



Monika Kiszka\*

Adam Mickiewicz University Poznań, Poland

## The student government as an educational method. Rich past and poor present

### KEYWORDS

student government, educational method, children, school, upbringing

### ABSTRACT

Monika Kiszka, *The student government as an educational method. Rich past and poor present. Culture – Society – Education no. 1(21) 2022, Poznań 2022, pp. 247–256, Adam Mickiewicz University Press. ISSN 2300-0422, ISSN (Online) 2719-2717. DOI 10.14746/kse.2022.21.15*

Democratic and governmental transformations require students to develop numerous civic skills that will allow them to fully participate in adult life and enjoy all civil rights. They constitute a very important link in the school education cycle, but above all, in civic education. The student government creates one of the most important forms of social activity available to students, which allows them to develop, among others, organizational skills. It also furthers the child's development. Active participation in the student government is an indicator of students' self-awareness and development; it directs their activities towards cooperation and readiness to carry out tasks for the benefit of the school community. However, despite numerous educational aspects, creating optimal conditions for the functioning of the student government is the most difficult task of a modern school (Sowiśło, 1996, p. 7).

---

\* ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0489-3902>.

## 1. The notion of the student government

Janusz Korczak, while trying to define the student government, pointed out that what it performs is not only a difficult and demanding job, but above all, it is a struggle. Students directly involved in the government activities should fight for those students who are unnoticed by teachers, for those who are quiet and weak. There is no doubt that each epoch has its own individual educational ideals. However, Janusz Korczak's words are still valid regardless of the era or the situation in any given country (Bohucki, 1947, p. 33).

In the Polish education system, the activities of student councils and governments are regulated by Article 85 of the Education Law. This provision sets out specific rules for a student government. The first provision is the method of electing students representing the student government. The students are elected in a secret and open ballot. The regulations for the functioning of student governments are defined directly by the statute of a school or an educational institution. The competences of the student government embodied by the student council include the right to analyse the school's documentation directly concerning students, i.e.: the curriculum, teaching and upbringing objectives and all requirements that are imposed on students. Furthermore, the student government has the right to organize school life, which should ensure the maintenance of the basic proportion between school effort, i.e. learning, and developing one's passions and talents. The student council has the right to publish and edit the school newspaper, as well as organize cultural activities in accordance with students' needs, but in agreement with the school headmaster. However, the most important aspect of Article 85 is the fact that the student council is composed of all students of a given school or institution (act, 2021, p. 110–111).

The basic idea of the student government is to prepare young people for the activities they will undertake, and the ability to develop appropriate responses to possible problems that arise in adulthood. Participating in the student government becomes an opportunity to familiarize students with the conditions of social life and their direct involvement in them. Students have a chance to formulate rules, which allow them to shape the ability to divide tasks and take responsibility for the decisions and actions they have undertaken. Consequently, being a part of the school council shapes students' social instincts, which in turn becomes the basis for civic education. Finally, being a part of the student council ensures that the innate need for self-rule and independence is met. Such activity allows students to fulfil their needs and focus on the needs of others (Bohucki, 1947, p. 34–35). The very idea of student governance is based on the assumption that it is the students

themselves who know what is best for them. It should be noted, however, that the student government cannot focus exclusively on meeting the needs of a selected group, but also on satisfying the general interest of the society (Sowisło, 1996, p. 17). Being a part of the student council is an excellent educational method. By giving students the opportunity to influence school decisions, teachers educate individuals who think independently and arrive at creative solutions to emerging problems. Students look for opportunities to find their own paths and achieve their goals. To prepare an individual best for independent and conscious behaviour in adult life, students should focus on systematic and planned activities in the student council. The application of the student government as an educational method allows to create a coherent school society at school. In such a situation, students begin to get to know themselves and their abilities. Individuals who have the competence to manage the work and those who perform the tasks begin to emerge spontaneously. Additionally, students begin to shape the skills of controlling their emotions and communicating them clearly, and gain courage to express their views and opinions. Therefore, the student council can be viewed as a reflection of real school of life. It becomes a system of social education. Each of the students has the opportunity to shape their personality, and the process of socialization is natural and undisturbed (Bohucki, 1947, p. 36–37).

