



## FEATURE

### **Students as “development-agents”: How one school in Northern Norway brings students and teachers together to enact school improvement**

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## Students as “development-agents”: How one school in Northern Norway brings students and teachers together to enact school improvement

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### Abstract

Norway was described in a UNICEF report (Lundy *et al.*, 2012, p. 57) as ‘a pioneer in the field of children’s rights’ and the incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into domestic law in Norway has been identified as a ‘critical point in the development of children’s rights culture’ (ibid, p. 59). The Norwegian National Curriculum requires children to be consulted about their education. Nevertheless, in the annual student survey, around half of Norwegian children report that they are not listened to in schools (Wendelborg *et al.*, 2017, p. 149). Schools are experiencing challenges when putting children’s rights into practice.

This article presents Lakselv High School in remote northern Norway which has prioritised students’ right to be heard. The school community is diverse, representing three communities; Norwegian, Sami and Kvensk (descendants of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Finnish migrants to Norway). Through the leadership of the Principal, Lakselv has operationalised student voice work, ensuring that it complies with its formal obligations. Furthermore, the school is demonstrating that student voice can impact positively on students’ experience of school, both academic and social; motivating them to complete their high school education. Lakselv offers strategies to combine the perhaps conflicting agendas of student voice and school improvement, indicating that under capable leadership it is possible to harness student voice to develop better schools.

Keywords: student voice; children’s rights; school improvement; school leadership

## **Introduction**

Schools in Norway are compelled by a comprehensive framework of legislation, which includes the Act of Education and the National Curriculum, to uphold children's rights and take account of student voice. There is also the weight of societal expectation; results from the World Values Survey (2009) indicate that Norway values self-expression, independence and a sense of responsibility among its children. Nevertheless, in the annual student survey, around half of Norwegian children report that they are not listened to in schools (Wendelberg et al, 2017, p. 149). The Ombudsman for Children in Norway reported to the UN in 2016 and 2017 about a disparity between the law and children's experiences. Lundy et al (2012, p. 62) observed that Norway experienced difficulties with putting children's rights into practice. Their research concurs with my findings in Norwegian schools, (Jones, 2018) in which teachers and school leaders reported problems of time, competence and the rigidity of existing school structures.

The Norwegian National Curriculum (2018) stipulates that schools should be continually developing and improving, with the best interests of the children at the core of these processes. This is by no means straightforward. School improvement is complex to define and challenging to bring about. In the past three decades, school improvement has become synonymous with standardisation and control (Hargreaves, 2009, p. 92), leading to a culture of testing and accountability. This seems to be at odds with a vision of schools as inclusive, democratic arenas, idealised in several Western countries. It is difficult to imagine how schools will be able to combine the dual agendas of measurable improvement and the realisation of children's right to be consulted.

This article presents one school in remote northern Norway, Lakselv High School, which appears to be achieving that balance, utilising co-operation with students to bring about school improvement. It has prioritised students' right to be heard, creating partnerships between teachers and students. Due to its remote location, community-building at the school has been especially important, and the Principal, Sylvi, has developed a structure in which students and teachers collaborate on equal terms to facilitate school improvement processes which encompass both academic and social learning. This has been positive on organisational and individual levels.

### **The National Context – Norway**

Since the latter part of the nineteenth century, Norway has considered schools to be important in the preparation of children to take part in democracy (Thuen, 2017, p. 124). Norway is one of a minority of countries which chose to incorporate the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) fully into domestic law (2003), confirming its international reputation as having 'a general culture for the respect of rights' (Lundy, Kilkelly and Byrne, 2013, p. 453) and demonstrating its commitment to protecting the rights of children. Children aged seven and up can give their opinions in cases which affect their family and living situation and their own health. Additionally, children are involved in democratic processes at local and national level through being members of advisory committees. Recently in some areas of Norway the voting age for local elections was lowered to sixteen and there is a growing number of young people being elected into local government.

In recent years the UNCRC has become more prominent in Norway, with a particular emphasis on Article 12, mandating children's right to express their views. The Norwegian government amended the Act of Education in 2017 to stipulate that 'all children have the right to a good school environment', specifying that schools have a duty to act to ensure that every child is happy and safe at school. The Department of Education (UDIR) (2017, p. 2) is clear in its conviction that children are unable to learn and make good progress unless they are happy and safe. Fundamental to this amendment is the child's perspective.

