

Democracy and associations

The democratic self-image of youth associations¹

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Abstract

When the words democracy and associations are mentioned in one sentence, polite reserve is often the response. Personal experience of associations of all sorts often clouds our perception of associations as democratic institutions. Let's start at the beginning and talk about what democracy means first of all. Because democracy is on everyone's lips. A whole host of groups in society – whether political parties, action groups or Facebook groups – are calling for more democracy. They want citizens to be granted a greater say and decision-making powers in their day-to-day lives. Whatever the motive for demanding more democracy, it's always insinuated that we already are democrats and as such are demanding greater powers. If we agree this is correct, the next question to ask from a pedagogical standpoint is what made us this way?

This article looks at where children and young people can learn and practise democracy in their environments. It focuses on youth associations as one of the key educational institutions for young people outside schools. To start with, the article will identify the potentials that predestine associations (due to their structures) for creating democratic processes. Based on the results of group discussions with selected youth associations, the way these youth associations see themselves in terms of democracy will then be examined.

1. Democracy and education

Democracy is a way of life and type of government that has to be repeatedly relearned. In order to grasp the concept, institutions with democratic structures are required. This is hardly a new idea, but the majority of educational institutions are a long way away from putting it into practice.

“Democracy is the only state-organised social system that has to be learned. The goal is to develop democratic awareness in young people by involving them actively in organisational processes in schools and higher-education facilities. If implemented consistently, this would fundamentally change the culture and structure of educational institutions.” (Negt 2008)

Virtually nobody denies that democracy and education are closely linked. In educational science however, how and where people become democrats is a question that is astonishingly often virtually ignored. Consequently, to date there are no systematic answers as to “what linking democracy and education does and does not entail,” and it “is a surprisingly vaguely worded theoretical problem that has been neglected. It is no coincidence that driven by developments in the UK, it's only been over the last few years that the debate has reawakened with new vigour.” (Oelkers, 2000, p. 334). Whether and in what way democracy and education can and should be combined in the structures of our educational institutions is now gradually becoming discussed as a result.

¹ The article is based on the “Demokratie und Verein” dissertation, published in 2011 by VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. Much of this article is a reprint of a text that has already appeared in “deutsche jugend” magazine. The details are as follows: Riekmann, Wibke (2011): Demokratie und Verein. Zum demokratischen Selbstverständnis von Jugendverbänden In: deutsche Jugend, 59. Year H.2, Weinheim, pp. 68-75.

Youth associations already seem to be one step ahead and like to call themselves “workshops of democracy” (Deutscher Bundesjugendring 2010). They claim that they are destined to teach children and young people democracy, “In youth associations for children and young people, a form of learning takes place which is political, social, character-forming and fosters democracy.” (Deutscher Bundesjugendring 2008, p. 4). However, what is the situation with the youth associations’ democratic perception of themselves and what rationale exists for assuming that youth associations in particular are institutions that provide education in democracy?

First of all, we need to clarify what the term democracy means. In analytical terms, it can mean two things. On the one hand, democracy can be seen as a form of government. In this case, democracy is designed as a form of competition, primarily as a struggle for power in the country concerned. This concept of democracy is also called elitist democracy or a democracy of leadership and is above all linked with Max Weber or Joseph Schumpeter. “The democratic method is the organisation of institutions to reach political decisions where individuals have the power to make decisions by vying for the votes of the people,” (Schumpeter, 1950, p. 428). By contrast, participatory theories of democracy express what has re-entered the German debate through John Dewey. Democracy is not mainly considered a form of government, but a way of life and Dewey sees it as an integral part of education and upbringing.

“A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience.” (Dewey 1916, p. 87)

Dewey believes that democracy and education are fundamentally linked with one another via experience. The public arena should be democratically organised so that people can gain a maximum of experience. Dewey is convinced that an individual’s life is all about the growth of experience and personal fulfilment. But both can therefore only be realised by actively engaging with society. People are therefore social beings who can only form and develop their own characters and desires by living with other people (see Jörke 2003, p. 241). The more democratically each sphere is organised, the greater the chance of gaining experience through encounters with other people.

Dewey comments that the pursuit of democracy is part of human nature. He highlights two criteria by which a democratic institution, or any other social group can gauge itself, “How numerous and varied are the interests which are consciously shared? How full and free is the interplay with other forms of association?” (Dewey 1916, p. 83). Consequently, education’s role would be to highlight those types of democratic public spheres which had a variety of consciously shared interests and where very different associations meet at the same time (see also Coelen 2005, p. 24).

