The School of Circles through the eyes of an educator in a mainstream school context

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Abstract: The paper which follows was born out of the need to reflect on the experience gained during a teaching assignment mobility realized within the framework of an Erasmus+ KA1 project and targeting the core principles of the Democratic School. Drawing from the theoretical background of Sociocracy which calls for a different view of schooling and aims at reinventing learning and teaching, the paper aspires to communicate the observations made and recorded in a journal, feelings sparked and thoughts evoked while spending a period of twenty-one days as a member of a diverse yet enthusiastic school community in Deurne, North Brabant, the Netherlands. The major goal is to initiate a personal quest of the meaning and means of education through the juxtaposition of two approaches, a traditional and an alternative one. The discussion touches upon many pedagogical issues like the inner drive to learn and how this is accomplished in both contexts. The pursuit and development of meaningful changes in the school environment which will be powered by the notion of play, freedom to learn and democratic co-existence constitute the proposal of this work.

Keywords: School of Circles, education, freedom to learn, consent, Sociocracy

Introduction

The perspective of teaching in a different school environment is definitely one of the main gains an educator can hope for while participating in a European programme and this alone can be a memorable experience if not a turning point in their teaching career. Getting prepared for the visit to LOS meant a number of things like weighing diverse approaches of education, diving into personal visions, questioning practices, collecting queries about daily practicalities and sharing an explorer's excitement on the start of a promising exploration.

Reading through the presentation of the school in the website, one is confronted with descriptions which certainly raise questions and dominate the content of this paper: learning with the "heart and soul" in non-conventional classrooms and taking decisions while sitting in circles of mixed-age groups of people in the framework of an alternative method. Therefore, a quick glance at the role of schooling in children's lives especially in our era will be offered first followed by a more detailed presentation of the governance system in question and a report of conventionally filtered feelings and ascertainments. Sociocracy which started as a suggestion for the educational world by Gerard Endenburg in an effort to replicate a business

administration system (SociocratischeKringorganisatieMethode) long after the term was coined by a philosopher[1], will be in focus.

1. On the way to school

What connects children in Mesopotamia of 3000 BC with those of feudalist Europe of the Middle Ages and their peers in a missionary school in Kenya of 2020? It is the common, long-lasting experience of schooling, a period in their life usually running in parallel with their childhood and early adulthood years and playing a vital role in the shaping of their personality and the social structure they are part of. The school institution has always sought ways to instill knowledge, preserve past behavioural norms and regulate new ones by teaching children even 'how, when, where, and for how long to laugh' (Parvulescu in Grosvenor, 2012). Schools have also been held responsible for people's well-being and quality assurance, they have been addressed with demands for greater efficiency and at times they have been charged with failing to increase innovation and creativity (Craft, 2006). Closely connected with political, economic, and social factors (McLaren, 2016) school systems around the world have undergone reforms, survived innovation attacks, believed in radical promises. Still, they have been competing with their target audience in a race towards maturity and efficiency often changing orientation according to the current theories.

2. The School of Circles

Inspired by the vision and work of the educators Betty Cadbury and KeesBoeke back in the mid-sixties, Gerard Endenburg developed a decision-making method the Sociocratic Circle Organisation Method (SCM), which soon expanded in organisations, business structures and education. Sociocracy[2] is a governance system which draws from the familiarity and routines engaged while members of a group need to take a decision. As a social construct, Sociocracy reached its current form in the 1980s and bases a lot of its potential on the people and the in-between relations developed during a decision-making process. The belief in equality among people and their right to take minor or major decisions relating to their life and enjoy living peacefully and collaboratively with each other resembles the thinking behind any democratic

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[1] From https://www.sociocracy.info/origins-of-sociocracy/Retrieved July 13, 2020: The idea of a sociocracy began with French philosopher and sociologist Auguste Comte. Sociology was a new science, the study of people in social groups. The root word for both sociology and sociocracy is the Latin, socius, which means a friend, an ally. People who know each other and are members of the same group or society. The suffix -ology means "the study of" as in archeology, psychology, etc. The suffix –ocracy refers to a particular form of governance. Thus a sociocracy refers to governance by people who know each other, friends or allies.

