

How Laborschule's educators experienced the process towards a "Bill of Rights"

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Laborschule Bielefeld has always been known for being a work in progress. Educational principles are always evaluated in a very close partnership with Bielefeld University whilst new knowledge is trailed or implemented in the daily routines. There are several ongoing research and development projects every school term and it was one of those projects that sparked the idea of creating our own Laborschule Bielefeld "Bill of Rights" because this research project focused on democratic education.

In this short report, I will outline my very own personal experiences whilst taking part in this process.

The small research group, working on democratic education, presented the idea to all of Laborschule's educators to provide our children from the age of 5-7 with more rights of their own. Being a social worker, my interest was sparked immediately.

All members of staff agreed upon the research group's proposal on getting some help from a couple of external experts in this area. Kathrin Aghamiri and Rüdiger Hansen from Kiel University had loads of experience creating and implementing constitutions in various nurseries and primary schools. They were, therefore, able to showcase a big variety of practical examples which were extremely helpful to visualise the areas in which the children could have more rights.

We started by writing down all the different areas in which our children already have the right to decide for themselves together with the rights which we as members of staff have decided for them.

This process was very interesting because as one might anticipate not all members of staff share the same views or personal values towards education and therefore the same ideas on what children are allowed to have a say in. We then moved on to the areas where pupils and members of staff have equal rights.

I remember that I was fascinated by the anecdotes told and examples given by the experts, in particular the stories they told regarding children's decisions about what to wear when going outside. Being a mother of two children and working with children every day I knew exactly what they meant. My children never wore their coats in school.

They reminded us about the fact that children need to develop a sense of getting to know their bodies and learn about the feeling of being too cold or too hot.

One of my educational principles is to trust in the children's abilities, to value their opinions and listen to their reasons given as to why they do things one way or another. That is why I was completely vindicated in this meeting because Kathrin and Rüdiger made it very clear that that is the foundation to give the children more rights.

After this first meeting, I started to shine a bigger light on my daily school routines and asked myself numerous times a day, "who gets to decide this?" Do I need to make this decision or could the child/children decide on their own?

The differences in dealing with the children and their rights amongst the members of staff and the sometimes very long discussions between us strengthened my feeling even more that it is necessary to give more rights to the children and to fix those rights in a, where possible, reliable and permanent way. This way the children are given the same rights by any member of staff involved and it's no longer arbitrary.

We had several meetings with Kathrin and Rüdiger. Each meeting followed the same pattern. We decided on the areas we wanted to work on for example "daily assemblies" and divided it into three categories: a) pupils' rights, b) equal rights for pupils and members of staff, "shared rights", c) members' of staff rights.

We formulated each paragraph in a way so that everyone involved agreed with it 100% before we moved on to the next area.

Sure, when it comes to safety measures within the whole school, my work schedule, or general human resources questions it is important that the members of staff have the right to make decisions without consulting the children first. We all agreed on that!

But having the input and insight into a child's mind to create a more comfortable, encouraging and appreciative environment is essential to my work. To that end, I was very happy with the fact that we created a lot of new rights and "shared rights" for the children.

The whole process from the very first idea to embark on this journey until we implemented the finished constitution took us 2 ½ years. This is of course also due to the fact that we had other jobs we needed to get on with during the term.

However, some rights, for example, "the children are allowed to choose what they would like to eat from a provided buffet" took a long time to formulate. Fears that children will only ever eat pizza as a first choice were very persistent. Luckily our experts were able to tell us about a study of theirs which found out that – after a certain amount of time – the children truly get bored with the same meal day in day out and will change their diet independently and of their own choice with a much better long-term effect.

Daily routines, assemblies, general activities, projects, school trips, festive celebrations, decorations, meals, and dress codes are all areas in which children are

allowed to also have a say. Often it is a combined effort with equal partners. In my personal opinion, all the above-mentioned areas gain from letting children bring in their ideas and thoughts into.

In hindsight, I can say it enhances my daily work to this day and allows me to act in the best interest of the children and be a partner of education rather than an educator who decides everything in advance for the children.



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