

Class Council Observation Report

by

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Class councils are a privileged moment for the expression of ideas, decision-making and debate, thus institutionalising children's participation in school and classroom life and introducing them to democratic practices from an early age. It is a time when pupils are free to express their ideas, interests and problems, while submitting them to discussion and collective decision-making. The stakes are high here, since it is a question of putting into practice the exercise of citizenship according to the ideal of personal and collective emancipation through the training of future citizens of a democratic society.

The council meets once a week in each class on a specific day and time known to the pupils, which makes it possible to ritualise this moment. The pupils meet in a circle - with the teacher taking a seat among them - to facilitate communication. Roles are assigned: the 'chairperson' opens the council by reminding them of the rules that he/she will make sure are effective during the council (listening and respecting the words of others, being kind, asking for the floor by raising the hand, giving priority to those who speak less, not explicitly mentioning the names of classmates concerned by the expression of a personal problem, etc.). He/she ensures that the agenda established during the week is respected (the pupils wishing to speak have taken care to register beforehand on a board hung on the wall of the classroom) and ensures that each pupil can express him/herself, clarify his/her thoughts and be heard so as to arrive at constructive thoughts and decisions. Finally, he/she may organise a vote in the context of a proposal or a search for a solution to a problem raised by one or more pupils. The 'secretary' notes down the decisions taken during the council in order to make them explicit verbally and easily memorable for all. The "time keeper" can set a maximum time limit for speaking; he/she also ensures that the time limit of the session (1 hour maximum) is respected. Other roles can be defined and distributed in order to facilitate the smooth running of the council, such as the noise monitor, whose function is to ensure a reasonable noise level.

In practice, the council is a democratic space where all opinions are considered valid and legitimate. Continuous and repeated participation in councils should enable children to learn to construct a constructive and open mind to discussion and disagreement while accepting, without feeling unfair or resentful, that the outcome of a vote may not go in the direction they personally want. This experience brings out particularly interesting discussions that can be observed at all age levels. For example, during the council meeting of 30 September 2022 in the CM2/6 class, a pupil mentioned what she considered to be *her problem*: namely that some of her classmates sometimes reserved seats so that their friends who were still absent could sit next to them when they arrived. She considers this unfair because it means that other students already in the classroom cannot sit where they want to. A discussion followed in which the pupils implicitly concerned spoke up and explained the gesture: "It's normal, you have the right to want to be with your friends". Other pupils participate fully in the discussion by giving their opinion: *the school material belongs to nobody in particular but to everybody* ("[we have to] share with everybody, not only one person"); *the classroom is not a restaurant where one can afford to reserve a table, it is a common space and the material is collective*; "it's normal, we can't always do what we want,

sometimes we want to be next to our friends but we are not". The other pupils who do not participate directly in the discussion by asking to speak approve or disapprove by a predetermined hand sign of the opinion that their classmates express (thumb down in case of disagreement, hand movement from front to back to support the opinion expressed). Finally, a pupil takes the floor and proposes to set up a system of "jokers" which would allow each pupil to reserve the place of a fellow pupil a certain number of times (to be defined) during the year. A discussion on this subject followed, then a vote: after debates, proposals and expression of opinions and disagreements, it is the prohibition of the possibility of reserving the place of one's absent classmate that is finally voted, thus creating a new rule for class life.

In addition to the 'debates and discussions' dimension of the councils, they can also be an opportunity for children to express personal interests, make suggestions or simply express their gratitude to someone or something. In the CP/CE1 council of 7 October 2022, the pupils thus began the session with thanks that could only bring a smile to anyone who was present at the exchanges: 'thank you to ... for playing with me at recess', 'thank you to the school and thank you for taking care of everyone', 'thank you to the glue for sticking well'. The teacher also, after having asked for the floor by raising her hand and waiting to receive the talking stick, expresses herself by voluntarily insisting on the values and behaviours that she wishes to encourage in the classroom: "thank you to the CE1 who go to help the others when they have finished their work, that helps me and that helps the others. During this same council, the pupils also showed a certain maturity by being able to express personal problems and to try to solve them collectively. One pupil, after having mentioned the problematic attitude of another pupil who was tripping him, listened attentively to the reaction of other pupils who suggested solutions to his problem: *he should be told not to do it before he does it; if he does it, he should immediately go and see an adult to warn him and make sure that it does not happen again.*

The councils thus constitute a real experience of democratic life and thus prepare for citizenship and living together. Pupils learn to discuss, to identify problems and thus to clarify their own thoughts in order to be able to share them and discuss them collectively with a view to reaching constructive solutions, to take collective decisions while recognising and respecting the opinions of others. Everyone can participate, speak up, have their say, propose ideas and make them happen. The teacher has the role of guarantor of the framework established for the councils, she sets an example by explaining how to act according to the different roles assigned. She encourages students to participate, to explain their own feelings and to clarify their thoughts. She reminds them of the rules when they are not followed. However, her role is more of an accompaniment to the process than a leader: she sits in the middle of the students and intervenes as little as possible in order to let them participate autonomously and responsibly.

Two years ago, for example, pupils complaining about the meals provided for lunch voted to allow them to eat at McDonald's every lunchtime. In this case, the adults - starting with the teacher - had to regain control over the final decision by refusing the outcome of the vote. However, this refusal had to be supported by arguments and explanations from the adults: in a democracy, the argument of authority cannot be based solely on the status of the person ordering or making a decision without questioning the value and content of that decision. It was therefore necessary to be inventive and cautious so that the children understood that this decision had no other motivation than concern for their own interests. This event gave rise to a series of class activities and collective reflections on the notions of balanced diet and health.

The councils are thus real democratic tools for schools, which make it possible to achieve and perfect the link between children's civic and social skills on a daily basis. For the practitioners of this pedagogical tool, the targeted capacities are notably autonomy, critical thinking and

initiative, mutual respect, cooperation and solidarity, living together as well as personal and collective commitment in ordinary life. The urgency and importance of these capacities lies in the fact that these values and social norms are at the root of all democratic life. In societies claiming and promoting such a way of life, it is urgent to take into account the need to form autonomous and enlightened citizens, active and engaged in their own life as well as in the collective life, both being always linked.

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