[2] For an introduction to Sociocracy watch the video The Operating System of the New Economy https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3zFWpntExg or visit the websitehttps://www.sociocracyforall.org . Concise and practical guidance to the steps one should follow in order to practice the method can also be found on Learn to Change (a non- governmental organisation which invests in human development within a frame of social justice and creative human emancipation https://www.learntochange.eu/2018/10/14/consent-decision-making-for-student-voice/).

governance system. The difference lies in the fact that Sociocracy goes even deeper, suggesting consent instead of majority and sharing leadership and power instead of preserving it in the highest ranked positions (Rau & Koch-Gonzalez, 2018).This is what Image 1 depicts below.
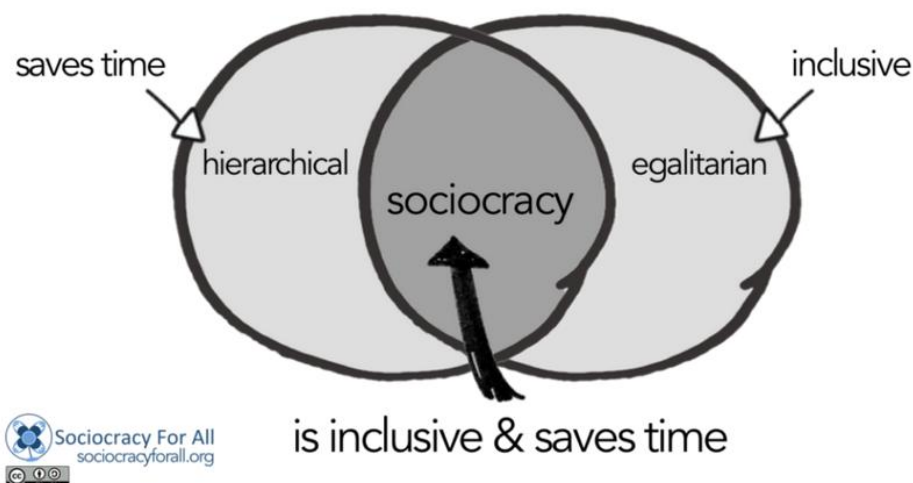
Image 1.Moving forward with everyone included (from https://www.sociocracyforall.org)

This transfer of leadership and joint decision making happens through a system of interconnected domains, the so called "circles". Participants join and work in small circles (and sub-circles) which focus on certain areas of a wider issue before they all join in the big circle (super/parent-circle) and work on the final decision. Circles are there to ensure that certain changes happen during the decision-taking process: talking takes place in rounds and it is not monopolized, listening gets more important than speaking, moving forward in joint forces crosses the line before polarizing manners. To ensure all these will happen, circle participants follow certain steps. Preparatory work is made with people working on a reasoned framework for presenting their proposal. Having understood every aspect of the proposal is in the main interest of this stage so that everyone is in the position to contribute to it with suggestions for improvement, thoughts and feelings about the way this affects the future of the whole group, answers and clarifications on possible objections or hesitations no matter how small they are. As soon as everything is clear, participants express their consent in turns and the decision enters the implementation stage.

The Sociocratic method is followed in schools around the world. From Sudbury in the US and Summerhill in the UK to the group of Democratic Schools in the Netherlands, the members of the EUDEC family in Europe, the Australasian Democratic Education Community ADEC in the east. Although school institutions which operate according to this organizational structure belong to the alternative schooling spectrum and depend mainly on private funding, an interest in the qualities they can bring to students' lives becomes apparent and even stronger in the light of inadequacies conventional education leaves unhitched.

3. Teaching and Learning at LOS

3.1 The premises

"I arrived at LOS at noon. A kind local offered to drive me to the school and on the way he informed me that the building the school is housed in today used to be a restaurant some years ago. Indeed, the former use of the place was still evident. Spacious and sunny with a big lawn-covered garden with trees, it quickly made me visualize it full of customers who were surely enjoying their food and surroundings in what could be a Michelin star winning diner. … In a nutshell, the place looked more of a big country house inhabited by many excited campers rather than youngsters of the attitude we expect to meet in schools …"

People say the first impression counts the most. Researchers have also validated the impact of aesthetics on the emotional and cognitive development of humans (Moore, 1994; Nicholson, 2012; Weinstein, 1987; Wohlwill& Heft, 1987). LOS surely managed to capture my attention with its elegant and comfy interior and drive my thoughts towards the first question:

How much do surroundings contribute to the mission of a school institution? What is the ideal home for people's body so that their mind and soul inhabit fertile grounds for imagination and creativity?

