

## **Critiquing the use of children's voice as a means of forging the community in a Polish democratic school**

### **Abstract:**

The paper examines school meetings held in a small democratic school in Poland in order to explore how school communities are formed. Drawing on Foucault's concept of power, the authors analyse fieldnotes and interview excerpts to reveal how voice and scripted bodily expressions accompanying verbal utterances are privileged in these school meetings to forge a community. Rather than being merely a space where students can act as empowered participants in democratic school governance, the school meetings are also argued to reduce the modalities of participation to voice and embodied forms of action and attention. Voiced participation is thereby instrumentalised to construct a democratic community with its dynamics of inclusions and exclusions. The paper concludes by pointing to reflexive engagements with utilising voice in democratic communities.

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### **Introduction**

Embodying self-government, school meetings have been an indispensable feature of progressive schools (Fielding 2005; Gribble 1998) and are considered as 'an archetypal participatory democratic practice' (Fielding 2013, 125). According to A.S. Neill (2006, 39), 'the school that has no self-government should not be called a progressive school. It is a compromise school'. As a space for collective decision-making on school life, school meetings are considered instrumental in their democratic governance (Beane and Apple 1999; Hope 2019; Hannam 2020). In Poland, parent-initiated educational collectives – termed as democratic or free schools – have recently mushroomed offering alternative avenues for compulsory schooling (Kłosińska 2019). In these schools' self-governing participatory meetings, children are included and they are

encouraged and supported to express their views, share ideas, evaluate the arrangements in place and participate in collective decision-making.

School meetings are frequently analysed as a mechanism through which schools become self-governing democratic communities. Thereby, attention is paid to their specific functions, organisation, power relations and responsibilities assigned to participants and the dynamics of member interactions (Hecht 2012; Neill Readhead 2006; Hope 2019; Fielding 2005; Rietmulder 2019). School meetings receive frequent criticism due to failing to accommodate children's varying competencies and promoting the development of their decision-making skills (Hope 2019). Other critiques highlight the danger of adults influencing on collective decisions with children through their power and charisma (Hecht 2012). Even in a democratic Sudbury school which is characterised as having the most egalitarian meeting spaces of free expression and decision-making, age- and gender-based hierarchies are still reproduced to some extent (Wilson 2015). Democratic meetings are not exempt of having power relations that often play out in hidden or unexpected ways, such as in Thonberg's (2010) study where student-control discourse served as an instrument for mediating children's participation. Contributing to these critical explorations, our study focuses on children's 'voice' in democratic school meetings, thus expanding the scholarship both on democratic schools (therein school meetings) and on children's 'voice.'

The importance of children's 'voice,' their (independent) 'agency' and the various ways in which voice/agency is identified as a vehicle enabling children's participation are central questions in studies on children's everyday life, including in schools. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the emergence of 'new' childhood studies have foregrounded children's voice in research and institutional life and propagated the view of children as capable

and independent agents who hold their own views on issues affecting them. A rich body of scholarship (too ample to be reviewed here) attests to children's agentic nature and participatory competencies, and promoting the importance of hearing children's 'voice' in ensuring their participatory rights. We uphold the importance of creating spaces for and hearing children's voices but are concerned that children's participation and voice can easily turn into mantra-like catchwords and empty performances instead of their inclusion in participatory decision-making. We are also concerned that children's voice might become instrumentalised when it is turned into a tool serving other purposes, for example, when not voicing an opinion leads to exclusion. With voice becoming a tool, emotions driving children to voice their views and participate in democratic decision-making may also become instrumentalised (Kraftl 2013). In this paper, we aim to show how voice (and remaining silent as an expression of voice), along with emotions and embodied ways of being attached to it, can become instrumentalised for purposes of building a seemingly egalitarian community or towards achieving some predefined instead of collectively deliberated goals.

Conceptually, this analysis is grounded in Foucault's understanding of power as 'a productive network that runs through the whole social body' and 'produces things, ... induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse' (Foucault 1980, 119). Power is relational, and its exercise does not consist in acting directly on others but involves 'an action upon an action' (Foucault 1983, 220). It is through such operations of power that the subject is regulated. When viewed as a product of power relations, 'voice' is a complex, fluid and indeterminate entity. Its appearance and its forms are premised on available discourses and practices.. In any setting a variety of possibly incongruent discourses operate to modify action and modulate dominant discourses with their purposes and intentions. In this paper, we focus on dominant school-based

discourses on community, participation, democratic decision-making and children's voice, including their silence.

