Practising sociocracy at Laborschule Bielefeld

Teachers' and students' experience with the sociocratic method for electing a class representative

After the elections took place in different groups at Laborschule Bielefeld, the team of the research and development team received feedback from different people involved in the election process. This includes feedback from a teacher of the mixed-age group in year 3/4/5 as well as from students in year 7 and a teacher in year 9.

Overall, the feedback highlights the positive effects of using sociocratic decision-making processes. From the teachers' perspective, this approach supports students in developing their ability to look for and present arguments that are based on careful reflection. From the students' perspective, sociocracy allows them to make decisions that everyone agrees with. They evaluate the fact that this decision is made together positively.
Both educators and students point out the time it took to reach a decision. This becomes especially obvious when comparing this approach to more traditional ways of voting. While this appears to be a common difficulty in the beginning, it is important to keep in mind: The more you practice sociocracy, the more time-effective the process becomes. It also helps speed up the process of communication when students have already developed close relationships with their peers

1. Feedback from a teacher in the mixed-age group in year 3/4/5 (eight- to eleven-year-old students)

The teacher gave written feedback in which she mentions several positive aspects and a few open questions.

On the one hand, she affirms that the sociocratic approach helps students to learn how to present arguments in favour of themselves or their peers. This contributes to their ability to look for and present arguments in general. On the other hand, this approach helps students to focus on the skills and traits that make a good class representative. She also appreciates that the hand signals used for showing consent and objection are easy to grasp for students.

Regarding the students' perception of the election process, she points out an important aspect. She is unsure whether it had been clear to her students that the first consent would mean that there would be no further voting process. She asks: "Why should we only vote on one pair of candidates?".

In total, the group needed two 60-minute-lessons for the sociocratic election of the class representatives. After the first lesson, she had the impression that she students wanted to continue, but also to conclude the voting process.

She explains that this was both her and her students' first sociocratic election. She added that it would help to use sociocracy in more contexts at school, which would make the method more accessible to students since they had repeatedly asked why they were using sociocracy instead of the usual majority vote. Finally, the teacher suggested determining the seating arrangement via a sociocratic process as an interesting option.

2. Feedback from a group in year 7 (twelve- to thirteen-year-old students)

Students in year 7 gave written feedback on the question: "What did you like about the sociocratic election of the class representative?". The students expressed many different opinions.

Six students state that everyone agrees with the election result. The fact that the decision was made together is pointed out as a positive aspect by five students. There is one feedback that is particularly interesting in this context: "I liked that I had a say". Here, the student created a new German word "Mitrecht" (literally meaning "with-right"). By taking a closer look at this neologism, it evokes the notion of participation: it links the ability to participate in something to the idea of human or children's rights. By creating this new word, the student expresses that they not only like having the right to vote for their class representative but also enjoy making use of this decision-making power together with their peers.

The second question was: "Which aspects should be changed/improved?". Seven students answered that they wish for the decision-making to be quicker. Three students mention that they prefer voting via a tally list (i.e. counting the votes with a tally list) because this election took too much time. Two students would like their peers to be more open to this method instead of only thinking about themselves. One student would like their peers to let others speak without interrupting them and to give proper reasons for their nomination.

One central finding is that half of the group criticises the time it takes to reach a decision using sociocracy. This echoes the educators' experiences at Laborschule during sociocratic decision-making processes. Taking this into account, it is important to explore the benefits of using sociocracy that may outweigh the additional time needed to come to a decision. During interviews, Laborschule educators illustrated a few of the benefits of sociocracy: being motivated to add your own thoughts to the discussion and to participate in the decision-making, being listened to by everyone as well as reaching a decision that includes everyone's opinion.

Based on this, it is helpful to ask all parties to be patient and have confidence in the method despite their concerns about the time-consuming procedure. It may also be a good idea to add that after practising sociocracy for some time, following the steps will become routine, thus decreasing the time needed until a decision is made.

3. Feedback from a teacher of a class in year 9 (fifteen- to sixteen-year old students)

The teacher gives an overview of how the sociocratic election of a class representative went in year 9. In comparison to the group in year 7, it took the year-9-group less time to come to a decision.

Students in year 9 learn about democratic processes in their German/Social Studies lessons. In the context of the German presidential election of 2021, the students reflected on the skills required to become a political representative. Since this political event coincided with the upcoming election of a class representative, the teacher gave students the following task to be discussed in groups: create a profile of the skills and requirements for assuming the position of class representative.

According to the students' ideas, there are various skills and requirements for becoming the class representative. Overall, social competences are considered the most important prerequisite (e.g. "is a good listener", "ability to make compromises", "is able to mediate in conflict situations"). Additionally, a class representative needs to have organisational competences (e.g. "is responsible") and a neutral attitude (e.g. treats everyone equally").

On the basis of this list of competences, the election itself took place the next day and took 25 minutes. The teacher gives the following reasons for this this swift decision-making process:

- The students had known each other for three years. Therefore, they had already built a relationship of mutual trust.
- During the nomination phase, it became already apparent which student would eventually become the class representative.
- Throughout the election process, the group was able to compare the list of competences with the profile of each nominee in a positive and supporting way. As a result, the whole group was able to quickly agree to electing of the nominee that was presented by the teacher.

Key learnings

Reaching a decision in the quickest way possible should not be the main objective of a political process this important. Since many educators and students have pointed out the time-consuming nature of the sociocratic method, it is however important to highlight the experiences addressed in the above-described example: Under the right circumstances, the sociocratic method can in fact be time-efficient.

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