Surprisingly, when considering the 'child-centred' and democratic reputation of the Nordic countries (Macbeath, 2004, p. 20), Norway reports that it is currently failing to uphold the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child. Two reports from 2017 ('The Children Have Rights' and 'Children's Rights in Norway') maintained that children are not heard in situations which directly affect them, in schools, or in society as a whole. The Children's Ombudsman reported to the UN (2017, p. 18) that 'there is an ongoing lack of expertise in conversing with children and highlighting the views of children in several arenas including...the education sector'. These reports concur with data collected from students in Norwegian schools. Annually, schools are required by UDIR to carry out an anonymous survey of their students' opinions (compulsory for students in Years 7, 10 and 11). Among the twelve categories of questions, 'student democracy and participation' is historically one in which schools score lowest (UDIR, 2019). This is despite the requirements for all schools to have a student council.

Consequently, UDIR is urging school leaders to ensure that students are not only given the opportunity to talk, but even that their perspectives of school life are prioritised above those of adults (UDIR, 2017, p. 17). 'Democracy and participation' are among the core principles in the new Norwegian national curriculum, in force from 2020, stating that 'children should experience that they are listened to in the daily life of school, that they have real influence and that they can affect that which concerns them' (UDIR, 2018, p. 9). Norway clearly intends to safeguard and prioritise the rights of children and has implemented a comprehensive framework of domestic laws. What makes Lakselv High School so remarkable, therefore, is their national student survey results indicate that not only are they providing opportunities for students to exercise their right to be heard, but also that this is having a measurable impact in other areas of the school community. The school is combining the fulfilment of children's rights with the agenda of school improvement; within a unique and often challenging local setting. Their journey will now be presented.

### **The Local Context - Lakselv High School**

The example of Lakselv High School has been explored through a variety of lenses, made possible by the openness of the Principal, Sylvi. These comprise results from the national student survey, examination results and high school completion rates together with conversations with the Principal over a period of six months as well as access to internal school documents on strategy and organisation.

Lakselv is situated within the Arctic Circle in remote Northern Norway and has around 200 students aged 16-19. The school has a catchment area of more than three thousand square kilometres. Staff and students at the school represent three distinct cultures: Sami, Kvensk and Norwegian and many of

the school community speak at least two languages. Following a long period of 'Norwegianisation' of the indigenous people of Norway (Sami people), during which they were subjugated and forced to abandon their languages in favour of Norwegian, in recent years there has been a commitment to the preservation and revitalising of Sami identity and languages. The Kvensk community (comprised of descendants of Finnish migrants to Norway from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries) was similarly subjected to assimilation policies, finally gaining recognition as a national minority in 1998 with the Kvensk language (which derives from Finnish) being recognised in 2005. The negative policies of the past have left a mark on the region, which has below average earnings, a higher rate of unemployment and lower numbers of students completing further education than nationally (Statistics Norway, 2019). The school is an important meeting-point for the interactions of cultures and will be one of the first high schools to offer education in Kvensk. It has a vital function in supporting young people in the region to have a positive future, complicated by the fact that unlike most other high schools in Norway, more than a third of students live away from home in order to attend Lakselv, staying at the school or with host families. This creates additional pressures for the school staff, not simply in the flow of information between school and home, but more so in the importance of providing a safe and inclusive community for the young people living hundreds of kilometres away from their parents.

### **Student Voice Work at Lakselv**

Principal Sylvi identifies the starting point for the journey as the school's involvement in a national strategy on 'Assessment for Learning' between 2010-12. Although hundreds of schools across Norway participate in this, it had a particular importance for Lakselv because the Principal utilised the framework provided and the mandate for teachers to begin to involve students in learning and assessment activities. The strategy enabled the development of teachers' competence in supporting students to critically reflect on their learning experiences. It provided an opportunity for students and teachers to try out methods for working together and to engage in dialogue about improving learning and assessment in the classroom. These changes were almost immediately reflected in results from the student survey, with Lakselv scoring above the county and national average in 'Student Democracy and Participation' from 2011 onwards. Principal Sylvi recalls that these early successes created a willingness among the staff to incorporate more student involvement in the school and supported the introduction of an internal strategy, which she was able to build upon. The link between student voice and assessment for learning enabled teachers to gain experience and success with involving students in defined ways within the classroom. Teachers received additional support to develop their skills in supporting students to become critical thinkers, and because the strategy was about learning and assessment, it was at the core of the daily business of teaching, ensuring teachers saw the value of the work.

The next steps taken by Lakselv can be summarised into three key areas:

1. *The role of Principal as Student Council Co-ordinator*
2. *The agreeing of a concept to frame intentions and actions*
3. *The systematisation of student voice work and the establishment of partnerships*

### 1. *The role of Principal as Student Council Co-ordinator*

The leadership of Principal Sylvi has been decisive. Having been born and raised in the area and employed at the school for forty years, she has unrivalled knowledge and experience of Lakselv and a vested interest in the future of its local community. Sylvi reflects that she has always been personally committed to student voice and views students as equal citizens, however, it was more challenging to convince others of this. Once the staff had enjoyed positive experiences with working together with students in the Assessment for Learning strategy, however, she could capitalise on this to systematise and elevate the work of the existing Student Council. Important here was the expansion of student voice from within the classroom to the wider learning environment, supported by Sylvi's direct involvement in the Student Council. The Act of Education in Norway requires schools to have a Student Council and for students aged up to sixteen, it is stated that a teacher will support them and participate in the meetings. This is not stipulated for students aged 16-19, however it is normal practice that a member of staff helps to organise meetings and activities. It is rare that the Principal takes the role of Student Council Co-ordinator, but for Sylvi, this was an absolute must if the work of the Student Council was to be taken seriously in Lakselv. Although this could be experienced as negative by the students, Sylvi is careful to define her role as an 'active listener', avoiding an authoritative stance.