## **Methodology**

In 2003, a new educational development took place in Poland as four so-called democratic or free schools opened. Their establishment was partly a response to the changes following the fall of the Iron Curtain and attempts to democratise once-socialist societies. Across the region, education reforms were launched to model the schooling systems upon the neoliberal democratic 'Western' patterns while Cold War stereotypes and hierarchies persisted (Silova et al. 2017). Perry examined 220 policy documents and research reports addressing these transformations, to conclude that they presented the West as 'tolerant, efficient, active, developed, organized, and democratic, and the East as intolerant, corrupt, passive, underdeveloped, chaotic, and undemocratic' (2009, 177). In Poland, democratisation efforts initially included the decentralisation of education, increased school autonomy and more social control over schooling (e.g. through authorising non-state entities to found educational institutions, introducing greater local curricular flexibility and instituting school councils of teachers, students and parents). However, a mere few years later these changes were halted under the impact of neoliberalism and neoconservatism, which prompted the privatisation of schools, austerity, accountability through high-stake testing and the dissemination of the conservative nationalist ideology through curricula (Cervinkova and Rudnicki 2019). Both in scholarly research and in public discourse schools were criticised as settings that worked to exacerbate inequalities, disrespect children's rights and deprive teachers and parents of agency, rather than providing education relevant to

students' needs and supporting their development (Mendel and Wiatr 2018; Sadura 2017; Wagner 2018; Zamojski 2018).

Dissatisfaction with mainstream education, coupled with an increased impact of modern parenting ideologies and the legislative provisions for pursuing mandatory education through home-schooling, fuelled the emergence of democratic schools (Wiatr 2020). Viewed by their founders as a corrective to conventional schools, which they consider dysfunctional beyond repair, these parent-established collective educational settings are not formally accredited as schools and do not receive state funding. Their students are registered in regular schools as receiving out-of-school education and take annual examinations to confirm the achievement of learning outcomes stipulated in the national curriculum. Democratic schools are entirely fee-based and implement arrangements that are profoundly alternative to mainstream educational models. They attract middle-class parents who seek settings that respect children, listen to their voices and encourage the development of their personalities, talents and abilities, instead of focusing on the narrowly conceived school achievement. Unlike typical educational institutions in Poland, democratic schools adopt progressivist and child-centred approaches to education with their tenets of readiness, choice, needs, play and discovery (Burman 2017, 252). They endorse the principles and values of democratic education as formulated by the European Democratic Education Community, such as students' right to make choices concerning their own lives in school (therein education) and to participate in decision-making on school matters (EUDEC n.d.), which are typically absent from mainstream schools. Rather than building on the progressivist tradition in Polish education (Author's reference), they position themselves as espousing a new approach to child-adult relationships and schooling. This specifically includes prioritising children's well-being and the development of their social competencies over

academic skills, taking children's interests as the starting point in designing educational processes, involving children in decision-making and developing respectful child-adult relationships (Author's reference). In line with the principles of relational pedagogy (Bingham and Sidorkin 2004), the schools' founders and leaders foreground developing close and authentic interpersonal relationships and community building as the schools' primary objectives. Heavily influenced by psy-disciplines (Rose 1996; Petersen and Millei 2016), they highlight the salience of personal development and frequently turn to therapeutic methods. While the staff and parents themselves frequently engage in psychotherapy and supervision, techniques embedded in nonviolent communication, Gestalt therapy and mindfulness approaches are commonly used in the everyday educational practice with children. As we will demonstrate, these techniques are clearly visible in school meetings. Their use is also a factor that sets democratic schools apart from more conventional educational institutions where they are marginally present.

This paper is part of a larger study on democratic schools conducted in 2015–2019, and draws on the material collected by the first author in one of such settings, named the Bright School here.<sup>1</sup> Located centrally in a large Polish city, it opened in 2014 and initially admitted children who had attended a preschool managed by its founder and leader, Dorota. The number of students, aged 5 to 12, fluctuated between 9 and 14 throughout the research period. The number and composition of the staff were also changing. There were at least two full-time employees at any point in time (four individuals in this role in total throughout the fieldwork). Having background in teacher education, psychology, philosophy or social work and prior experience in working with children and the youth, they managed the core educational activities. Additionally, the total of eight part-time educators (working for shorter or longer stints throughout the fieldwork), some of whom were parents, provided additional activities, such as

physics, biology, guitar, yoga, foreign languages, and arts and crafts. All these adults were driven by an aspiration to contribute to educational and social change.

