

The development of the Stage 2 Constitution

A non-scientific experience report full of love for the cause

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Introduction

Between autumn 2015 and spring 2018, we, the pedagogical team of key-stage II at Bielefeld Laborschule, together with Prof. Dr. Katrin Aghamiri from the Institute for Participation and Education, developed a constitution for our students.

At that time, I had already been at this school for many years, where things are so different from other schools at times. I appreciated that very much and simultaneously it challenged me a lot of times, especially when it was necessary to find a consensus or also to point out boundaries when they seemed sensible to me. Was I allowed to point out boundaries at all at this school where so much value was placed on the children's co-determination?

So on the one hand I was happy that we would hopefully have more clarity. At the same time, I had no idea how we were going to manage developing the constitution, even with the help of an expert. Often times we had not been able to reach a real consensus in conferences, even on much smaller decisions. For example, we had had so many discussions about whether and what exactly our children were allowed to buy in the neighbouring upper secondary school, the Oberstufenkolleg, during the breaks.

Did I have to agree to things in the future that I definitely did not want, e.g. allow the children to buy and eat as many sweets as they wanted for breakfast? I had just had very exhausting experiences with that. Some could barely contain themselves afterwards and I worried about the health of some children because of their sugar consumption. Wasn't one of my educational missions to help ensure a balanced diet and to teach the children about it?

At the same time, I wanted to let the children determine as much as possible themselves, so that they could learn to participate and take responsibility. Again and again there were ambiguities! What was I supposed to allow and what not? Was it OK if I wanted to decide things on my own and also forbid things? So now it was time to draw up a constitution! What would come out of it? I was excited ... and curious ... and sceptical at the same time.

Main Body

On 10th November 2015, we started the preliminary work that would help us to develop a first draft. In my memory, it was clear from the beginning in which rough steps the constitution should be realised. The children should also be involved quickly, which they were.

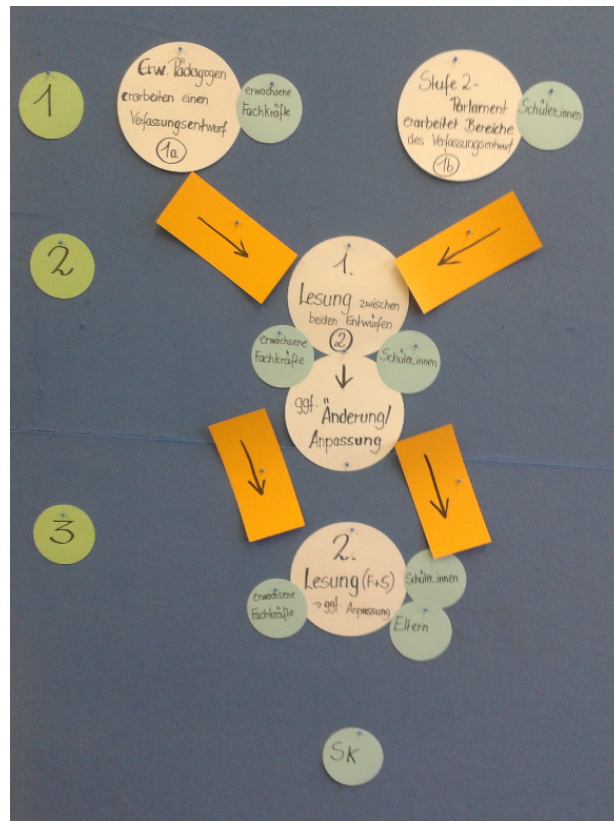


Figure 1 - Overview of the process: 1) Adults and students brainstorm 2) first reading and changes 3) second reading

The way I remember it, we started by looking at the overview with the individual areas that play a role for children and adults in the context of "school and co-determination" (see following picture).

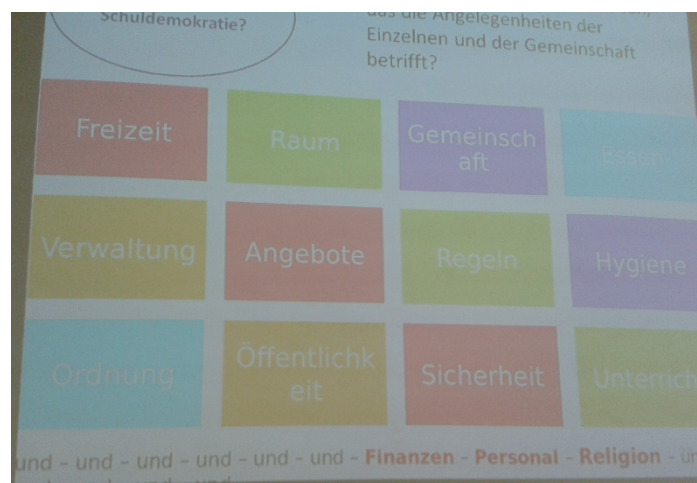


Figure 2 - Overview of individual areas, e.g. free time, space, community, administration, rules, security, hygiene

Based on this overview, we used cards to formulate more precisely everything that belonged to the individual areas for us with regard to our school.