### 2. *The agreeing of a concept to frame intentions and actions*

This work has been driven by the Principal, who explains that she encapsulates the school's approach to student voice is encapsulated in the concept 'student as development-agents', which has evolved from Fielding's (2001) 'agents of change' idea, later adapted to 'change-agent' by Fullan (2016). According to Principal Sylvi, the term 'development-agent' has been defined by the school community as "students participating in planning, executing and evaluating teaching and learning as well as actively contributing to the establishment of a good learning environment and community". Student voice at Lakselv is understood as students taking part in deciding specific learning activities and also as students actively shaping the learning environment. This definition has been a focal point for the student voice work at Lakselv and appears as one of the school's six development targets as well as being used in the school's planning documents. This indicates that the concept of 'student as development-agents' has contributed to an embedding of the intentions of student voice work, and perhaps also a shared understanding among staff and students.

### 3. *The systematisation of student voice work and the establishment of partnerships*

Lakselv High School has developed an organisational structure which incorporates student voice work. Class teachers (who have pastoral and academic responsibilities) are partnered with Student Council representatives from their classes, and together they are expected to lead the establishment and maintenance of a good learning environment for all. Principal Sylvi explains that these partnerships have been crucial, both in the practical undertaking of student voice work, but also in relationship building between staff and students, with some staff describing their student partners as "colleagues". Issues and difficulties are managed together and there is a mutual seeking of advice. On a more

strategic level, the partners collaborate to analyse the results of the national student survey in detail, using several days to do so. They discuss results with their classes and set development targets. Time is allocated later to ensure that the targets are being addressed.

The organised and regular nature of student voice work has undoubtedly contributed to its success. Meetings and key activities follow a set routine, which is incorporated into the school's annual plan. The Student Council meetings and class meetings (led by the Student Council) are on alternate weeks, and time is allocated each week for associated teachers and Student Council representatives to plan agendas and follow up issues.

The pillars of the work at Lakselv are therefore, the personal involvement of the Principal, the use of a unifying concept to define the work and the systematisation of practice through the establishment of partnerships. Their formation was made possible by the Principal's ability to build on the school's participation in the national 'Assessment for Learning' strategy. The journey has not been without challenges, however, and although the results have been positive so far, there is a need for continued development.

Facilitating for and participating in the school's collaborative work requires a constant input of positive energy from the Principal as well as an investment of time and resources. Likewise, the commitment to co-operation between teachers and students is dependent on everyone continuing to experience it as valuable. This relies on personal commitment as well as on maintaining the organisational structures. Principal Sylvi describes the efforts to ensure everyone attends meetings. Maintaining the focus on "students as development-agents" is demanding, but crucial to its continued success. Thus far, this has been easiest with the students and class teachers who have been involved in partnerships and the Student Council. It is unsurprising that meeting regularly, discussing and making decisions together and analysing the student survey has led to more buy-in from students and teachers. Subject teachers (without pastoral responsibility) have been more removed from these processes and students at Lakselv have reported that these teachers have struggled to balance teaching the required curriculum and ensuring that students are consulted. Further research on Lakselv may reveal more about the extent of these difficulties.

The intention of this study is not to present strategies to be replicated, rather, it is to communicate as example of a Principal and a school which have managed to operationalise student voice work through three key strategies. Results demonstrate that they have worked for this school and the Principal describes a vibrant, collaborative school environment in which students and staff are able to critically reflect, problem solve and follow up on solutions. The results which support this description will now be presented.

## **The Results**

That the school takes its work seriously can be evidenced through its results. At Lakselv, a greater percentage of students complete their high school education than at other schools in the county. When combined with the school's impressive student survey results, there is an indication that Lakselv is a school which is succeeding in providing a learning environment which meets the needs of its students.

As previously explained, the national student survey is compulsory for students in Year 11, which is their first year of high school education. Participation is anonymised and schools do not have access to the results until several weeks after the survey is concluded. The administration of the survey in classrooms is not defined, making it difficult to assess the extent to which students are steered when answering, however, the school's consistent high scoring over several years combined with other success indicators support a positive analysis. In the most recent results (2018-19), Lakselv school scored better than the county average in all twelve categories of the survey and were ranked second nationally. The school scored better than the national average in ten of the twelve categories and the same as the national average in the remaining two categories. The 2018-19 results by category are presented below in Table 1.

