshop as a suitable pedagogical method to give students influence on the way they are taught.

With regard to the physical and social environment, there are many examples of good practice in the Danish VET schools. Much cooperativeness was shown from the schools when the students expressed specific wishes and wanted to participate actively themselves. One school made an effort at enhancing the students' influence by initiating a number of special arrangements such as school camps, excursions, parties, Friday café, auto project, end-of-term Christmas celebrations. Thus, the school became a drop-in-centre that supported teaching and learning. Another school had

³ Statement to the Danish Parliament on the representative democracy, 1999, pages 2 – 3. Homepage of the Danish Ministry of Education.

established a large multi-workshop as a framework for different trades thus demonstrating that learning space is not only limited to more general and IT-subjects. A third school established cooperation between teachers and students about different initiatives such as setting up house rules and having parties. The special thing about this project was that it viewed the process that had been initiated as the end-product.

The representative democracy enjoys a broad framework and favourable conditions at the schools. However, the question remains if it also receives the backing of the students in its traditional form. Many schools have worked with the students' council, because it did not work according to the original intentions. The schools have changed several practices so that this type of democracy becomes more relevant to the students. There are many examples of this. At one school a new meeting structure was introduced, which meant that meetings were held during school time. Another school established inspiration groups with teacher participation to ensure a fast decision-making process. The next example advocates letting students attend courses or conferences; this was very motivating, indeed, it became more prestigious to participate in the work of the students' council. A third example describes how the work of the students' council at a school was organised as an optional subject. Finally, we refer to an example of how the students got their own rooms and equipment; at another school, students were even paid with gift vouchers for the school's student shop.

Finally, we describe an example of a more informal organisation form than, for instance, the students' council, i.e. free class discussions. Here the students met to discuss their specific problems and the way they were taught. The free discussions and the free form meant that many subjects were introduced. Nevertheless, the example also shows that a forum is not necessarily democratic just because everyone is free to speak. A number of communication skills and meeting techniques are necessary.