Access to the school was first negotiated with the leader and later outlined to the staff, parents and children. While the parents consented for their children to participate as required by the law, the researcher also sought the children's direct consent, explaining to them why she was visiting their school and assuring them of their right not to participate (Harcourt and Conroy 2011). Throughout the fieldwork, the researcher made sure to keep the children comfortable about her presence and to respond to any signals of their preference not to be watched. The researcher visited the school approximately seventy times, with visits typically lasting between three and five hours. Documented in detailed fieldnotes, observations were carried out in a variety of everyday situations, including lessons, meetings, meals, exams and free time activities, as well as during excursions and overnight camps. Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted with five staff members and eight parents and short conversations with five children.

Our argument is primarily based on the fieldnotes from 43 school meetings and meetings-related excerpts from transcribed interviews with the staff and the children. Since neither video- nor audio-recording of the meetings was allowed, thick description was used to register the events. Notes were usually taken during the meetings; however, when the topics discussed were particularly sensitive or contentious, writing was delayed until the end of the meeting. The fieldnotes and interview excerpts were organised for themes, such as the topics and circumstances of convening the meetings, the participants' behaviour and roles in the meetings, and the meanings ascribed to the meetings. Selected passages were subsequently analysed, focusing on the techniques of power and ways of using and regulating children's voice.

In the next section, we describe how school meetings served as a tool for community building, one of the most important ideals of this democratic school. School meetings are examined since they provided a forum where children's voices were most explicitly and actively sought and facilitated. Subsequently, we explore how children's voices became an avenue for community building, how some techniques were utilised for voicing the child, i.e. actively eliciting children's ideas and feelings, and how these techniques established participation forms and produced the community.

### **Community building through school meetings**

'We are here not only to learn, but also to be together, to take care of this space. We are a community that shares tasks, duties, stays together in various everyday situations,' a staff member stated. Another reminded the children that 'in this school, besides studying Polish, math and biology, you are supposed to learn camaraderie and collaboration' (fieldnotes, FN, Feb 2016). The mother of a prospective student was informed by the leader that the major focus was on upbringing and that a real community was being formed there. The community that was being built here was imagined as a democratic and collaborative forum, an inclusive space.

'Community' featured prominently in the Bright School's discourse, and school meetings were deemed, as the leader put it, the 'primary tool' for forging it. School meetings hence were referred to as 'communities,' the same term as that denoting the school community.<sup>2</sup> The Bright School used these gatherings as a space to address disparate issues pertinent to the community, from the everyday running of the school, to establishing rules, to solving problems. Called whenever needed, their frequency fluctuated from several times a day to once every few weeks.

School meetings were expected to be taken seriously. The adults explicitly highlighted their importance although attendance was optional. Being late, skipping meetings and/or not coming to school when they were scheduled were taken as an indication of breaking agreed-on arrangements and not caring about the community. Children only rarely failed to attend the meetings. Permission from the entire group was usually needed for a child to leave a meeting when in progress or to join back having first left it without consent. The children were expected not only to be present at the meetings but also to be fully engaged and focused. The point of the meetings was 'not to be attractive, but for us to work well' (FN, Dec 2016), as an adult put it. Accordingly, rules were established for the participants' conduct, from the sitting arrangement (typically in a circle on the floor), to the order and manner of speaking (taking turns, without shouting), to the expected attitude (refraining from playing and from producing unnecessary sounds). Instances of the children's incorrect behaviour were commented on by the adults, such as when a child was ignoring the others or acting against the community and its rules. In such situations, an adult would stop the meeting and refuse to start it until the children composed themselves. Occasionally, an adult would respond to inappropriate conduct in a much firmer or even forceful way, such as hoisting a child and carrying them out of the room. The requirement of deep involvement was captured in the phrase that 'one's mind should be on the meeting rather than on oneself,' which posited the children as able to set aside their particular interests, boredom or bodily discomfort in attending to the collective good.