	Category*	Lakselv School	County Average	National Average
1	Student Democracy and Participation	4.2	3.6	3.6
2	Enjoyment of School	4.3	4.2	4.3
3	Education and Career Guidance	3.9	3.6	3.5
4	Mastery	4.0	3.9	4.0
5	Shared Rules	4.5	4.2	4.2
6	Academic Challenge	4.6	4.3	4.3
7	Assessment for Learning	3.9	3.5	3.5
8	Motivation	4.0	3.7	3.7
9	Support from Teachers	4.4	4.1	4.1
10	Support from Home	4.3	3.8	4.0
11	Culture for Learning	4.3	4.0	4.0
12	Percentage of students regularly experiencing bullying	0	6	4.7

Figure 1 Results of Norwegian National Student Survey (Responses from Year 11 Students, Aged 16-17, 96.9% response rate), 2018-19

Categories 1-11 have the range 1-5, with 5 being the best possible score. Category 12 has the range 0-100 with 0 as the best possible score.

\*Translation from Norwegian to English has been provided by the author

These scores are a source of pride for Lakselv School. They have consistently scored above the county average in most areas during the past five years. It would indeed seem that the scores taken together



indicate that students' experience the school as a safe and supportive environment and that this is also positively impacting on their motivation and enjoyment of school.

The Principal explains that a next step for the school is to build on these successes with student voice to improve academic results. Lakselv regularly achieves slightly above the county average, but the pattern of results is inconsistent. For the school to harness student voice to raise output may well involve addressing the challenge already discussed in the inclusion of subject teachers and exploring the potential of productive partnerships between them and students.

The results presented here indicate that the student voice work at Lakselv High School as framed and facilitated by the Principal is having a positive effect on the students' experience of school, thus motivating them to complete their education. It should be recognised that there may be other factors, and further research is needed to fully evaluate the effects of student voice work. The results do seem to indicate, however, that when students and teachers are supported to work together systematically and with a shared agenda, it can positively affect several areas of school culture.

## **Conclusions**

Lakselv High School is of interest because it provides an example of a public high school which is meeting its obligations whilst continually improving through the involvement of students. Lakselv manages to create a safe, inclusive and motivating learning environment which students want to be part of, within a geographical area challenged by its history and known for low educational aspirations. The active involvement of the Principal, the use of a unifying concept, the systematic organisation of student voice work and the establishment of partnerships are measures which could be considered (but not imported) elsewhere.

Schools are unique and highly complex communities operating within extensive varieties of local and national frameworks. A 'one size fits all' approach to student voice and/or school improvement is inappropriate and contradicts the contextually relevant and inclusive school improvement described at Lakselv High School. Norway has provided a comprehensive legal framework to protect and promote the rights of children which schools are bound to follow. We have seen that this is carried out with varying degrees of success, but the laws do, at least, create a shared understanding of intentions and expectations among teachers and school leaders. Schools in other countries may not have such a foundation.

That Lakselv school is remarkable, both in its remote location and in its specific cultural diversity is clear. These factors have motivated the school to be welcoming and inclusive and seem to have unified rather than divided the community. The Norwegian government is actively encouraging the regeneration of indigenous cultures and seeking to atone for the past. This is fortunate for Lakselv, standing at crossroads of three cultures. Other schools face challenges of cultural multiplicity which may be more difficult to unite within a school community and remain unsupported by their governments.

The personal dedication of the Principal and the school ethos which has been created may not be possible in other schools, however, and it would be inappropriate to suggest that this study could be

used as a blueprint for student voice work. In this instance it appears that the Principal has established a position as a facilitator, who lends gravity and importance to the work with student voice, as well as ensuring it continues to be a part of the overall strategy of the school. In part, this can be attributed to the Principal herself; her belief in the importance of student voice and her ability to build relationships with others. The issue of power is especially significant. In other schools, the direct involvement of the Principal could be seen as a control measure, as a straitjacket for student voice work. Having the Principal attend Student Council Meetings may restrict students' ability to express their opinions frankly, and teachers may view the Principal's participation as an accountability tactic. The role of the Principal would need to be clearly demarcated. Additionally, not all Principals are equally committed to student voice work. Clearly, at Lakselv school, the personal conviction of the Principal has been a motivating and enabling force.

It may be exceptional that Lakselv has such a dedicated Principal who sees the including of students as crucial to school improvement and as part of her vocation. There are obviously challenges and limitations. Nevertheless, this study demonstrates that school leaders can frame, facilitate for and enable student voice work; with measurable effects.

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