

***Systematic Work with Learning Environments:
Training Student Representatives to Improve Learning Conditions in Their Classes***

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Abstract

In Norwegian schools, student councils have a long tradition, and law enforces students to participate in democratic processes. However, it is a challenge to get the student council to work according to purpose, that students are to influence their own learning environment. One challenge is that students often see the student council, as a place where they can report all their wishes, be it a coke machine or pizza for lunch. Another challenge is that it may be difficult for the student representative to get the opinions of all students in their class. To meet these challenges, we have tried out an alternative way of working with student councils in primary and lower secondary schools, applying a systematic approach to working with the learning environment. In this approach, the student representatives ask their class 1) What is important for you to be okay in school? 2) What do you as class do well, what are you satisfied with? 3) Is there something that is difficult for your class and that makes you not feel okay in school? All students in class write answers to the questions that the student representatives bring to the student council, which discuss possible areas the class need to focus on improving, and what they could do. Suggestions from the student council is then brought back to class by the student representative, and they decide on what to work on. In this way, the students actively contribute to improve their own learning environment.

Keywords: Participation, Student Councils, Agency, Self-Efficacy

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Introduction

Student and youth councils and all political committees are natural parts of the Norwegian democratic tradition and legislation. All these institutions are based on elected representation in order to promote and hear different voices before decision-making and action. Ever since 1919, student councils have existed in Norway. Gradually extending and gaining political influence, law enforced student councils in 1964 (Hareide, 1972). Today the Education Act defines how student councils shall be organized (1998, §11-2; § 11-6), and what type of topics student councils can engage in, like physical environment and student participation in work with the school environment etc. (1998, § 9a).

In spite of having student councils established by law, students' actual impact has been thoroughly inquired and investigated, both in 2011 and again in 2019 (NOU 2019:23). One of the issues that has been criticised is that often representatives only speak on behalf of some students in the student groups, and not all, as they are supposed to (NOU 2011:20). In 2019, a new paragraph in the Municipality Act §5-2 e, enforced youth councils as political committee in order to strengthen and lift youngsters' opinions into local governments and authorities. Despite law enforced student and youth councils, their function, students' actual contribution and true school-democracy and participation are still being questioned, discussed and tried improved.

Currently, new curricula are being implemented that emphasize student participation and democracy as interdisciplinary topics (The Norwegian Directorate of Education, 2019). In addition, a new Education Act is proceeded in order make room for alternative ways of organizing student participation and improve practice (NOU 2019:23, §2-4). Student council paragraphs are suggested promoted and gathered from chapter 9 and 11 to chapter 2 titled: "Participation, school-democracy and school rules". If the suggested Education Act is decided on, the word "council" will be replaced with "student", and the word "shall" will be used to exemplify and emphasise all important issues students ARE to be truly involved in. In addition, the new Education Act will give room for optional and more efficient ways of organizing and gaining true participation compared to traditional student council, and the approach presented here is one way of organising student democracy.

The current study is a development from an ongoing action research project in the southern region of Norway, where a fivestep approach to achieve mastery and motivation is applied. The method promotes everyone's opinion about what is important, what their success factors are and what obstacles they may have, for then to find solutions to possible obstacles. Seeing positive effects of systematically motivating and strengthening groups of students together, the five-step-method was adapted in one student council autumn 2019 for a pilot study focusing on developing a better learning environment for all. According to a national survey conducted two years ago, youngsters' struggle psychologically (Bakken, 2018). It is therefore of outmost importance for them to have a good learning environment at school, and this is something that student representatives and student councils work with.

Our research question is as follows: *How can schools facilitate for student representatives to make the classes they represent actively engage in improving their*

own learning environment? To answer this question, we have investigated what experiences and discussions the five-step approach implemented in the student councils led to, and students' evaluations of how this approach worked. In the following, the theoretical foundation for the approach will be presented, as well as details of the intervention, results, and finally a discussion of the findings and some final remarks on how this study contributes to the field.

Theoretical foundation

The approach applied in the current study builds on different theoretical aspects. First and foremost, the five-step method adjusted here builds on Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory (2000), claiming that in order to be motivated, the basic needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness must be met. The feelings of autonomy and competence are also related to the concepts of agency and self-efficacy (see figure 1).