The meetings also served as a space for handling matters that potentially threatened the community's cohesion. Issues of interpersonal relationships were always prioritised in the meetings, including conflicts and tensions both among the children and between the children and the adults, which were the major theme of 26 out of the 43 meetings observed. As 10-year-old

Kamil explained in an interview, 'when someone does something to someone else, a meeting is called.' The rationale behind the meetings was to ensure that nobody was left without support: 'if someone can't cope on their own, they ask others for help' (FN, Dec 12, 2016), as Dorota (staff member, SM) emphasised. Thus, the collective was created by the de-individualising of problems, wherein individuals did not have to bear the burden of the issues alone, but everyone was involved in developing solutions beneficial for the entire community.

Settling conflicts seemed to aim at maintaining the school order and creating a harmonious community with collectively established rules. The children were explicitly taught that conflicts were properly handled by calmly verbalising the issues and hurts, rather than by physically fighting or quarrelling. On one occasion, Gosia (SM) stopped the children having a row and said that there would be no quarrelling in a meeting. When a child objected, claiming that 'the point of a meeting is to quarrel,' she responded firmly: 'No, the point is for everyone to say what the matter is' (FN, May 2017). 'Saying' instead of 'quarrelling' evokes an image of a community where members have opportunities for articulating their issues and being listened to. In this way, teachers carefully managed children's voices and tamed emotions to ensure the running of the meetings.

Voicing the children, listening to their concerns, authorising and heeding the children's objections to the adults' deeds and proposals helped constitute the desired community as an egalitarian space. Such an empowerment of the children as holders of rights and voice was also inscribed in the general perception of the meetings, as exemplified by a comment 8-year-old Magda made in an interview: 'we have meetings that make it so that it is not an adult who decides, but we all talk and make rules and keep these rules. If someone doesn't like something, they can call a meeting and change the rule.' The children were thus seen as thoughtful subjects

capable of contributing to the common good. They were often asked to offer suggestions on the curriculum and pedagogy, and the staff appreciated their ability to produce original ideas to enhance the school's operation.

Besides creating a democratic, more equal and cohesive community, children voicing opinions and volunteering ideas also worked as a complex technique of power. On the one hand, emancipatory rights discourse positioned the children as legitimate contributors to the school's everyday life whose competence was valued and whose voices were respected (as typical of democratic schools). On the other hand, the children were made responsible for their own and the entire community's wellbeing. To be accepted as a proper school community members, the children had to be willingly and actively engage in decision-making and conflict-solving, and this involvement was mostly sought by urging them to voice their thoughts and feelings and to offer solutions. The most extreme appearance of this expectation occurred in a fairly heated exchange in one meeting, both the children and the educator relentlessly pressured a withdrawn girl who was hesitant about whether she wanted to be the 'cleaning supervisor' to finally make her decision. This type of insistence to participate questions the very foundation of free participation and regulates children through explicitly phrased demands on participation. What we see here therefore is the instrumentalization of participation through voicing as a governing practice that lays control over the very act of free participation (Rose 1996).

### **Voicing oneself and hearing others**

As the school systematically observed the principles of nonviolent communication (Rosenberg 2003), the identification and voicing of one's own feelings and needs, and the recognition and hearing of those of the others were considered instrumental in handling conflicts and making

decisions. This routine is illustrated by the following episode of two boys playing with their clothes in a meeting:

#### EXCERPT 1

Dorota (SM) points to the boys wrapping their sweatshirts around their feet and asks the other children how they feel about it. Daniel says: 'It annoys me.' Dorota asks if there is something he would like to tell the boys or request them to do. Daniel: 'Guys, it annoys me, please don't do this.' Dorota wants to hear more about how he feels. Daniel: 'I'm just itching to do something about it.' The boys keep playing, and Dorota asks if they have heard Daniel's request and can comply with it. Olek agrees, and Tymek initially does not want to but then agrees as well. (FN, Dec 2016)

As this exchange exemplifies, the individuals involved would be asked to say how they felt in a problematic situation and what they would want the other party to do. Sometimes, they were also requested to paraphrase each other's statements to ensure that they had heard and understood them as intended, and the staff encouraged them to follow up on that with an action. Similar questions were asked about troublesome incidents being discussed in a meeting and about the meeting itself.