Dewey didn’t develop a theory of institutions which youth work could mirror. Quite the contrary, as regards institutions Dewey remains vague. Dewey sees schools alone as the starting point and hotbed of democratic society, although he does mention companies, churches, political bodies, associations and local authorities, but doesn’t go into them in any more detail. Dewey also has no analytical antonym for democracy as experienced in contemporary life, so that he is merely defensive towards economic expediency. Following the deliberative theory of democracy proposed by Jürgen Habermas and his perception of society as a unit of different differentiated areas of system and the environment we live in, this sort of analytical antonym can be introduced. In the light of this definition, democracy can be seen as a way of life *and* a form of government.

The institutions in the world around us that Habermas talks about in the new edition of “Strukturwandel in der Öffentlichkeit” are associations, which are based on voluntary membership as well as “egalitarian forms of communication, freedom of expression, decisions made on the basis of simple majorities etc.” (Habermas 1999, p. 13 et seq.). This is

where youth work and its institutions come in because it is usually organised in this form. It is most apparent in youth work in an association that is based on local clubs. The article below will deal with youth association work from the theoretical focus presented.

2. Youth association work and democracy

Clubs and associations are key pillars of youth work. Their roles are specified primarily in article 11 and article 12 of SGB VIII (*Sozialgesetzbuch* ‘German Social Security Code’). Article 11, paragraph 3 states that some of the focal points of youth work are extra-curricular education with general, political, social, health, cultural, natural history and technical education. Article 12 deals with the autonomy of the youth associations. It states that youth work in the associations is organised by young people themselves in the form of a community for which they are also responsible. In other words, youth education in clubs and associations covers a broad range. The common denominators lie in taking responsibility for their own actions and self-organised structures to create independent, critical personalities.

An academic discussion of youth work can start with the publication by Müller et al. 1972/1964 entitled “Was ist Jugendarbeit?” (What is youth work?). The gradually developing theory of work with children and young people is pervaded from the very beginning by an emancipatory attitude to education which, considering today’s hotly debated discussion about skills and training of children and young people, could overshoot the key point about advanced abilities to act. Walter Hornstein describes a critical-emancipatory concept of education which could apply to youth work with elements of autonomous education of young people, of self-perception and the way the world sees education, of empowerment to act critically and freely, as well as the aspect that education always opposes instrumentalisation and appropriation (see Hornstein 2004, p. 17 et seq.). In other words, the theory of youth work is mainly about looking at social conditions in which children and young people grow up and the issue of involvement in defining and redefining conditions in society. “Youth work is educating children to embrace freedom” (Kentler, 1972/1964, p. 51) comments Kentler in his article in “Was ist Jugendarbeit?” (Müller et al. 1972/1964). He calls for youth work as a form of committed critical clarification. At the same time he doesn’t want clarification of what youth work entails to be an additional aspect, but to discover and develop approaches which “are long part of youth work” (Kentler 1972/1964, p. 42). Based on Kentler’s wish, democracy evolves as a potential that is already part of the structure of youth association work. However, a misunderstanding needs to be cleared up that any form of commitment would contribute to forming democracy regardless of the structures in which it happens. The Shell Study 2010 comments that:

“In addition to political participation and the associated activities, for a democracy to survive and exhibit cohesion, adequate social commitment is also vital of the type that is expressed in a modern civil society (Schneekloth 2010; p. 152).

If we aren’t just talking about social interaction with each other based on a civil society, but a democratic society, then it does matter what structures we work in. In this case youth associations really are predestined for involvement in democratic activities due to their structural principles. These include principles of volunteering, membership, local organisational structures and publicness (see Bühler et al. 1978) and can also be called association principles. In Germany they have a legal status.

In German there are two words for voluntary. Where the first “freiwillig” is concerned, young people can decide whether and where they want to participate and can stop at any time and leave youth work as an institution. This type of participation is one of the most important differentiations between families and schools.

The principle of *membership* denotes greater obligations. Membership is a relationship that is manifested in the rights and obligations of members. Young people can use their membership to have an impact on youth work. Therefore, youth work assumes a relationship so that it works because those taking part consistently have to renegotiate goals, content and working methods with one another and the key pedagogues.

The second word in German for voluntary is *ehrenamtlich*. This suggests that young people are committed due to an inner desire because they enjoy what they are doing and can meet their friends here. Social integration takes place without any money changing hands. This is where young people have a chance to spread their wings without receiving any grades, without fearing they might lose their jobs and without going against family tradition. People are elected to this type of voluntary honorary post for a certain period. The responsibilities are always carried out free of charge, recompense for expenses or similar fees shouldn't however be ruled out.

