

Teacher testimony on the diagnosis questionnaire

The team work on the questionnaire was very enriching in many ways: it allowed us to better understand what is meant by “democracy” in school: a word often used as if everyone knew what it meant, but for which it is not so easy to give a definition that works in a school setting...

It also taught us to get to know the team members better, by reflecting together on the different dimensions that were proposed in the questionnaire.

The first dimension – governance – led us to reflect on the ways in which decisions are made about different subjects and the place of the members of the Lab School community: students, teachers and other members of the educational team, parents. We drew up a table to define the respective roles of the community members in the choices to be made in specific domains and to clarify who could give an advisory opinion, who could vote and in which cases, and, if the decision was not to be made by vote, who would be responsible for making the decision and on what basis.

This has led to some changes: for example, each year we choose a theme that unites the whole school and gives rise to a series of cross-curricular activities in different disciplines, guides the choice of school outings and fosters links between students of different ages and levels. Until now, the choice was made by the team at the end of the previous school year, to allow for reflection during the summer. While reflecting upon the questionnaire, we decided to give the students the freedom to propose themes and vote for the project they liked the most. They really appreciated having their say! In practice, this is quite demanding, as it requires teamwork, student council discussions and then a vote. This takes a lot of time! In addition, it requires more flexibility on the part of the teachers, who cannot plan those activities when they prepare their classes during the summer. But in the end, the benefits for students are significant: they feel heard, they learn to accept the decision of a vote, whether their preference prevailed or not, and the debates over the choice of a topic also strengthen the ties between students and between students and teachers.

Regarding the second dimension – inhabitability –, we are lucky to have very nice premises and equipment, especially IT material, which allow us to work in good conditions. Of course, there are some things we lack, such as a playground or a large room that allows the whole school to meet. The reflection on this dimension has allowed us to ask ourselves what could be improved. For example, two classrooms have rather old, poorly insulated windows, and it is a bit cold in winter: discussions with the owner have been initiated to plan to change them and thus improve the working environment. Since the school’s creation, there had been a focus on space arrangements to create an optimal learning environment, with the most flexible classrooms possible. We realized that this falls into this category, but it was not entirely new. This dimension includes protocols to address various difficulties and support to most vulnerable families, which is also very important to us. A directory of reliable health professionals has been initiated and will be completed as new contacts are identified.

The notion of *otherness* or *alterity* is at the heart of the Lab School Paris educational project: cultural, social, cognitive, etc. diversity is valued, and this is reflected in the life of the school, where we put a strong emphasis on the quality of interactions, both between children and adults and between children and adults. It’s not always easy! Research-based approaches help create a coherent framework to develop a common culture, particularly the explicit teaching of behaviors and support for positive behavior. School is also a space for socialization where children learn to live together, to welcome differences, and the role of adults is to support them in developing the social and civic skills that will enable them to become responsible and informed citizens.

Ethos is the most encompassing notion. We realized that part of the work had been done since the creation of the school, in particular the drafting of a charter explaining the values, a work of accompaniment of the development of the social skills and the development of a sense of belonging. But this work is never finished and there are always aspects to be deepened or improved. In particular, with the Covid health crisis, meetings with families have been less frequent and it is important to find occasions to restore the link between the educational teams and the families.

In general, knowing more about what researchers say on a given subject helps us to reflect on our profession, sometimes forces us to reconsider or ask new questions, and allows us to gain some perspective in an occupation that is highly challenging on an emotional level.

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