Giving voice to children is an act of empowerment aimed to amend children's social positioning vis-à-vis each other and adults. Giving voice is informed by social justice and rights considerations and is driven by a moral imperative (Komulainen 2007; Spyrou 2011; Spyrou 2016; Kraftl 2013). The notion of voice draws on the modern and liberal concept of the 'speaking' subject (Lee 2001). Emphasising the social constructedness of voice, Komulainen (2007) explains how the attribution of voice individualises the child subject and grants autonomy, rationality and intentionality to the speaking child. As a modern notion, voice also

presupposes a unitary subject whose authentic voice speaks the 'truth' (Mazzei and Jackson 2009) and is hence believed to reveal children's inner worlds. In a mirroring act, 'hearing voice' makes the listener heed and act on what is heard, thus presupposing an active subject ready to respond, rather than receiving voice passively and silently. A moral imperative is set in motion when a child shares the inner truth of her or his feelings and others act on that in ways that apparently address the shared feelings. Justice is done, and a harmonious community is created or sustained.

Voicing practices and discourses, such as in Excerpt 1, prompted the children to exercise introspection and to identify and express their emotions, physical states, preferences and ideas about school life. The school meetings frequently started with an invitation to share how everyone was and how they felt about the current or past situations. The verbalisation of feelings and opinions was viewed as an emancipatory practice by the staff. Reflecting on the practice of speaking up in school meetings, Dorota said in her interview:

Sooner or later, each child feels that they indeed make an 'I' statement. ... We have seen children who wouldn't say a word and then... it starts to work, and everyone listens to them. It definitely helps that at some point everyone is heard.

The experience of being heard by others, being noticed, acknowledged and taken into consideration, were viewed in this school as promoting the children's development. In a meeting, staff member Gosia reminded the children that the most important rule was that everyone had to listen while a person was speaking. She further explained that the purpose of it was not only to hear each other but also to practise being in a situation of social exposure. The pedagogical intention was to help children practise participating in democratic fora and acquire public skills, such as listening to and speaking in front of other people.

However, while meetings can be considered an empowering mechanism, which in the staff's view increases children's self-confidence, independence and participation skills, the insistence that children identify their feelings, come up with ideas and then share them with others compels them to constantly strive to self-examine, discover their own feelings and desires and reveal themselves to others, however painful this may be – and do it for their own good (Foucault 1988). Fendler identifies the subject's ability to 'understand [...] and reflexively discipline [...] desires, feelings, love, wishes and fears' as the condition of being 'recognized – or recogniz[ing] oneself – as educated' (2001, 124). In the Bright School, this educated ability of participation fostered by the staff's pedagogical techniques lay the foundation for competent community membership, where competency was established partly on being able to introspect and voice one's emotion.

Sharing one's feelings had a specific aim of making the community members realise and take into consideration what others experienced and needed. Dorota's question in Excerpt 1, whether the boys have heard their friend's request, reflects this function of communicating one's feelings. Despite the shared understanding that (non)compliance with requests was to be decided by the person asked, the desirability of going along with them was clearly conveyed. The staff expressed their gratitude to the children who had agreed to requests and disciplined children if they resisted either the practice of learning about each other's feelings or heeding others' requests. The children also sensed what was expected of them and often voiced views consistent with these expectations. The cultural and social norm of voicing emotions channelled social relations and shaped the children's performances in line with the interests and agendas of the adults. As a result, and as Spyrou explains (2018, p. 93), a 'structured and highly controlled

space of the school [meeting] encouraged children to provide the “correct answer”. In the following episode, Maja enacts this ‘correct voice.’

## EXCERPT 2

The meeting starts, but the sitting arrangement is incorrect. Bartek (11 years old) sits behind Maja’s (6 years old) back. Someone suggests that Maja should change her place. She gets up and moves outside of the circle, looking quite sad. Dorota requests Maja to come closer and asks her if there is something she would like to tell Bartek or ask him to do. Maja says: ‘I was sitting there first and you sat down behind me.’ Bartek is supposed to repeat what she said. He cannot, so Dorota asks Maja to repeat. This exchange continues for a while until Bartek says angrily: ‘We are wasting our time.’ Dorota: ‘If you are wasting your time, move [to the library].’ She explains that what is happening is happening because of what he has done. She says that she feels bad that Bartek is comfortable and Maja isn’t, and that she feels she must do something about it. (FN, Dec 19, 2016)