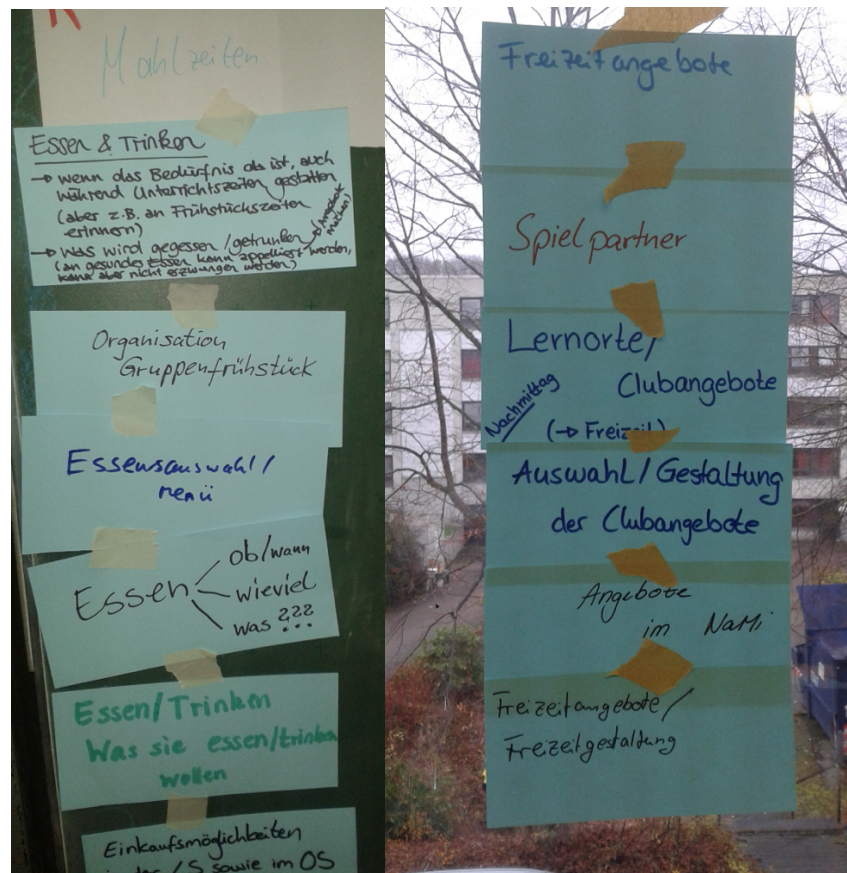


Figure 3 - Examples for the areas "food and drinks" and "free time activities"

Afterwards, we wrote down where we could imagine the children having a say (blue cards) and where it was considered not feasible by us adults (orange cards) for each area exactly. I remember that I struggled a lot with myself when writing these cards, because on the one hand, like I already described, I wanted to give the children as much say as possible, but on the other hand I also wanted to fulfil my educational mission and my responsibility for the care of the children sufficiently, which until then I felt was partly contradictory.



Figure 4 - Cards describing where children can have a say for different areas

Each card that was written, was then read out in plenary. Every single statement was discussed together with the aim of finding the smallest possible consensus.

This was quite an impressive experience, because the whole thing went on in such a relaxed way and even with laughter, which I would never have guessed. All of this took place after many hours of teaching, with many people in one room and until late in the evening, yet we were highly concentrated and discussed every detail.

Many times, I have wondered why this was possible in such a relaxed way. Here are my thoughts on the situation:

- In many ways it had to do with Katrin Aghamiri, who had prepared us so well with her first actions.
- Katrin remained very relaxed herself, always grasping the root of the problem as soon as we were "stuck". In the past, we had argued about strategies and had the feeling that we had to prescribe an exact path or rule, e.g. that all children are only allowed in the Oberstufenkolleg with prior adult permission. Now we had a very empathetic and experienced facilitator with us who helped us to stay more at the level of need, which was what we were really about, and things worked out much better.
- I think it also had something to do with the fact that Katrin felt that we were so willing to let the children have a say and expressed this very clearly again and again. This amazed me, as I felt myself to be too rigid and therefore too strict.
- I was also helped in many places by her great clarity, both on the visual level and with words.