The *local organisational structure* emphasises that the foundations of associations lie in local districts. In big cities this happens in different neighbourhoods. The democratic principle that lies behind local organisational structure is the principle of common concerns. If associations are aware of their local roots in the neighbourhood, the population that lives there – whether people are male or female, German or foreign, disabled or not – are a point of reference for their activities and for membership because of factors that affect them personally (see Richter/Riekmann/Jung 2007, p. 31). In this way, associations prevent themselves from a narrow-minded approach and only being interested in their own activities. The opportunity to recall what is happening locally is for clubs to integrate with the neighbourhood by seeing themselves as their public and for the neighbourhood to be reflected in the clubs. Consequently, the club operates in the public arena and is therefore part of the organised and non-entrenched publicness of the locality in which the club is reflected (see Richter 2001, p. 209 et seq.). The way that the principles come together qualifies the club as a place to provide education and to actively practise democracy.

“It's the principles of associations which qualify them superbly (in stark contrast to schools) to educate people in a philosophy and/or towards objectivity and to be democratic. And in the idea of publicness developed here to be a local democrat to start with and to let people be unconditional democrats.” (Richter 2011, p. 233)

In other words, principles have an impact on youth education as empowerment structures for self-organised and emancipatory educational processes with democracy-forming potential. At the same time it is not merely about function as a school of democracy. It is not just about preparing people for something which then becomes relevant in real life. As work in an association, youth work enables democratic action in the world lived in because it is democratic itself.

This reflects Dewey's realisation that you don't learn for a particular purpose, but that you learn through something else, i.e. experience (see Dewey 1916/1944). It is therefore obvious that to implement the educational approach of youth associations the question of organisation and internal structures of youth associations needs to be looked just as closely as the perspective of increasing democratisation. With these aspects in mind, it is all about allowing young people to become independent and giving them a voice (see Riekmann/Bracker 2008).

3. Trends of decreasing democratisation in youth associations

The principles of associations consequently stand for associations' potential – they say nothing about the empirical reality. Therefore, the goal of the empirical analysis was to take a critical look at the democratic self-image of the youth associations and the way youth associations call themselves “workshops of democracy”. Special emphasis was placed on

looking at trends towards a decline in democracy, which are relevant to the associations. Youth associations are at the same time subjected to colonising tendencies of the system and have to respond to *economic or state-driven constraints*. In addition to the service-driven or vocation-driven aspects, familiarisation needs to be looked at too. *Familiarisation* becomes clear when the membership structure is very similar and the stress is on forming a community and not integration in society. In these cases, access to clubs is usually made through family connections, but honorary posts are often “inherited” by other members of the family or close friends. In associations and clubs, decisions are frequently made based on friendships and events shared together. These decisions are rooted in the fact that people know one another. Because the more abstract level of membership plays no role, internal hierarchies can form between generations or the two sexes. There is then a tacit agreement on who makes the decisions in associations. A conflict exists between familiarisation and the youth associations’ leaning towards familiar environments, because ties to a particular environment are characteristic of a youth association.

“Environments that foster development require both: on the one hand social borders and a profile without which they would not be recognisable, attractive and welcoming to the people involved. On the other hand, they need to open themselves up via contact to others to allow self-reflection, new growth and development.” (Sturzenhecker, 2007 p. 116).

As Böhnisch says that a community is always the expression of a longing for togetherness, sparked by a crisis (Böhnisch 1994, p. 200), it has to create democratic structures via cultural integration of a range of the population. Otherwise it risks moving away (and this goes for youth associations too) from a democratic organisational structure. Familiarisation happens when environments close themselves off and aren’t prepared to permit anything that is alien to them. Then the democratic potential of associations is circumvented. In this case the association becomes a replacement family.

Entrepreneurial/service approaches foster the spread of a customer-centric focus beyond a concept of “constitutive value-driven volunteering by members for members”. (Richter 2001, p. 217). Customers of associations enquire about an offering and aren’t interested in helping shape the future of the club by becoming a member or holding an honorary post. Habermas describes a service-driven approach as colonisation of the world we live in. Due to the increasing streamlining of the system, this tends to have a knock-on effect on our environment. The result is a forced assimilation with processes of symbolic reproduction of the world we live in to systemic integration mechanisms (loc. cit., p. 153 et seq.). The association becomes an enterprise.