Looking back to the historical outline of the student government, one should refer to its very beginning, which should be sought in the socio-political assumptions, but also in the pedagogical contexts of self-rule. The intuitive period of development constituted the first period of development. The method of trial and error was characteristic here. Outstanding educators and their actions were guided mostly by their intuition and feelings in creating a student-friendly environment, not by knowledge based on scientific research. The student government focused essentially on the implementation of didactic and educational goals set by tutors. The absolute beginning of the student government was based mainly on the use of ideas to control teaching and maintaining discipline by teachers. In the pedagogical literature, the first mentions of the student government can be found as early as in the Middle Ages. In medieval schools there was a so-called system of helpers, which distinguished three types of the student government: general class officials, law enforcement officials and supervisory officials. In Polish history, the most significant items of information seem to be the ones appearing directly in the acts of the National Education Commission and in the records concerning the Krzemieniec Secondary School in the era of Tadeusz Czacki. The author based his actions on the belief that the only measure that enables constant supervision over the students' behaviour and their discipline is entrusting students themselves with

the power and control over their own behaviour. In the times of the development of pedagogy, some of the activities were aimed at suppressing the idea of student governance. Rousseau's pedagogy and the period of Herbartowska pedagogy contributed to the suppression of the development of the student government. The so-called young rational period was the second period which was conducive to the development of the student government. It was characterized primarily by the multitude of pedagogical and sociological research and the description of the practical experiences of educators (Bohucki, 1947, p. 37–39).

## **2. Main assumptions and functions of the student government**

The student government is an important part of the entire structure of the educational system. Social activity meets the needs of students, but above all, it fosters the comprehensive development of each individual student in any given school or institution. The basic functions of the student government include planning, organizing and assessing life in school and classroom. All the above-mentioned functions are performed by direct and indirect actions of the student government. Some of its tasks include organizing social and cultural events, for example, organizing all kinds of St. Andrew's games or other types of social events. However, its most important functions include cooperation with the principal and representing the entire community of students in various relations with school management, teachers and other school partners (Sowisło, 1996, p. 19).

The goals of the student government were defined as early as 1982 in the ordinance of the Minister of Education and Upbringing. The main goals include striving for independence in solving problems arising in the student community, but also creating a partnership with teachers and school management. Another goal is to shape and develop democratic forms of coexistence and cooperation of the entire school community. The most important competences shaped by participation in the student council include the ability to cooperate as a team and developing creativity. Being a part of the student government is also conducive to developing self-control and self-discipline in students being a part of it.

The tasks of the student government include organizing the activity of the student community and motivating students to fulfil compulsory educational tasks and other obligations to their best. Additionally, the student government is obliged to cooperate with all authorities present at school, above all with the school principal. The student government operating as the student council should, first of all, represent the students and express their opinions clearly and firmly. The student

council should engage in mutual peer assistance and, if necessary, submit applications for financial assistance for the students in a difficult financial situation. The most important task of the school government should be, however, to care of the good name of the school and cultivating the traditions present there (Sowisło, 1996, p. 22).

The tasks of the student government also include preparing students for social life. The student government is understood here as a form of organizing life in a way that will prepare students fully for future life in a civil society. Zbigniew Zaborowski therefore focuses on a few basic tasks. Participation in the student government allows students to develop sensitivity to people's difficulties, build a friendly attitude towards people and trust them. Developing the skills of cooperation and constant social activity are the further important functions of the student government. Additionally, the author focuses on developing patriotic attitudes in students and integrating the entire school community (Zaborowski, 1960, p. 6).

While describing the goals of the student government, Jan Bohucki mentioned primarily coordinating the activities of class councils. The function of the student government, which is to exercise supreme authority over individual class councils, directly results from this very goal. Another task is to adopt and consider all kinds of applications that are submitted by individual students and class councils. The next goal of the student government which can be mentioned here is shaping students' self-confidence and the ability to use their own development opportunities. Further, the author points to instilling the principles of responsibility for their own actions and decisions the students have made. The last postulate is to root the cooperation of the student government with all the school authorities (Bohucki, 1947, p. 142–143).

Zbigniew Zaborowski focused his attention on other favourable conditions, which are related to the possibility of students participating in the student council. The first postulate is the transformation of the school community into a uniform social organism that can accurately diagnose its needs and find solutions to emerging problems. Another postulate is the possibility of jointly and unequivocally opposing a teacher's authoritarian behaviour, which might enforce obedience in terms of participating in the student government and decision-making. Participating in the student government and its emanation – the student council additionally strengthens the ties between individual students, but also the entire school community. Finally, the student government ensures stimulation of teenagers' mental development, extending the range of social experiences they may have and stimulating self-education (Zaborowski, 1960, p. 10–12).