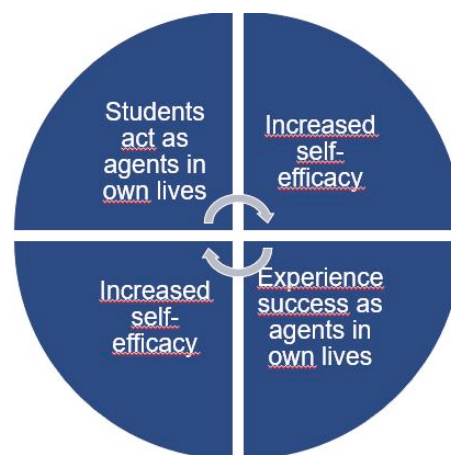


Figure 1. Agency and self-efficacy (Based on Bandura, 1997 and 2006)

When students act as agents in their own lives, they are likely to experience an increased belief in their own abilities to master, or their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; 2006). With increased self-efficacy, the students are more likely to experience success as agents in their own lives. This again may lead to increased self-efficacy, making it more likely that the students dare take responsibility for new tasks, and act as agents in their own lives.

Second, the method builds on Antonovsky's healthpromoting theory (2012), saying that in order to deal with stress and develop resilience, it is important for individuals to experience a sense of coherence. This is achieved through comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness, meaning that individuals understand situations, they believe that they have resources to deal with the situation, and they see the value of their own contributions. This theory also relates to Bandura's theory of self-efficacy (1997; 2006), that if one believes in one's own resources, the expectancy to master something is increased, which again makes it more likely that one succeeds. This is related to the concept of manageability in Antonovsky's theory.

The third theory which is basis for the adjustment of the method to a student council context, is the theory of deliberative democracy, or consensus democracy (Baldersheim & Rose, 2014). In a deliberative democracy, meaning is created and

solutions are found through collective processes. However, underneath this practice is an assumption that there is consensus in the group about what is best for the community, and this is not always the case. In Habermas' discourse theory, it is emphasised that it is important to accept that different opinions exist about what is best for the collective (1984; 1987; 1996). This is an important aspect to include when student representatives are to apply the fivestep approach in their classes.

Methodology

This study investigates how schools can facilitate for successful student participation and student democracy by examining a fivestep approach applied as a form of deliberative democracy. The aim of the study is to find out whether this type of approach may help students actively engage in making a better learning environment. In order to find some answers to this, we report some of the reflections from the students and the student representatives. In addition, both student representatives and all students in the classes filled in assessment forms, which we present here. First, the intervention will be described, then the measuring instrument or the assessment form, then the sample, and finally there will be some ethical considerations regarding the study.

Intervention

The intervention consisted of three meetings in the student council, and in addition, the student representatives were given tasks to fulfill between the meetings. The tasks the student representatives were given were based on the fivestep method as illustrated in figure 2 below.

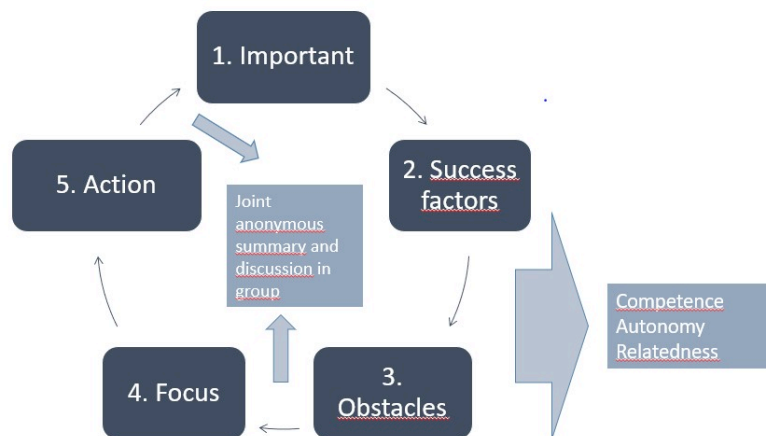


Figure 2. The fivestep approach to working with student participation

In the first student council meeting, the student representatives were presented with this method, and they carried out the first three steps to become acquainted with the method. They answered the following three questions anonymously, writing on empty papers: 1) What is important for you to be okay in school?, 2) What are you as a group good at, and what are you satisfied with in school? and 3) Is something difficult for you as a group, something that makes you not feel okay in school? The answers were collected, and it was demonstrated how to make a summary of the notes. The

student representatives were given instructions to ask their classes to write individual answers to the same three questions, and then make a summary of this for the next student council.

