

Theoretical background

School constitutions and parliaments as elements of democratic participation at Laborschule Bielefeld

A guiding principle of Laborschule Bielefeld is the idea of school as an “embryonic society” (cf. Kurz et al., in press), according to which the students see themselves as part of a community, thus being able to experience social cooperation in their everyday school life. This idea is supported by Laborschule’s orientation towards democratic education, which means that educational processes should be both experience-based and participatory as well as advocate for democracy (Fauser, 2007, p. 37 f.; Breit, 2005, p. 43 f.). This orientation is based on the assumption that two aspects are of particular importance when it comes to political learning processes: Firstly, dealing with issues that are highly relevant to everyday life and, secondly, experiencing what it is like to take action (Fauser, 2006, p. 84). Thirdly, it is assumed that people develop democratic attitudes and patterns of behaviour primarily through experiencing life in environments that are guided by democratic principles (Edelstein, 2009, p. 8).

In order to meet the need for establishing opportunities for student participation and democratic education, the daily routine at Laborschule Bielefeld is characterised by numerous democratic assembly formats. On the one hand, the students hereby learn about direct democracy by participating in the decision-making process (e.g. through regular group assemblies) when it comes to matters that directly affect them. On the other hand, the students also become familiar with life in a representative democracy, for example, by taking discussions and decisions that involve various groups to the school parliaments and the student council (Biermann, 2017, p. 26; Asdonk et al., 2017, p. 66). Since around 2010, the student parliaments have been established bodies at Laborschule whose executive function is enshrined in the constitutions of each key stage. In the process of writing these constitutions in 2013/14 (key stage I) and 2015-2018 (key stage II), certain organisational aspects of these parliaments were modified, and specific central regulations were established: According to these, the two spokespersons or their representatives, who are elected by the groups each year, take part in the parliamentary sessions as representatives of their respective groups. In addition to that, two educators are present during these parliamentary sessions;

having been elected by the students of the parliaments, they play a supporting role and do not have voting rights in the parliaments. The parliamentary sessions take place once a week if possible and at least once a month with the objective of addressing topics which are relevant to the respective key stage as a whole or which are of interest to the student council. In the context of the parliamentary discussions, decisions should be made by consensus if possible. In case a consensus cannot be reached, decisions are made by applying the principle of the simple majority. All parliamentary sessions are minuted and the minutes are both shared with the groups of the respective key stage by their representatives and as a report within the school. Nevertheless, the constitutions of the key stages I and II specify areas of school life in which educators are exclusively responsible for making decisions, despite the intended student participation. This means that there are specific areas in which the parliamentary decision-making power of the student body is limited (Freke et al., 2020; Laborschule Bielefeld, n.d., pp. 17-19).

The institutionalisation of such student bodies aims to foster the students' personal competences as well as to test and establish democratic practices in the everyday (school) lives of young people. Over the last decades there has been an increasing interest in involving students in decisions that have actual consequences for their school life, instead of keeping student participation limited to a theoretical-formal context (Eikel & Diemer, 2006, p. 2; Bauer, 2018, p. 680 f.). In this context however, the question arises to what extent these formats of student responsibility and self-determination that have been established by the schools themselves are in fact able to meet the demands described above (Bauer, 2018, p. 686). Further potential problems are seen in the lack of interest and commitment of the people involved, as well as in role conflicts both on the part of the students as well as on the part of the teachers. Students, for example, may be exposed to contradictory expectations of their peer group and the school setting, while teachers may be caught between their traditional role as advisors and their power to intervene on the one hand, and the restraint that is needed when it comes to students' decision-making processes on the other hand (Eikel & Diemer, 2006, p. 4 f.; Bauer, 2018). The constitutions of the key stages at Laborschule provide a solution to these challenges by defining both on an organisational-formal level what kind of decisions specific constitutional bodies are allowed to make and on an individual-personal level by clearly delimiting the decision-making freedoms and limits of students, teachers and educators.

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With the support of the
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