

The Class Council – Structural and Personnel Conditions for Successful Implementation

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Abstract

The class council is a democratic pedagogical approach at a class level. It serves as a setting for negotiating social life and is being implemented in an increasing number of German schools. This article examines the introduction of the class council concept in three federal states. The findings of the study show that the status of democratic education and children's rights shapes the class council and its implementation. Teachers' prior knowledge and openness to the concept as well as external support play a critical role. Concrete options for decision-makers who want to support the introduction of the class council are broken into three main categories.

Keywords

Class council, participation, democratic school development, democratic professionalization

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1 Introduction

The class council is an approach to promote a more holistic democracy education at the class level. It is meant to serve as a place for negotiating social life (Budde, Kansteiner & Bossen 2016, p. 178). In more and more schools, the class council is becoming an integral part of the school culture (Budde &

Weuster 2018, p. 50) and is also addressed in the context of democratic school development (Giesel, de Haan & Diemer 2007, p. 159–187; Schäfer 2015, p. 20).

The concept of class council has so far been discussed mainly in terms of the content of meetings and questions over the feasibility of “cooperation among equals” (Böhme & Kramer 2001, p. 183) in the school system, which is otherwise characterized by strong hierarchies (de Boer 2006, p. 20; Löttscher & Wyss 2013, p. 100; Budde & Weuster 2018, p. 54).

In spite of this, concrete approaches to nationwide implementation are already being put into practice. Due to the gradual incorporation of the class council into school laws and curriculum of some federal states (e.g., Rhineland-Palatinate, Brandenburg) or the state-wide provision of class council sets for all elementary schools (Saxony), structural and personnel considerations for the class council become increasingly important. This paper investigates these considerations in the contexts of the federal states of Rhineland-Palatinate, Saxony, Berlin and Brandenburg. In qualitative interviews, experts, teachers, youth workers and other non-school organizations from the selected federal states where class councils have been introduced were asked to assess which conditions are most conducive to successful implementation.

Based on theoretical and empirical findings, three areas play a significant role in the process of implementation: the institutionalization of school participation, the openness and prior knowledge of the people involved, as well as internal and external support. The following section summarizes findings from theory and practice for each of the three areas.

2 Conditions for Successful Implementation of Class Councils in Schools

2.1 Institutionalizing school-based participation

“States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.” (Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child)

So far, children’s participatory rights are not to be taken for granted. On the one hand, there is a ratified UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, ac-

ording to which state institutions must make every effort to grant children the right to co-determination (Article 12, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child). However, since the child's right to participation is not a subjective-public right, i.e., it cannot de facto be enforced in court, pupils "continue to be dependent on the political will of the responsible bodies of the schools and youth services" (Merk 2003, p. 100). A study by the German Children's Fund (Deutsches Kinderhilfswerk e.V. 2019, p. 20) summarizes the current situation by stating that there is a lack of legal provisions for the co-determination of children and young people in many areas.

Accordingly, there are major differences in the school laws of federal states as to whether and how participatory instruments such as the class council are integrated. The Berlin School Act, for example, stipulates that only elected student councils may exercise participatory rights (§ 83 para. 2, Berlin School Act). Likewise, a type of class council is only mentioned in the Saxon School Act to the extent that it elects a class representative and deputy at the beginning of the school year (§ 52 para. 1, Saxon School Act).

Another important condition for a successful implementation of the class council was the availability of sufficient time resources, which was the issue most frequently mentioned by the interviewees. Even in regions where class councils are featured prominently, the possibility of implementation is highly dependent on the grade level, type of school, and the federal state. In Berlin-Brandenburg, for example, it is well-documented that class council hours are dependent upon school type and grade and that they tend to decrease in higher grades. As one interviewee commented, "I think that misses the reality a bit, because it's not like people in high school don't have social concerns or that class community isn't important". A dedicated time during which class councils can hold session does not exist at all in Saxony, in contrast to Rhineland-Palatinate, Berlin and Brandenburg.

According to the interviewees, different organizational frameworks also lead to differences in the sense of obligation. More concrete and uniform requirements in school laws, school curriculum, and school concepts, on the other hand, would have the potential to elevate the status of class councils in schools and among the faculty. In this way, administrative tasks in the school, for example, could be better harmonized with the class council.

As a concrete measure to ensure that co-determination rights are being upheld, one non-school actor suggested setting up external complaint offices

at the state level, similar to those for youth services, which can make children and young people's voices heard in participation issues – not only, but also when it comes to the class council.

2.2 Openness and Prior Knowledge

Studies through empirical analysis have demonstrated that student participation at the classroom level depends on the overall open-mindedness of the school as well as the quality of relationships between students and their teachers (Böhme & Kramer 2001). Giesel et al. also found that according to school administrators, a holistic conception of human nature and a democratic mindset in the teaching staff are important for democratic school development (Giesel, de Haan & Diemer 2007, p. 79). An expression of openness is also the willingness to “train oneself on the one hand and to exemplify democratic principles on the other” (ibid.). Flexibility and the ability to adopt other perspectives are also mentioned as important characteristics (ibid.). According to Diedrich, it is also important to continuously address contradictions in goals and content of when dealing with concepts of democratic education (Diedrich 2008, p. 312).