The circle was not formed correctly because Bartek was not part of it. The suggestion that Maja should move troubled Maija, which Dorota recognised. Instead of solving this issue herself, Dorota transferred the task to the children and wanted Maja to voice her concern and Bartek to give the expected response. Dorota transformed the situation into a pedagogical event in two ways. First, she asked the children to voice and hear each other as community members do and, second, she taught them how to position their bodies also as community members. She could have identified the injustice herself and ameliorated the situation. Instead, she gave the disadvantaged child room to speak up and also called on her to do so. She made it clear how the boy’s actions impacted the child directly targeted and other individuals who felt affected by it

and pointed to the risk of being excluded as a result of one's unwillingness to engage in restorative work. In this episode, Bartek was made to learn that one's actions influenced others who needed to be heard. While in several similar situations children assumed the subject position as those capable of recognising another person's requests and complying with them, Bartek seems to have refused to follow the usual procedure.

The episode, however, was more complex than that. For example, Bartek's feelings (e.g. resentment at being expected to move though being older and a boy) were not deemed important enough to be voiced and listened to. Instead of addressing the injustice with its manifold implications, the pedagogy focused on making Bartek hear and act. This speaks to the staff's tendency 'to seek that voice which can elucidate, clarify, confirm, and pronounce [the expected] meaning' (Mazzei 2009, 46–47). Dorota dismissed other voices. She did not consider the voice suggesting that Maja should move. When Bartek's refusal to comply expressed more than what he 'voiced,' she did not respond to the voice which 'spoke' beyond the verbalised in Bartek's statement, and which may have indicated discomfort or disagreement prompted by the questioning of the patriarchal gender and age order.

If having a voice stands for being able to express one's views, feelings and emotions, voice was taken literally in the Bright School meetings. As Dorota stated in an interview: 'Everyone says something when we go around, and we pay attention to this.' Although the children were encouraged to listen attentively to their bodies and learn what they wanted, their bodily expressions of unease, confusion or fatigue were nonetheless disciplined. While verbal expressions of the children's feelings and wishes were interpreted as productive of community, their bodily expressions contravening the adult-imposed rules of bodily comportment tended to be construed as working against it. Nevertheless, the children constantly used their bodies as a

means of expression. Though expected to take meetings seriously, they would start jumping or dancing when an adult left a meeting for a while. When discussing the meeting regulations, they insisted on being allowed to lie down (instead of sitting) or after a certain time to draw. It was through bodily acts, such as going to the bathroom, lying down on the floor, turning their heads or whole bodies away or smiling anxiously, that they expressed their discomfort or disagreement when difficult issues were being discussed. Such acts, even if recognised by the staff members as the children's expressions of their emotions, were either disregarded or repudiated as inappropriate ways of voicing oneself. 'I don't know why you're laughing, maybe this is how you're dealing with this situation, but I want you not to laugh because it seems to me you're not taking this seriously,' Dorota said in a meeting to a 5-year-old boy who had flushed a school fish down the toilet, thus calling on the child to control his emotions and properly use his body. When tired and/or bored with long discussions, the children also relied on their bodies as means of communicating their feelings and wishes, for example, by playing with their clothes, fidgeting, making faces or touching and chatting with each other. Rather than interpreted as ways of children's expression, in other word 'voice', such actions were decisively stopped as disrespectful to the other people and breaching the rules.

Prioritising the verbal expression of one's voice is illustrated by an incident in which a child suggested discussing an irrelevant issue related to the body. A 7-year-old boy put the question of how to poop in one's underwear on the agenda, which evoked protests from the other children (who, acting as competent community members, claimed that such issues should not be discussed in meetings because they were nonsense and distracted the children) but was taken seriously by a staff member. She reminded the children that this was what the meetings were for: to talk about different things. What is interesting for our analysis here is that the boy perhaps

aimed to disrupt the smooth running of the meetings and succeeded in doing so by drawing on the rule of using voice. Since the teacher could not deny him 'his voice,' the boy managed to exert power over the teacher's and the group's actions. In this way, the children, as well as the adults, instrumentalised 'voice.'

As can be seen, the body played different roles in community building through meetings. First, it was a legitimate and literally understood object of voicing practices. Second, proper bodily comportment was construed as a sign of mutual care, respect and deep involvement in collective decision-making and problem-solving; consequently, it was supposed to strengthen the community. At the same time, children tended to use the body as an alternative means of voicing their views and emotions: their dissatisfaction with the format of a meeting, their resistance to adult-imposed regulations and themes for discussion or their desire to do something else. However, given the significance attributed to the democratic procedure of speaking out one's thoughts, there was not much room for using one's voice in these 'bodily' ways. While pedagogical theory and research recognise the multiplicity of children's manners of expression, the children in the Bright School meetings were regulated to restrict themselves to the verbal language, and the democratic subject was defined in terms of the capacity to speak out.

