

Experiences with Sociocratic Circles at Laborschule Bielefeld

1. Sociocratic circles at Laborschule

The introduction of **sociocracy** at Laborschule was accompanied by interviews with colleagues. We would like to collect and share their as well as our own experiences with decision-making in **sociocratic circles** here. Please note that all text parts in quotation marks are quotes from colleagues we interviewed.

According to the colleagues, regular conferences were often dominated by "the enthusiasts" or "the constant complainers", who contributed little to the actual decision-making process or who relativised the arguments. This meant that, in the end, there was a lot of "babbling" without any real exchange. In the sociocratic circle, however, existing alliances between colleagues or the constant resistance against "the doubters" fade into the background since the focus is on the matter being negotiated in the circle. According to the colleagues, it is pleasant that good arguments are heard just as much as objections and that no decision is considered "far-fetched", or that the arguments are played off against each other as in a game of ping-pong without reaching a successful decision.

There are also always colleagues who are simply against all votes simply for the sake of being against something: "There's always the absurd argument that we can do whatever we want here at Laborschule anyway, and in the end it's the school management that decides". From the interviewees' perspective, this attitude cannot easily be changed, since "the colleagues have long since said goodbye internally". However, with the help of the sociocratic circle, precisely these colleagues cannot escape, unless they decide not to attend at all.

The advantages of a **circle** as a form of communication are manifold: "The advantage of a circle is that everyone sees everyone else". This has always been a fixed component of work at school through the assembly rounds and it is also considered meaningful by the adults. "Not turning your back on anyone and being able to look at everyone makes sense."

In summary, the following strengths and weaknesses of the sociocratic circle can be determined on the basis of the interviews:

- Everyone is heard
- There is real co-determination and participation / no hierarchies
- Clarity and transparency
- The matter is in the foreground
- The time required is high (too frequent use can be disproportionate), but there are many ways to shorten or simplify the rules and rituals of sociocratic circles without giving up the basic idea of sociocracy
- The rules of the circle are subjectively sometimes difficult to endure - objectively, however, they are good

2. Sociocratic circle structures that we tried out

Since the beginning of the introduction of sociocratic methods, we have been able to implement and comparatively observe the following three structures:

- The **broader circle**
- **Focused circles** with a final core circle of delegates
- A so-called **turbo focused circle** with a turbo core circle of delegates

3. Broader Circle

In the **broader circle** all employees (in our case there were 60 to 80 adults in one of the open spaces of Laborschule) sit in an appropriately large circle and decide together on a consent.

Decisions in the broader circle were the first form of sociocratic decision-making to be tried out at Laborschule. The great advantage of this form is complete transparency: all colleagues are involved in the entire decision-making process and the final consent is made public verbatim and immediately in the decision-making process. The risk that exists in the broader circle is related to time efficiency and thus the ability of the school community to act: each final round of consent, in which each individual in turn has to speak, can be stopped by each individual stating an objection, whereupon new rounds of discussion take place, in which each individual is allowed to speak. The next round of consent can then again be stopped by each individual person, and so on. On the one hand, this can be very time-consuming; on the other hand, it is a consistent application of the sociocratic circle method in order to hear all objections and incorporate them into the decision.

Another potential disadvantage of this form is that the willingness to communicate, especially critically, naturally varies greatly among colleagues in such a large group. Some simply do not feel comfortable doing so in such an open way.

On the other hand, the openness of a broader circle is also described as positive. One teacher found the large group very interesting, "because it was the first time I had seen and heard all the colleagues in this school. I have already seen them all, but this was really a circle where people suddenly became involved whom I had never heard before. And these are people who would not speak up at a general conference and say, 'I want to say something too', because they would hold back out of respect for the people who speak a lot."

4. Focused circles with a core circle

When we tried out the **focused circles** structure, all colleagues worked on one topic, distributed over a total of eight small circles. Later, delegates elected from each focused circle participated in a so-called **core circle**. In this model, the delegates were obliged to represent the consent from their respective focused circles in the core circle in order to arrive at a final binding decision for the entire staff, including different professions like teachers and social pedagogues.

Deciding in focused circles with a final core circle of delegates from those small circles is reminiscent of a type of parliamentary democracy. In the focused circles, it has been much easier to have a quick, time-efficient and comprehensive exchange of ideas and come to final agreements than in the broader circle. The core circle of delegates then finds it easy to forge a common consent from the various contributions because of the manageable number of people. In order to create transparency, the jointly reached consent must be presented to the entire staff afterwards. This requires the trust of the entire staff in the work of the delegates, both in preparation and afterwards. So far, this has proven to be unproblematic.

One factor that has positively influenced both the managing of decisions and the well-being within the staff has been the fact that the focused circles are made up of educators and employees from all levels of the school. In doing so, a direct exchange between the levels was possible and the different needs and concerns of the different professional groups in the school were taken into account from the beginning. This has led to both trust and constructive cooperation and cohesion among the staff.

The speed of the exchange in the focused circles was seen as a strength of the focused circles. The most important arguments were quickly determined, and the frequent speakers were asked to be more disciplined. Especially when it came to finding a common opinion in the focused circle, this small circle was evaluated positively since one can react quickly to nonsensical arguments or unreasonable expressions of opinion and it is easy to find the opportunity to change or sharpen one's own opinion on the basis of what was heard. The fact that a successful consent was always reached in the end was cited as an absolute strength: "Every time I was a bit surprised and thought, oh look, now we've found a consent after all."

5. Turbo focused circles with a core circle

The so-called **turbo focused circle** differs from the focused circle in that it is less ritualised (no speaking one after the other, no clear division into information round, consent round, etc.) in order to save time. However, it still contains the core aspect that a decision can only take place if there is no objection. In our case, the entire staff decided within 20 minutes at a general conference on the important question of whether a final presentation of the results of the project week should be obligatory or voluntary for all project groups. In principle, the question was whether the work during the project week should be process-oriented or results-oriented. The staff was asked to meet in eight circles of chairs, each with about eight members, to discuss the question informally and without a talking stick and then, after about 10-12 minutes, to send a delegate to come to a decision directly in a **turbo core circle**. The result was then put in writing and adopted as a general decision.

The turbo circle listens least deeply into the staff - not every single person is asked to present their own thoughts in detail. As with the focused circle method, transparency is largely replaced or supported by trust. The ability to act and the time efficiency - especially for decisions that are more or less undisputed in the group - are extremely high with this method. However, it has been shown that the principle of sociocracy – i.e. creating a sense of well-being by allowing all participants to contribute freely and without pressure and with self-selected, by distributing speaking time fairly, and by being heard – is only guaranteed if all people in this circle adhere to the rules of discussion, especially true in the absence of a speaking stick. In general, we have found that sociocratic circles become faster and more time-efficient over time as people become more proficient in this method, which is still largely new to most people at our school.

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