In addition to an openness in principle, the interview study also finds that prior knowledge about the class council (in the form of previous experience and conceptual knowledge) is greatly beneficial since, according to the interviewees, it is ultimately the teachers themselves who bear the responsibility for if and how the class council is implemented regardless of the legal requirements.

According to the interviewees, the goals of the teachers in implementing the class council are shaped significantly by their prior knowledge and experience with the class council. Is it to enable children's rights? Is it to improve the school and class climate? Is it to teach emotional and social competencies? Differences in the teachers' conceptual knowledge and the support structure available to them can lead to very different forms of implementation.

A successful implementation of the class council could therefore consist, among other things, of working out with the teachers the connection of the class council with the promotion of social competences and methods of conflict mediation or violence prevention. Moreover, the non-school actors in-

interviewed consider a theoretical examination of the teacher's own position of power to be indispensable.

Further training on the legal foundations, in particular raising awareness of the right of children and young people to participate in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, could also have a significant effect on the attitudes and openness of those involved. Similarly, knowledge about the possibilities and limitations of participation is also beneficial. All of this can have a positive influence on how teachers view the class council concept, their attitudes toward it, and whether they are interested in introducing the class council to their own school.

These suggestions could be implemented in the context of teacher training, in continuing professional development programs, or through the widespread support of non-school actors in specific school situations.

2.3 Support and exchange

The school system bears great responsibility when it comes to teaching social and democratic skills. Teachers are asked to go above and beyond regarding student participation, which goes above the usual job description and existing their skillsets. In the context of school development, such as the introduction of class councils, teachers must fulfill tasks "that they have not previously located in their professional self-image" (Buhren & Rolff 2012, p. 12). For the development of a democratic school culture, the immediate social interactions within the teaching staff in the form of collegial community and emotional support are particularly important for teachers (Diedrich 2008, p. 226).

Personal exchange between teachers is crucial and is seen by teachers as a significant component of democratic school culture (Student & Portmann 2007, p. 85). School managements play an essential role in most of the supportive measures. According to Buhren and Rolff, they often have the function of "gatekeepers" in school innovations, deciding whether or not an innovation will find its way into the school (Buhren & Rolff, 2012, p. 15). They can have a significant say in whether and how the class council and the associated interchange takes place at the school and they, along with other stakeholders such as teachers, school social workers, and the steering group, are indisputably the most important stakeholders for the class council.

For a “consistent and authentic participation culture [...] there must be an understanding in the colleges about the forms, extent and consequences of participation at their own school” (Giesel, de Haan & Diemer 2007, p. 271). Only in such a way can a common basis for all motivations, values, and orientations be negotiated (ibid.). The establishment of a culture of peer observation of the class council, from both within and outside an individual school, represents a prime opportunity to promote the class council and to support its implementation (Student & Portmann 2007, p. 85; Giesel, de Haan & Diemer 2007, p. 97, 120–123). Here, too, school management has a key role to play.

In addition to the measures already mentioned, the interviewees consider it useful to strive for the broadest possible distribution of responsibilities within the school. The institutionalization of the class council in the school profile and school program increases its importance. The joint organization in steering groups or grade-level teams was also mentioned by the interviewees as a supporting measure. The aim here is to ensure that the implementation of the class council is not solely dependent on the commitment of individuals and that it becomes more binding.

The negotiation of common goals and methods of the class council in the form of a pedagogical consensus within the teaching staff can provide additional support for teachers. According to the interviewees, a shared school-wide conception would positively shape the teachers’ attitudes towards the class council as well as increase their acceptance of the concept. If a special set of materials is used, it should be part of this school concept, if possible, in order to promote it.

According to the interviewees, a support structure should also be established outside the school in order to gain from prior experiences working with class councils and to provide teachers with a knowledge base and network of relevant contacts. According to the interviewees, external actors can make a valuable contribution with know-how and motivational support, whereby support measures for teachers should always show a direct added value.

Consistent support from external actors can also help individual schools to develop and implement the class council in a way that is adapted to the school’s context. Aspects such as the type of school, the social context, and already existing participation structures at the school should be considered.

At the state level, information and exchange events such as the “Team 7” events in Berlin, the organized exchange between democracy model schools in Rhineland-Palatinate, and the annual Democracy Days in all three states play an important role in the exchange of experience and dissemination of the concept.

3 Outlook

The interview study revealed additional areas of school participation where connection to the class council should be further explored. On the one hand, the connections of the class council with other concepts of civic education and personal development emerged as a promising topic for better embedding the class council in the overall school context. This may become more relevant considering the increasing prevalence of full-day schools and associated extracurricular activities in German schools.

Furthermore, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and resultant distance learning, respondents perceived severe limitations to school-based participation. In response to this, the question of how digital tools can be profitably used for concepts of school participation and their implementation should be investigated.

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