In the second student council meeting, the student representatives gave summaries of their classes' responses. Following this, the student council discussed what they thought their group needed to focus on improving, and what specifically they could do. The student representatives were instructed to return to their classes and give them the same summaries that they presented in the student council, and carry out the same type of discussion, where they discuss what they need to focus on and what they could do to manage this. If the class had little suggestions, the student representative could refer to examples discussed in the student council, and come up with suggestions to choose between.

In the third student council meeting, the student representatives reported what their classes had decided to focus on, and they gave an assessment of how well they felt the class had followed up on this. Different alternative continuations of this type of student council work were suggested.

Measuring instrument

The student representatives filled in an assessment form with the following questions: 1) Has the fivestep approach helped you carry out student council work (alternatives: Yes, no, I do not know)? 2) Do you as student representative find the method easy to apply (alternatives: yes, partly, no)? 3) Has the method made it easier for you to understand what your class is concerned with (alternatives: yes, no, I do not know)? 4) Do you think that your class found good focus areas and plans to carry out something (alternatives; yes, no, I do not know)? If yes, explain if you can. 5) Give examples of what your class has chosen to focus on and has worked with. 6) How do you think your class followed up the plan? And 7) How satisfied have you been with the fivestep approach (alternatives: very dissatisfied, dissatisfied, satisfied, very satisfied, I do not know). In addition to filling in this form, the student representatives were asked during the final student council about what they felt about using this method as student representatives.

The rest of the students in the classes filled in another assessment form with the following questions: 1) Do you think the fivestep approach has helped you as a group to feel better in school (alternatives: yes, no, I do not know). If yes, explain if you can. 2) Give examples of something you have focused on. 3) Has the class managed to follow their own plan (alternatives: yes, partly, no)? 4) How satisfied have you been with the fivestep method the student council have applied (alternatives: very dissatisfied, dissatisfied, satisfied, very satisfied, I do not know).

Sample

All student representatives from 8th, 9th and 10th grade in a lower secondary school participated in the student council when the approach was applied. The analysis of the themes in the student reflections is based on the students' summaries of the answers they received from their classes. There were three groups of 8th grade students, two groups of 9th grade students and two groups of 10th grade students. Each group had

two student representatives that participated in the student councils, resulting in 14 student representatives in total. Out of these, we only have assessment forms from the 8 student representatives in the 9th and 10th grade due to circumstances we could not control. Data from classes is therefore limited to 9th and 10th grade, resulting in a sample of 73 students in total.

Ethical considerations

Everything students wrote was completely anonymous, and the student representatives were informed that it was voluntary to contribute to research. They were also instructed to give their classes the same information, and tell their peers that they could write «Not for research» if they did not want to participate in the study. Also on the assessment forms, the students were to cross out whether it was okay that their reflections were used for research and teaching purposes. As everything that was collected was anonymous the study did not need to be reported to the national centre for research data.

There are some challenges with the validity and the reliability of this study, whether we can trust and generalise the findings here (Jacobsen, 2005). The fivestep method was only applied once in the groups, and the students might not have remembered much of the method when they answered the assessment forms, as they were filled out some time after the intervention. The fivestep method was introduced to them by their newly and easy-trained student representatives. For this reason, they may have found it hard to define whether the method had worked satisfactorily. This is also a very limited study as only one student council and one school has been involved. It is therefore difficult to generalise based on the findings. Still, the results and analyses in this study give an indication that this is an approach worth exploring.

Results

To answer the question of how to facilitate for students engaging in creating a good learning environment, we have analysed what themes occur in the student reflections: What is important for them, what are they good at and what do they experience as difficult. In addition, we include examples of what they decided to focus on and what specifically they decided to do. Following this, we will present the students' assessments of the method.