It was these anti-democratic developments that led to the question the research posed as to what extent the structural democratic potential of the clubs in youth associations was perceived at all and what their self-image is.

4. The democratic self-image of youth associations

The empirical analysis presented here included eight group discussions with four selected associations from Hamburg. On the one hand, we talked to young people who have a volunteering role today. On the other we talked to people who were volunteers in the post-war period and foundation of the associations after 1945. By comparing the comments and the self-images of these different generations of volunteers, developments and differences between them became apparent. The analysis was complemented by a secondary analysis, which related to the development of the associations in the 1970s. The four associations selected are: *Sozialistische Jugend Deutschlands – Die Falken* ‘Socialist Youth of Germany – The Falcons’ (SJD), *Sportjugend* ‘German Sports Youth’ (DSJ), *Bund Deutscher Pfadfinder*

‘scouts’ BdP (previously BDP) and *Jugendfeuerwehr* ‘youth fire brigade’. The following analyses are qualitative in nature. Conclusions about the association or the youth associations as a whole aren’t possible. A major characteristic of youth association work is the heterogeneity, which is allowable within associations. The following results can however be interpreted as saying that from which association the reasons and arguments stem from regarding their democratic self-image is not coincidental. They are examples of typical reasons given.

All in all, after 1945 associations primarily wished to revive their culture as a community. Membership and volunteering were considered key elements, but the latter had no democratic legitimisation. The *Falken* was the only group that displayed any link between a revitalised culture in the association with democratic education. In this case, participatory activities were implemented in camps and in day-to-day association life. The other associations appeared to find formal processes, such as, for example, electing people to voluntary posts as interfering with, rather than being beneficial to the community.

A: To illustrate what our understanding of democracy was back then, the leader of the group wasn’t usually elected, but the group leaders made up their groups themselves. I know that was true from my own experience. I went to school and recruited my boys on the playground. I got them together and nobody decided to choose me. I set up my group and when I thought I had enough I said “right, now we’re a group”. End of interview. (*Interviewee from Bund Deutscher Pfadfinder*)

When talking to former volunteers from the scouts it is clear that they didn’t experience democracy as a way of life and this reflected itself in their groups too. There was a similar understanding of the term in other associations too. *Sportjugend* also refers to undemocratic processes in choosing who was to appointed youth officer.

B: I wasn’t particularly sporty and they said there’s a general meeting that you can attend too. The venue was Haus des Sports, just around the corner. I went along totally naively and then they said, “We need a youth officer. We need one otherwise we’ll have to pay to rent the gym.” All I had to do was sign on the dotted line and that was it, as if it were totally harmless. And I thought OK I’ll do it. They were all really nice and bought me a beer too. (*Interviewee from Sportjugend*)

As a factor in shaping and deciding the future of associations, volunteering was not something that people were aware of. The main goal was to restart the association. Nevertheless, this is not a case of a backward-looking approach, democracy is merely seen as a governmental form of the state and is accepted as such by everybody.

When they were founded in the 1960s/1970s the youth fire brigades had to grapple with the fact that the existing culture in adult fire brigades was neither participatory nor were voluntary fire brigades prepared to given the youth fire brigades autonomy. These ideas about merely community-driven cultures in associations therefore had to be overcome with the newly emerging ideas about youth work.

C: Above all, when I recall that when our youth fire brigade was founded, it was clear that 50% of the time would involve service for the fire brigade and 50% youth work. And it was then that the questions started, “What’s the point of youth work” etc. And adults were saying, “We need a new generation of people in the fire brigade, so don’t start any other distractions.” In our brigade it was an approach I stuck to. (*Interviewee from Jugendfeuerwehr*)

All in all, the 1970s were a period of democratisation of cultures in clubs and associations. Their statutes included new goals related to democracy:

The scouts wanted “as responsible citizens to shape and be responsible for a democratic, liberal-minded society” (Bund der Pfadfinderinnen und Pfadfinder, BdP 2002 p. D3).

The Jugendfeuerwehr wanted to “teach young people to help their fellow human beings, democratic awareness, equality, solidarity, fairness and tolerance”. (Jugendordnung der Jugendfeuerwehr Hamburg o. J.).

The aspirations of the 1970s for a radical democratisation of society were dashed and associations had to deal with the problems caused by ever dwindling resources. Since the 1990s it has been the increasingly service-led approach of youth work that associations have been confronted with.

How do young volunteers see the democratic self-image of their associations today?