All the functions described above constitute the theoretical foundations laid by outstanding educators. However, the educational reality as a result of the conducted research shows that the assumed functions differ significantly from the real ones. Heliodor Muszyński described the activities of the student government in terms of planning, organizing, evaluating and controlling activities (Muszyński, 1967, p. 151). Julian Radziewicz does not spare words of criticism, either. He addresses mainly the issue of teachers who limit the power of the student government. The main accusations include the direct formulation of tasks for the student government by teachers. Additionally, teachers clearly supervise and directly assess students who perform specific tasks in student councils (Radziewicz & Mirgos, 1988, p. 30–31).

### **3. Upbringing in the spirit of self-governance as a preparation to participate in student democracy**

The student council is an example of an often forgotten educational method. Pedagogical considerations confirm that commitment and conscious participation provide students with the opportunity to learn about many aspects of social life and directly contribute to shaping their character, as well as improving the well-being of entire communities. The students who actively participate in the student government grow up to be active and conscious citizens. Therefore, it can be concluded that the self-governance of the school period leads to the promotion of the idea of self-help, self-education and democracy. The following considerations constitute a set of the most important positive changes and skills that are shaped during activity in the student council and constitute arguments which form the basis for re-thinking the educational value of the method presented above.

Democracy in the modern world is the highest value. That is why it is so important to prepare students for conscious and active participation in social life. However, this is not the only educational aspect that relates directly to the student government thus to student councils. The educational method gives rise to the idea of self-help, which in turn is based on the idea of taking responsibility for one's actions, but it is also related to accepting and respecting other people who are often different from ourselves. Individuals become responsible for their actions and for themselves, and therefore most often they begin to strive to create alternative or creative behaviours that are to help themselves and others. What we are dealing here with is a departure from institutional aid towards independent problem solving. Additionally, an individual begins to understand that the community

has no right to force decisions upon them. Yes, social life takes place in a certain community, but everyone has the absolute right to participate in decision making within the community (Dymara, 2001, p. 68).

Participation in student councils prepares the student to meet the requirements that are imposed directly on individuals by small social groups. The spirit of self-control and self-management is born automatically in small groups. Therefore, schools constitute the environment of microscopic student societies, which allow for conscious participation according to the rules and ethics of participation. Students gain the conviction that through their own activity they are able to achieve a lot. Democracy resulting from school governments shows students that many issues important to them can be solved without the help of intermediaries. Self-activity becomes the key to the development of an individual as well as the entire society. Thus, the idea of participatory democracy was born out of the above-mentioned postulates. The responsibility for promoting it rests directly with teachers and parents, who should teach children to be responsible for themselves and their immediate environment from an early age. All the above-mentioned aspects of learning and the student government influence the development of social networks at school. Students begin to understand that everyone has the right to communicate their needs, and thanks to conversation and mutual cooperation, the network can dynamically develop and create many activities ensuring the success of the community (Dymara, 2001, p. 69–70).

The general educational aspects of the student government, which are indicated by Jan Bohucki, include the possibility of realizing personal aspirations of an individual and values in action. From an early age, students want to be active in their environment and for their environment. During their activity in the student councils, students learn to evaluate events and situations. The evaluation process is significant in the context of adult life and lets them give the right direction to their adult life. Evaluation as a process runs in three parallel directions. The first one is to evaluate oneself and one's own closest school group. The second direction is the evaluation of activities and goals one has undertaken. The last direction is the evaluation of selected methods leading to achieving the assumed goals. Students acquire the ability to predict the consequences of their actions in the long run. The student council also becomes an opportunity to acquire life experience that allows one to be aware of one's own deeds and valuable behaviours (Bohucki, 1947, p. 145–149).

The student government also contributes to the full socialization of the young generation. Thanks to the above-mentioned idea, individuals shape their moral habits and introduce students to morality and community. The student govern-

ment becomes a place for exchanging experiences and building one's identity. The experience of democracy and the student government in early childhood and younger school years expands the school community and allows for social progress in the immediate environment. Thus, the student government introduces students to the democratization of life, so students learn about all forms of participation and social obligations that rest on every citizen. It should also be noted that active participation in the assigned tasks prepares students to perform and fulfil the assigned duties. When carrying out the assigned tasks, students' critical thinking is shaped. As a result, students discern the value of cooperation and collaboration (Bohucki, 1947, p. 149).

