BIG CHANGE QUESTION
SHOULD PUPILS BE ABLE TO MAKE DECISIONS ABOUT
SCHOOL CHANGE?

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1. TRAPPED IN THE SCHOOL DISCOURSE

My simple answer is “Yes,” followed by the inevitable “but” ... they need the right “literacy” to do so. Whereas in everyday situations young people take up responsibility for real life decisions (e.g. the use of cellular phones with all the costs involved), in school they are still seen as the pupils who have to learn about life. Whereas communicative practices in the life world challenge their daily behaviour to acquire literacy as social practice, teaching and learning practices in the school world restrict them to literacy practices associated with their roles in the classroom. Two main discourse patterns hinder pupils’ participation in decision-making and their control over their learning and learning environment.

On the one hand, it is the discourse of teaching and learning, which builds on the power relationship between teachers and learners in the teaching–learning interaction. According to the IRE pattern (Initiation – Response – Evaluation; see Mehan & Schratz, 1993), the teacher is “right” and the pupil has to follow suit. There is a clear hierarchy in the institutional discourse of teaching and learning in school. The introduction of standards in many education systems has even increased the hierarchical power relationship between children and teachers, although they are meant to be “customer” oriented.

On the other hand, it is the discourse on change drawing on the rhetoric of organisational development, which is very much detached from pupils’ lives in school. Even teachers show reluctance to take up the jargon of organizational development for its managerial rhetoric (change management, benchmarks, 360 degree evaluation ...), let alone the pupils. As a consequence, mostly they do not have much say in school development processes.
Pupils are able to be more involved in the way the school is run, if conventional discourse patterns of teaching, learning and organisational change are shaped in new communicative practices which change the relationship of power. Conventional communication patterns using language suffer from the fact that the power relationship is too much in favour of the adults when young people are confronted with verbal argumentation. Therefore we have to find other possibilities to deal with the “inner world” of schools from the children’s perspective without falling into the traps set by language. That is why we have to develop communicative strategies which are more appropriate to their particular context.

When we use digital communication channels, which determine everyday school life, we touch on the limitations of language. The literacy concept behind it perpetuates the pupils’ deprivation of decision-making in school change: the language of change is simply not their language, and therefore their resistance is often expressed in their silence or passivity. In our work we have experimented more with analogic forms of communication, which give the pupils more ownership over the process of decision-making. Analogic communication is more open to the individual biographical context, giving the children space to make meaning in their own ways of communicating.

Here I present two examples of how communicative practices embedded in relationships of power can be changed, showing that pupils can be empowered to make decisions about school change by analogical approaches.

2. Giving Pupils a Voice

Visuals are excellent means to increase children’s participation in decision-making and control over their learning and learning environment. This is why I provide pupils with a camera, helping them to understand their school as a learning organisation. This visual device helps them to find new ways of looking at school life from a different perspective. The results are not only the evidence of what an individual sees, not just documents but an evaluation of the world view. The pictures taken give a visual insight into the “interconnectedness” between places, rooms, areas and feelings, emotions, and associations, which usually receive little attention in education – and even less in schooling, where teaching is mainly based on cognitive aspects of the curriculum. For Rob Walker (1993), the use of photographs