

Practising sociocracy at Laborschule Bielefeld

Electing a class representative

The sociocratic approach was used at Laborschule Bielefeld in the mixed-age group of years 3, 4, and 5 (students eight to eleven years old) for electing their class representatives.

Who was involved in the election process?

1. The class/group teacher
2. All students of the class
3. One educator acted as mediator to guide the group through the election

Overall, the election was divided into 11 steps, which give you an insight into the nomination and voting process. They will be explained on more detail below.

The 11 steps at a glance

1. Explaining the sociocratic election
2. Defining the roles and tasks
3. Deciding on the role descriptions
4. Nominating a candidate
5. Collecting the nominations
6. The first round of opinions - listening to arguments
7. The first round of opinions - adding arguments
8. The second round of opinions
9. Choosing the candidate
10. Deciding on the class representative
11. Concluding and celebrating the election

1. Explaining the sociocratic election

At first, the educator introduced the idea of electing the class representatives via a sociocratic election to all students. The students with prior knowledge of the sociocratic approach then explained it to the rest of the group. In case some details were missing, the educator added the relevant information.

2. Defining the roles and tasks

Together, educators and students reflected on the character traits and skills that make a good class representative. Both presented their ideas, which the educator wrote on the blackboard. The students could voice all their ideas until nobody wanted to add anything else.

3. Deciding on the role descriptions (in this case the educator decided)

The educator explained that these traits and skills were the basis for nominating potential candidates. The students were informed that they would need to give reasons for their nominations and that the nomination process would take place openly in the group.

4. Nominating a candidate – openly and honestly

Each student received a nomination sheet where they wrote down their own name (since the election process is transparent) as well as the name of the nominee. The adults did not participate in the nomination process. Instead, they helped the students with filling out the sheet and answer the students' questions. Some students asked whether they were allowed to nominate themselves or their best friend if they could justify their choice, and the educator said that they were allowed to do so.

5. Collecting the nominations

All ballots were collected, and the nominees' names were listed next to each other on the blackboard. The educator pointed out that the names were not put in a specific order because what was important was to collect arguments in favour of each nominee.

6. The first round of opinions – listening to arguments

After gathering all the names, the students one after another said whom they nominated and why. The educator recorded all arguments below the name of the respective nominee. Some students struggled with accurately explaining their reasoning behind the nomination. Therefore, the educator supported them with examples (e.g. "I, Leo, nominate Ylva because she is always on time for the council and can always tell the time") and asked questions that helped the students to phrase their arguments. Only arguments in favour were noted on the blackboard. Voicing concerns takes place in the next step.

7. The first round of opinions – adding arguments (and taking a break)

Next, the students were invited to add anything they had not yet said and these arguments were included in the list. At this point, some students found it increasingly difficult to accept their peers' opinions, which became apparent when they interrupted other students even though it was not their turn to speak. They said things like: "That's not true, he doesn't know how to do that". The educator then explained that sometimes there are differing opinions about a topic and that it is totally fine if there are opposing opinions in a group. What is important is that everyone accepts the right of every student to voice their own opinion before discussing this opinion. The students slowly calmed down. The educator praised the class for trying out something new and for participating so diligently.

To not overburden the students, the process took a break at this point.

Afterwards, the educator copied the list on posters, which s*he brought to class next time.

8. The second round of opinions – Looking back and finding new arguments

The educator brought the posters with a copy of the nominee list to class. S*he explained to them that this election was a group process in which the opinions of all parties matter. She added that there may be opinions that may differ significantly from the students' own opinion. However, it is important to be open to their peers' perspectives and to avoid thinking of their own perspective as the "one truth". Instead, this process is about negotiating with each other to find a "shared truth". After that, the educator once again presented the posters and asked the students whether there were any open questions or arguments left.

9. Choosing the candidate

The educator asked whether there are students who felt prepared to take on the difficult role of choosing the candidates for the election. Out of those who signal their willingness to take on this role, two students were chosen. They took a few moments to consider all nominees and then chose two final candidates, based on the role descriptions they wrote before. Then, they wrote both names on the blackboard. From our experiences, at this point the voting process goes smoothly and without many difficulties.

10. Deciding on the class representative

Before starting the election process, the students were once again reminded of the hand signals which they would use to show their agreement or objection:

- Putting one's hand on their heart means consenting to the decision
- Raising one's hand signals objection
- Raising both hands indicates serious concerns

Students and adults were then asked by the educator whether they consented to the candidates that had been proposed by the two students. All parties showed their consent. If there has been no consensus, all concerns and suggestions for improvement from the participants will be discussed and incorporated until everyone agrees with the resolution at hand. Once again, the educator asked all parties, including the two candidates, to express their opinion using the hand signals. Everyone gave their consent.

11. Concluding and celebrating the election

Once there were no more objections, the educator declared that the group had now successfully elected their new representatives. S*he told them that it was time for a round of applause. All students and adults applauded and showed their satisfaction with the election.

A note on the process described above:

It is important to note that this example shows that the election process follows the guidelines in almost all regards. The only steps that are missing: reflecting on the election and the deciding on the role descriptions by consent. The latter step was decided by the educator after the students had collected ideas for the role descriptions.

This documentation is based on Cerulla, B., Engler, S., Exner, A., Herrmann, K., & Zentarra, D. (2022). *SFE*, 1(1), 80-95. https://doi.org/10.11576/sfe_ls-6037

These resources have been created within the Erasmus+ project *LabSchoolsEurope: Participatory Research for Democratic Education*. You are welcome to use, adapt and transform these materials and share them using the same license as the original Creative Commons License **CC-BY-SA** 4.0.



With the support of the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

The creation of these resources has been (partially) funded by the ERASMUS+ grant program of the European Union under grant no. 2019-1-DE01-KA203-005003.

Neither the European Commission nor the project's national funding agency, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) are responsible for the content or liable for any losses or damage resulting of the use of these resources.