Other important values that arise from the possibility of participation in the student council are, above all, developing dignity and personal importance. They result directly from taking over responsibility for entrusted tasks. Students grow up convinced that each individual is important. Each individual behaviour is important for the improvement of the life of the community. In connection with the above-mentioned postulates, students get a chance to constantly improve their personality and shape social interests (Bohucki, 1947, p. 154). Nowadays, the most important aspect of upbringing is introducing students to self-educating throughout their lives. Participating in the student government as an educational method, ensures social progress. The main components are active and operative experience, independence and creativity in making decisions. Therefore, the school should create appropriate conditions allowing for natural experiencing of reality. The student government lets students achieve their goals and broaden their horizons of knowledge and self-discovery. Self-education at school should be manifested in allowing students to participate in student councils, which has a significant impact on the overall school life. Freedom at school allows for the development of multi-faceted aspects of school and out-of-school life. That freedom also allows for the development of independence and individuality. The student government develops a natural willingness to be involved, spontaneous and curious about life. The important aspect of self-education is the awareness of the goal and the activities which must be undertaken to reach that goal. Being a part of the student government prepares students to unleash their strengths and to rely on themselves and their decisions. Each member of the school council must focus on the decisions taken and the consequences that may result from their overall activity. It can therefore be stated that the process of self-education takes place in the course of teamwork, but it develops each individual member (Bohucki, 1947, p. 154–155).

Participating in the student government allows students to test their skills by participating in a variety of activities. Students get the opportunity to come into



contact with various social institutions, thanks to which they gain experience that will influence their future adult life. The school council allows students to develop morally. Students are held ethically responsible for the actions they take while representing all the students. Through experience, students begin to understand the need to adapt to the established norms and rules of social behaviour. In conclusion, students who actively participate in the student government gain the opportunity to shape their own self, foster moral principles, learn the rules and skills of cooperation (Bohucki, 1947, p. 158–159).

## **Conclusion**

The above-mentioned theoretical implications show that the student government is one of the most important educational methods that allow to meet students' basic developmental needs. However, all students' efforts should be coordinated by teachers and the principals. It is the school principal who should create the conditions conducive for the activities of the student government and treat that body as a partner, and not as an unnecessary initiative of the student community. Any manifestations of independence and attempts to take the initiative in a Polish school are very often treated as sabotage or undermining of competences that are reserved for the school management. Teachers fear the independence of their students because they do not want to lose their leadership position. This type of behaviour leads to conflict situations and definitely makes it difficult to integrate the entire school community. Contemporary pedagogical considerations focus on examining the negative causes related to the lack of functioning of student councils in schools. The analyses which have been performed show that teachers, who are responsible for helping students, very often show a lack of elementary knowledge about the development and shaping self-governance among students. Therefore, the most important postulate seems to be the need for school principals to share responsibility and, above all, decision-making authority and give part of it to student governments. The idea of self-governance is therefore the basic developmental need of every student, in order to ensure their proper development. One should thus focus on the positive aspects of the above-described idea of the student government and allow students to be independent. It is obvious that proper cooperation which supports the student government is a challenge for school authorities. It must be remembered, however, that its results in building students' awareness and personality are tangible and of fundamental importance.

## Bibliography

- Bohucki, J. (1947). *Samorząd uczniowski*. Wydawnictwo Józefa Nawrockiego.
- Dymara, B. (2001). *Dziecko w świecie współdziałania*. Oficyna Wydawnicza „Impuls”.
- Muszyński, H. (1967). *Podstawy wychowania społeczno-moralnego*. Wydawnictwo PZWS.
- Radzewicz, J., Mirgos, M. (1988). *O samorządności uczniów w procesie wychowania szkolnego*. Wydawnictwo Nasza Księgarnia.
- Sowisło, M. (1996). *Funkcje samorządu uczniowskiego – założenia i rzeczywistość*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe WSP.
- Ustawa z dnia 14 grudnia 2016 r. – Prawo oświatowe Dz.U. 2021 poz. 1082 z późn. zm. (2021) (Polska).
- Zaborowski, Z. (1960). *Problemy wychowania społecznego w szkole*. Wydawnictwo PZWS.