### **The liminality of belonging**

Inherent to the concept of community are exclusionary practices through which the coherence of a community is produced (Fendler 2006; Millei 2012). As already indicated, crucial to one's belonging to the Bright School community was the willingness and ability to voice and hear one's own and others' feelings. The school meetings were the key space where such membership

was fashioned. It was also in the meetings that the vulnerability of the children who were unable to meet this demand flared up, and the inclusion/exclusion dynamics became pronounced.

### EXCERPT 3

Ola (11 years old) keeps drawing; Gosia (SM) and Dorota (SM) remind her of the rule forbidding drawing in a school meeting. Ola objects; in her view, drawing is allowed if it helps a person focus. The discussion becomes heated, and finally Bartek (11 years old), who is getting visibly tired of the meeting, asks Ola to stop for 10 minutes. He says that he doesn't want to listen to quarrels. Dorota asks the group what they should do now. The children suggest that Ola should leave the meeting. Ola sits still and keeps drawing, but she is pale and on the verge of crying. Dorota asks: 'Are you ready to put it away, or do you want to leave?' Ola says she doesn't know. Dorota reminds her that nobody will decide for her. Ola responds that she is not ready and adds that the meeting is boring and this is why she is drawing. Dorota says that Ola acts against the community, to the community's detriment, instead of using her energy to move it forward; even though she has lots of useful ideas, she cannot contribute anything because of her anger. At some point, Ola gets up, picks a tissue, blows her nose and returns to the meeting. (FN, Nov 2016)

Ola stated that she paid attention and 'heard' the others better when she was drawing. With her statement, she applied a 'correct' mode of voicing and hearing in this democratic community. Looking at the paper, however, contravened the rules, as not the whole of her body was attentive because she was not looking at the others speaking. Bartek apparently interpreted her actions as protracting the meeting, which he wanted finished, and, in what may have been an assertion of his position as a boy, he suggested, along with the other children, a harsh solution

that would exclude Ola from the meeting. Ola's own actions and comportment 'spoke' loudly, but she remained silent. Her response of evasion, denial and deflection lay in what was not being said (Mazzei 2003, Spyrou 2018), but the adults ignored it.

Dorota did not ask Ola anymore to voice her feelings and forced her to hear and abide by the others' wish that she leaves the meeting. This manoeuvre transferred the task of solving the issue onto the children, and hearing was instrumentalised to make Ola do what Dorota had expected her to do all the way: listen without drawing. Seeing that her point about doing 'hearing' while drawing was not accepted and her silent protest was not responded to, Ola excluded herself by claiming that the meeting was boring, which probably indicated her wish not to participate. Turning away from Ola, Dorota labelled Ola's feeling as 'anger,' instead of voicing the child. Anger was interpreted as impeding one's creative energy, and therefore Dorota deemed Ola's participation no longer useful for the community.

This episode vividly captures the regulatory role that the meeting played in instituting collective responsibility and asserting the importance of the community as the common good. Ola's refusal to do what was expected of a community member – to follow the rules, to refrain from arguing in order for the group to achieve its aims, to use her energy and ingenuity for the benefit of the community – brought her to a place where she needed to decide whether she wanted to be in or out – of the meeting and perhaps also of the school community, given the double meaning of the term. Her freedom of choice was illusory: she could either act consistently with what was constructed as the proper school/community member or exclude herself (Fendler 2001). Shifting responsibility to the group by asking them what should be done also reveals the function of the community as a soft-control mechanism, which Pongratz (2007) identifies as typical of reform pedagogy, whose legacy underpins democratic schools. With enhanced

importance attributed to community, exclusion from it looms as the most severe punishment. In the reported incident, Ola decided to avoid it by giving up on her desire (to draw and mentally leave a boring meeting).