Typical issues in student reflections

When answering the question of what was important for them to be okay in school, many students answered friends, respect, and to be kind and include others. They were concerned with having a good learning environment without bullying. Much of this was mirrored in the answers to question two dealing with success factors, meaning what they were good at already and what they were satisfied with. They reported that they were good at including, being kind and supporting each other. In addition, one of the student representatives reported that they were good at discussing. On the third question, dealing with obstacles, meaning what may be difficult or prevent them from being okay, they typically answered conflicts and drama between classmates. They also mentioned that noise in class made it difficult to concentrate

and work well. One of the student representatives reported that most students in the class found it difficult to raise their hand.

When discussing possible focus areas, three themes occurred: 1) Everyone has friends or is included, 2) Less disruption or noise in class and 3) Make it easier to raise hands. The first theme also included showing respect, being kind and avoiding conflicts and drama. When discussing what to do to make a change, the students suggested that they could include others by smiling and saying «hi» to others. They could avoid bullying each other and invite each other to conversations or gatherings of different types. When it comes to the second focus area, they suggested that everyone needed to take responsibility to be quiet, and that they could think before they spoke, and speak one at the time. In order to make a safe atmosphere to raise hands in, they suggested that they could avoid giving comments to those who spoke in class. These were the focus areas and actions the different classes decided on as well.

Results of assessments

When the student representatives were asked how it was to work in this way in the student council, they mentioned particularly that they profited from hearing what their classmates found important to bring before the council. They also underlined the advantage of getting to know what their classmates regarded as success factors in their classes. Finally, they emphasised how the method resulted in valuable discussions both in their own classes but also in the council: “Good with discussions, both in class and here”.

The student representative’s responses on the assessment form are presented in table 1 below. As the number of respondents is very low, the results are presented as numbers and not percentages.

Table 1: Assessment from student representatives grade 9 and 10, N = 8.

Question	Yes	Partly (Q2)	No	I do not know (Q1, 3, 4)
Has the fivestep method helped you carry out student council work?	3	-	2	3
Do you as student council representative find the method easy to apply?	2	5	0	-
Has the method made it easier for you to understand what your class is concerned with?	4	-	2	2
Do you think that the class has managed to choose good focus areas and action plans?	3	-	1	3

From the assessment, we see that the student representatives have different perceptions of how the method has worked. Three report that it has helped them carry out the student council work, two say it has not helped, and three do not know. The student representatives show more agreement on the second question, on whether they found the method easy to apply. Two answered «yes» and five answered «partly». Half of the student representatives answers positively to the question of whether the method has made it easier for them to understand what their class is concerned with,

whereas two answered «no» and two «I do not know». To the final question here of whether their class managed to choose good focus areas and action plans, three answered «yes», 1 answered «no», and 4 either did not know or did not answer. Out of the 8 student representatives, 6 were satisfied with the fivestep method, only 1 was very dissatisfied, and 1 did not know.

The assessments from the students in the classes reveal that many students were uncertain about how this method worked for them. The results are presented in percentages in table 2 below.

Table 2: Student assessment of the fivestep method applied in classes, N = 73

Question 1 and 2	Yes	Partly (Q2)	No	I do not know (Q1)	No answer
Do you think that the fivestep method has helped you as class to be more okay at school?	10%	-	26%	51%	14%
Has the class managed to follow their own plans?	14%	53%	19%	-	15%

Note. On questions 2 and 3, two students circled two options. In these cases both answers are included.

Only 10% answered «yes» to the question of whether the fivestep method helped them as class to be more okay at school, whereas 26% answered «no» and 65% either answered «I do not know» or did not answer at all. When answering the second question of whether they managed to follow their own plans, more students had a positive response as 14% answered «yes», 53% answered «partly», and only 19% said «no». Fifteen percent did not answer. To the question of how satisfied they were with the method, 7% answered that they were «very dissatisfied», 1% answered «dissatisfied», 28% answered «satisfied» and 1% «very satisfied». More than half of the students, as much as 63% either answered «I do not know», or gave no answer at all.