- Even today I can hear Katrin's voice in my head saying: "If it becomes dangerous, you must and should of course intervene, even if you here decide to let the children make their own choices. That is, of course, still your duty." It was precisely this statement that made things so much easier. It made the agreements really easy.
- There was more and more clarity and unity the longer we talked. We also noticed that most of the time we were much more in agreement than we had known before. That too was an extremely positive experience.
- In addition, there was also a kind of veto right built in, which made it even easier for me to say "yes" to the children's co-determination more often:

At the same time, some of the children from their students' parliament worked on the same topic and expressed their wishes, which were also included.

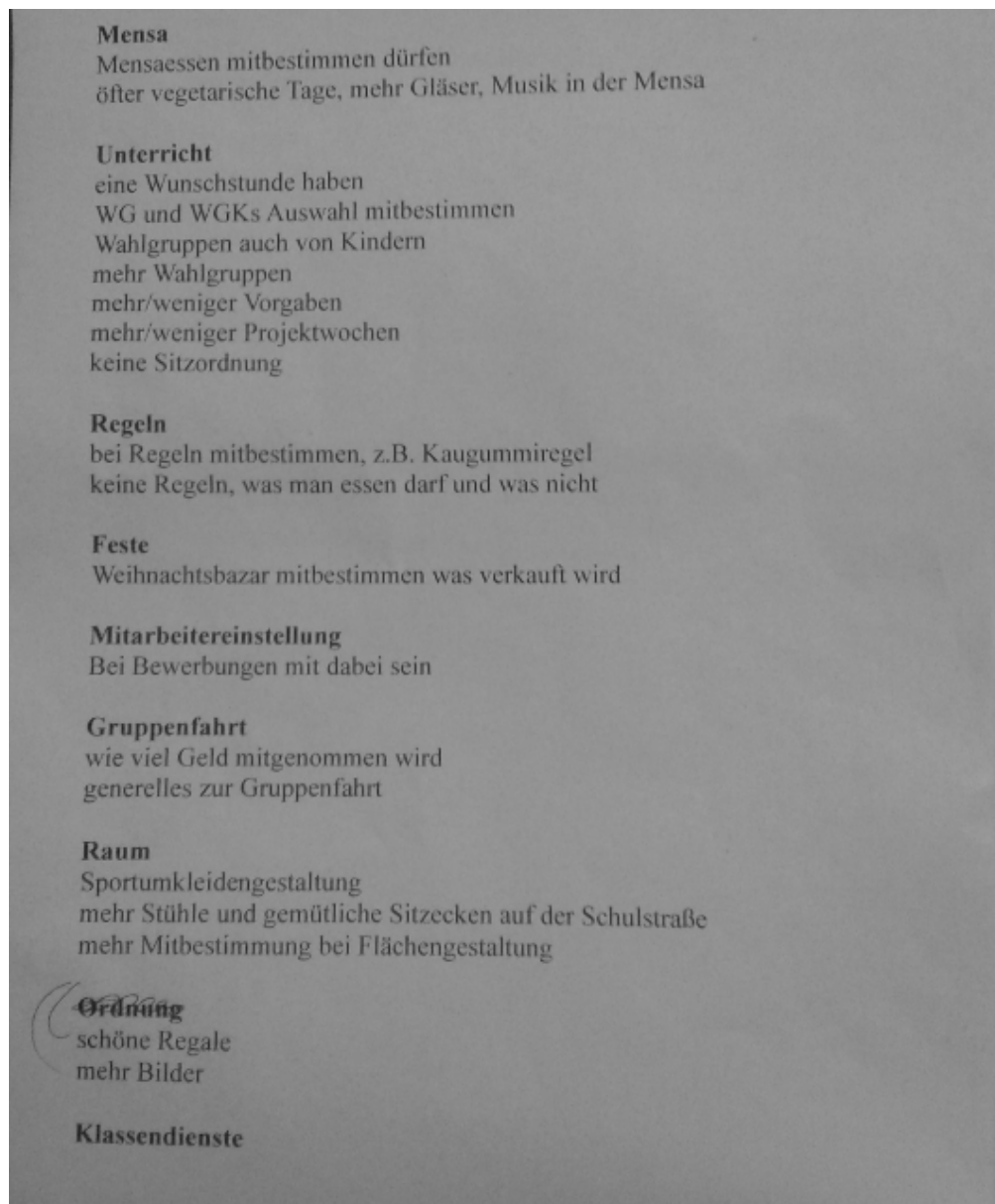


Figure 5 - student wishes e.g. being able to decide on the food that is offered, being able to put in wishes for lessons and having a say in certain rules (like the bubble-gum rule)

Following this process, it was then relatively easy to formulate appropriate sentences from our consensus. When we were unsure, we looked at the wording in the key-stage I constitution that had already been developed. At the next meeting we went through everything again, I think, and then the implementation continued as shown in the photo.