Voicing and hearing formed the dominant mechanism of belonging and exclusion in the meetings. Voice helped construct and maintain the boundaries of the school community in at least four ways. First, the prioritising of voice legitimised the staff's insistence that the children verbalise their thoughts and feelings as voice expressed their participation in and belonging to the community. Second, remaining silent consequently meant disobedience or (self-)relegation to the liminal position between the inside and the outside of the community. Third, the children could cut themselves off the community by not responding to voicing requests or by leaving the meeting and thus giving up the opportunity of voicing. Fourth, if the children did not embrace participation through voice/hearing and resultant action, they could be sent out and thus excluded from the community.

### **Concluding thoughts**

Our reading of school meetings in this paper goes beyond recognising children's voice and hearing others as children's rights and as part of good democratic governance. The Foucauldian perspective affords an insight into how children's voice and hearing can be also instrumentalised for other ends than empowering children. In the school meetings analysed in this paper, the children were viewed as rights-holders, competent decision-makers, members of a democratic community and moral subjects capable of self-reflection, self-control, recognising others and taking responsibility for them. Such modes of thinking of and acting with children fulfilled the emancipatory potential of rights-based and competency discourses and offered a possibility to

recast unequal child-adult relationships. They also ensured the children's right to have a say on issues concerning them and enabled them to exert a real influence. This in itself sets this school (and other democratic schools where similar practices are in place) apart from conventional settings with strictly hierarchical structures and students' limited impact (Falkowska and Telusiewicz-Pacak 2019).

Simultaneously, these positionings became part of power relations, which, as Foucault reminds us, always imply that 'certain persons exercise power over the others' (1983, 217). Despite the staff's declared recognition of the emancipatory function of meetings and the children's attempts to exercise power over the adults (e.g. through summoning them to a meeting, refusing to offer an idea or disrupting a meeting by wanting to discuss pooping), the leading position of the adults as those who channelled the conduct of the children remained mostly intact. The staff both modelled the desired behaviours and called on the children to act in specific ways (to reflect and introspect, to verbally express their feelings, to behave properly). They disciplined the children who resisted doing so, to the point of symbolically or physically excluding them from the community. This kind of instrumentalisation of giving voice to children and hearing each other in the meetings meant that the very intent to empower children could easily morph into regulation. The children identified such instances and enacted forms of refusal or resistance by either calling on, reinterpreting or instrumentalising voicing and hearing. Like Ola, who in a meeting accused the adults of dismissing the children's decisions even if those reflected the majority's will, the children became competent negotiators of voicing.

Our aim in offering a complex reading of voice and hearing children's voice in meetings of a democratic school was to show their multiple uses (which has already been implied in research that both itself utilises and problematises the use of children's voice, e.g. Spyrou 2011,

2016, 2018; Kraftl 2013), and the expediency of devoting more attention and reflection to these uses in education in general and in democratic schooling in particular. More specifically, we sought to call attention to voice as a tool for community building through the democratic practice of expressing one's opinion and feelings, and participating in decisions, on the one hand, and as an instrument of power on the other. Democratic schools seek to balance individual liberties and the wellbeing of the community. Voicing the child and making children hear each other proved to be a productive approach to this challenge in the Bright School. Yet, while the children learned to recognise themselves and each other as interconnected human beings and community members, which bears out the effectiveness of these democratic techniques in reaching certain goals, they also learned to regulate others and were themselves regulated by the same democratic techniques.

We also wanted to highlight other forms of expression that also 'speak,' for example children's body language or silence, since in our view what is not said is just as revealing as what is voiced. In school meetings or in democratic schools, voice can happen in nonresponses, pauses, breaths and sighs (Mazzei 2003), and even in the materialities and atmospheres of schools. As Mazzei (2009) argues in relation to researchers, the staff also need to go beyond the 'voiced' in children's verbalised voices and recognise and listen to voices that happen 'when they/we fail to audibly voice an opinion with words and instead voice displeasure, discomfort, or disagreement' by other means (Mazzei 2009, 45). Children's vast repertoire of 'other means' of expression beyond voice includes body language, screaming, crying, giggling, silence, etc. (Rosen 2015), all of which relevantly convey what matters to children and communicate otherwise what the staff in this study requested the children to express through verbal voice.

## Endnotes

1. The names of both the school and the research participants are pseudonyms.
2. In order to avoid confusion, we will nevertheless use the terms ‘meeting’ or ‘gathering,’ rather than a ‘community,’ to refer to this specific practice. The notion of ‘community’ will be applied to talk about the specific understanding of the school adopted by the Bright School.

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