Discussion

This study has investigated how a fivestep method applied by student representatives may facilitate for student participation and how students may engage in making a good learning environment. Some of the advantages of using this type of method is that it gives everyone opportunity and time to express their inner thoughts anonymously and silently, as everything is written down on an unnamed sheet of paper. Many students find it is easier to be both honest and bold under these circumstances. Not having to fear reactions or pointed fingers, delicate matters concerning many students appear. Discussion topics not often risen before, tends to be revealed. As the student representatives reported, they gained insight into what their peers were concerned with. This is something that supports their roles as student representatives, and make it easier for them to be agents that believe that they can succeed with making a change, and actually make a change (Bandura, 1997; 2006).

The results from the assessments are somewhat vague, as many of the students in the classes were uncertain about how they felt about this method. This may be due to a

very short and limited intervention. They may have had problems remembering the method. The student representatives also received little training and time to carry out the method. However, 6 out of 8 student representatives were satisfied with the method despite of limiting circumstances. Sixty-seven percent of the students in 9th and 10th grade reported that they managed or partly managed to follow their plans, regardless of the short intervention. Following plans usually means doing something different or doing something in a different and often better manner. Succeeding with following plans also meets the basic needs of competence and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which may result in increased self-efficacy and agency (Bandura, 1997; 2006). Starting off this case study, we hoped to improve decision-making, produce better practice and initiate action. Since many students actually did change their practice, this is an indication that applying the fivestep method through student councils made a change.

Carrying out a class project such as this may also meet the need for relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The class decide on a joint focus and makes a plan they are to follow up as a group. The fact that they do this together also makes it more likely that the individual students feel a success, as they may get encouragement and trust from each other. They observe others following the plan, and feel that they succeed as a class (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015; Schunk & Meece, 2006; Bandura, 1997). This is one of the advantages of carrying out the fivestep method through student councils. With a focus on improving the learning environment, everyone can share a possible success.

A central aspect of applying the fivestep method through student councils is that the student representatives are empowered to take charge of a process and lead their peers. It also empowers the students in class. An empowerment process is about making individuals more conscious about recognising and becoming conscious about one's own situation. It is also about understanding how to affect one's surroundings (Tveiten, 2017) which is one of the aims of applying the fivestep method. There is however a risk in starting this type of process if the student representative does not manage to take responsibility, if there are serious conflicts in the class or if the class does not reach a consensus. These are examples of risks pointed out in deliberative democracies by Habermas (84; 87; 96). How can a quite inexperienced and fresh student representative handle this? Perhaps it is not up to the student representatives to handle all these types of challenges alone.

Even though we want to empower students to take responsibility of their own learning environment, adults sometimes need to guide and support them in order to make the empowerment process successful. When applying this approach in this pilot study, the student representatives were left with all the reflections from their peers on their own. This practice could perhaps be changed. An alternative would be that the reflections are handed over to their teacher, who brings the reflections to the adult in charge of the student council. At the next student council meeting, the adult in charge gives the class reflections to the representatives, who are given time to make summaries and present in the meeting. Then the adult could be more attentive to possible challenges in the reflections, and go through the reflections before handing them out. Another important aspect here is that the students cannot solve all challenges themselves. It is important that the adult following up the student council helps the student representatives sort the reflections. Together they could decide what should be

brought to the schools leaders, what should be brought to the teachers, and what should be dealt with by the students themselves.

Conclusion

This pilot study has illustrated how a systematic approach may be applied to make students actively engaged in improving their own learning environment. Central in this approach is identifying what is important, success factors and obstacles, for then to discuss what the class needs to focus on and how to do it. The study exemplifies how a deliberative democracy may be implemented in a school context. The findings show that the majority of the student representatives were satisfied with applying the method. This tells us that this new way of doing student representative work must have made sense and meaning to them.

To conclude, the five-step method described here may be a useful tool for student representatives to handle their role and make a difference. They get insight into what their peers are concerned with. In addition, they are supported through the process of making a change by attending student council meetings where an adult leads them through the process, and discuss possible challenges along the way. As the majority of the students in the classes reported that they had followed their plans, at least partly, we may also conclude that by applying this approach, the student representatives made their peers actively engaged in improving their own learning environment. Still, this is only a limited pilot study, and further investigation is needed to explore the potential of this approach to facilitate for participation and student democracy.

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