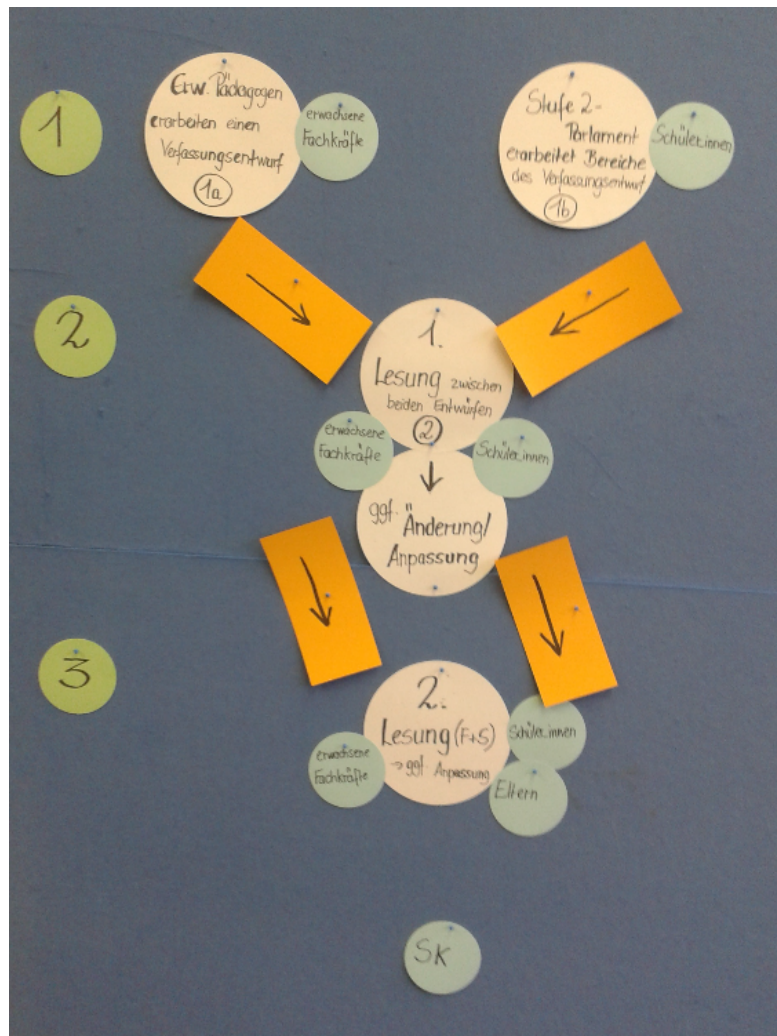


Figure 6 - Overview of the process: 1) Adults and students brainstorm 2) first reading and changes 3) second reading

Conclusion

I think developing the constitution was a great gift for the children and for us adults, because it brought all of us so much clarity and thus assurance in our actions.

Nowadays, we are all much clearer about what the children can and cannot decide. I no longer interfere with their choice of clothing when they go outside, unless it is sub-zero outside and we move further away from the building.

I now tell the children clearly beforehand whether it is an information, whether I "only" (but at least) listen to them or whether they are allowed to have a say. I do interfere if they are eating sweets without restraint. I advise them and give them reasons for my concern. I also tell them what happens if they are negligent with their freedom, that I then restrict their right to self-determined eating in alert concern for them, because eating sweets is harmful to children's (and adults') health if they eat too much of it on a permanent basis.

This new clarity has made me much more relaxed. This also makes it easy for me to let the children take part in the decision-making. The inner struggle with myself has stopped. I know that I can always say "no" when things get dangerous.

Again and again, I have been presented with great ideas and great achievements that "only" became possible through co-determination. I myself would never have had such creative ideas, and the children are passionate when it is their ideas that they can then realise.

Because the development of the constitution was based on consensus decisions, we have also found a different form of voting within the group as a result. Nowadays, we vote by consensus in our group, i.e. we do the things that cause the least resistance among the children. So finally, there are no more perceived losers and everyone feels heard and taken seriously. My feeling is that the value of democratic action is now much more apparent and felt by the children.

What a great idea it was for us to set out on the path back then. For the future, I would like us to develop further constitutions, one with the pedagogical team of the whole school and one for and with the parents.



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