The reality of the work by Hamburg’s *Falken* is that the majority of it is done by full-time staff in independent associations. Despite this rise in a service-led approach, the youth association retains an unbroken democratic self-image with socialist aims.

D: It’s not the association’s objective to teach children and young people democracy. In other words not democracy as something that is outside of us. We’re not Germany’s democratic youth, but its socialist youth organisation. And the concept of democracy does emerge again and again, but it’s not a cause that we take up. But this can be viewed in different ways. Sometimes it’s a case of bourgeois democracy, which legitimises power by pretending we have a voice. And sometimes it’s what you would wish for, or what is actually intended in terms of bourgeois ideals and that’s a true voice and participation for everybody. So it almost has two meanings. It’s used in the sense of these two meanings in the association. (*Interviewee from SJD – Die Falken*)

In this case, the *Falken* are a perfect example of the concept of an association where democracy as a form of government is rejected, but is practised as a way of life to the full.

In the *Bund der Pfadfinderinnen und Pfadfinder* (Schleswig-Holstein/Hamburg) the concept of democracy is limited to a form of government. In the association the democratic implementation of association principles only plays a subordinate role.

E: When I think about it, in our group two group leaders stand as candidates against one another and then there’s an election – so I think the potential for disagreement is huge.

F: The whole group could end up torn apart.

E: That’s true. I know that that’s the case in other groups that then split. Or half of them left and took many of the others with them as well. I think it’s better not to decide by voting, but by sitting down and talking. (*Interviewee from Bund der Pfadfinderinnen und Pfadfinder*)

By questioning democratic procedures within the association, the scouts develop a tendency towards familiarisation. Democratic procedures are described as wearisome and unproductive.

Only *Sportjugend* appears to see a service-led approach as a part of their day-to-day work, a factor that has appeared due to competition with gyms. As a result, young volunteers have to repeatedly argue that there is a lot more to a sport club than just doing sport. On the other hand, they do understand that after school, young people want to get away from their desks at last.

G: When young people join a club, we ask ourselves what do they actually want to do. And we’ve got to the point where they actually want to take part in sport. When

school's out, they just want to participate in a sport, have a shower, go home and not have to talk at meetings etc. (*Interviewee from Sportjugend*)

Sportjugend's volunteers are, in general, very positive about the democratic opportunities in the club. They clearly acknowledge the club's potential, but often experience a different reality in the clubs and are sceptical when they think about what they've experienced.

For today's volunteers in the youth fire brigade, democratic processes for electing a youth office or a youth spokesperson have been introduced and the interviewees thought these sorts of processes were important. But they still doubt whether young people think these processes are advisable and they believe that in some cases young people are out of their depth with them. As a result, today's volunteers in the youth fire brigade appear to ask themselves why they should maintain participatory processes and they see it as the role of schools to teach democratic concepts.

To sum up, the interviews with the representatives of the associations showed that association principles are usually supported, but the link to democratic education has been seldom the topic of discussion until now. The same goes for the club as an institution. While democracy is in principle supported, the club as an institution is often rejected and criticised although all interviewees are in the same club. Criticism of the club uttered by former members is no different to today's active members. The club is not seen as a democratic institution and the principles of the club are seldom reflected in terms of democratic education.

Furthermore, the interviewees criticised the terms "membership" and "volunteer". It is clear that the two terms already put obstacles in the way of talking about democracy and associations. The attempt to introduce new terms such as *voluntary work* or *civic commitment* has merely served to muddy the terms and has not made it easier for clubs to find volunteers. Desirable would be a debate on volunteering and the other principles of clubs in conjunction with democratic education in the clubs in order to ensure that people identify more strongly with their own institution. Perhaps new terms will emerge as a result, without any increase in arbitrariness.

5. Conclusion: Creating structures

As already shown, clubs and associations have huge educational potential. Even if this has been carried out in the youth associations mentioned, it applies to all clubs. Much of the analysis can also be transferred to adult organisations. Awareness of the educational potential and the harnessing of this potential is still low in all clubs. As a result, forming clubs as institutions for the clubs themselves, but also for academic and political spheres is still in its infancy. Structures need to be created. They often do so without the associations knowing what they are actually doing. But resting on their laurels would not be sufficient. Considering developments towards turning associations into quasi enterprises and service providers and a rising lack of clarity as to what membership and volunteering means, they cannot afford to wait for structures to form, but need to proactively create structures themselves. The clubs should seize the opportunity to enter into a debate about the potentials of their own principles in order to position themselves, aware of their status as institutions, in the education debate.

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