Living half of your day and moving around a building which caters for your right to decorating and enjoying your own private space , your needs for comfortable, home-like and of high aesthetics surroundings justify what is declared in relevant literature: whatever children do and accomplish cannot be seen in isolation from what surrounds them (Tanner, 2013). Children at LOS seemed to enjoy and respect this freedom and their daily routine was a proof that this respect was translated into action: they were responsible in turns for keeping the place clean and tidy for the next day and this is something we are not used to witnessing in our schools.

"The extra big kitchen is a place to be used for preparing and enjoying food, chatting, organizing activities and spending time. Next to it, there is an entertainment and sports room where students can use to play the billiards, listen to music, practice indoors sports and dance. The rest of the ground floor is full of meeting corners which host the school circles, one for every subject/activity taught/done. Almost every room had access to the garden a patch of which was occupied by a group of students and where work was in progress: the building of a tree house was of vital importance to the three boys I met there struggling with tree logs and wooden sticks. Four big tree trunks create a climbing lessons pit on the other side of the garden while the shadow of the trees and a swing rope is at everyone's disposal."

Learning can happen everywhere life is. From the schools at the forest (O' Brien, 2009) to recent calls for outdoor learning (Dyment, 2005; Harvey et al., 2020; Hoffman et al., 2007) experience generates learning in a powerful way (Kolb, 2014; Lewis & Williams, 1994). I noticed it happening while watching the children chatting in the kitchen, negotiating over a

computer in the comfort of a sofa, challenging the rules of a game in the garden, discussing over the analogies of ingredients in the kitchen or operating a vacuum.

3.2 The people

Soon I was invited to attend a small teachers' circle on the grass, a meeting which started by everyone taking turns to speak without being interrupted and finished by everybody's consent to the decisions taken and the usual meeting minutes keeping on a two-page document which as I was told was to be reproduced and filed in a digital form, too.

I called them teachers but soon I was advised to use the term "coaches" instead. Begeleiders (Dutch version of mentor, leader, coach, guide) in a School of Circles share the same vision of education which makes it an extraordinary starting point and probably a common ground we often miss in our traditional school environments. These people are convinced that learning happens when humans feel the need for it and they start turning motivation into action. This takes time, and that is why children should be left alone to realize that moment. Meanwhile, the coaches' duty is to provide them with opportunities and stimuli, to expose them to real life situations so to favour their inner search for identity and mission. When worries about the way to handle a possible delay of this revelation moment were expressed (a state which in most educational systems is expected at the age of six or a bit later) and how schools of this type make sure that they all accomplish this task in due time, this is what came as an answer:

"…. *You saw our students and us taking part in circles where all decisions are taken. Before having these meetings, we hold training sessions about the way we should all behave and act and then we vote for the post of secretary. A student who didn't know how to read and write nominated himself for the job but he was turned down for time being due to his inefficiency to cope with the task. As a follow up, the student asked to be taught how to do this and writing and reading sessions were scheduled with a begeleider right away.*"

Gray &Chanoff (1986) who conducted a survey among Sudbury Valley School[3] graduates so that they examine whether this extended freedom and personalized readiness points for learning resulted in higher education studies and successful careers later on, they confirmed students' following successful careers. They also reported on the way the school benefited them through this right to free choice by allowing them to grow in areas such as "*personal responsibility, initiative, curiosity, ability to communicate well with people*".

How can we increase the catalytic power an educator infuses in the teacher-student chemical reaction? Which practices favourable to children's growth should educators develop while teaching?

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[3] The Sudbury Valley School is a private day school located in Framingham, Massachusetts founded by Daniel Greenberg, a wide-ranging scholar who had previously taught physics and the history of science at Columbia University. His primary was to goal was to develop a place where people of all ages can feel comfortable, dignified, and free to pursue their own interests.https://sudburyvalley.org

Creating self-direction opportunities, fostering autonomy and democratic values which prepare children for their adult life, being close enough to be able to guide without interfering with personal choice and responsibility for it could be some of the patterns that could be followed by teachers. Buber saw the teacher as a community builder, Freire drew the attention to their political qualities and Gur-Ze'ev promoted the teacher-improviser model who encourages criticism (Guilherme& Morgan 2018). Whatever the answer, it is closely connected to the vision of education we share with other co-travelers during the journey. Is the latter somewhere close to the image of autonomous students we want in our world? Maybe the following evidence points at a starting point:

"*... I knew we were close to the end of the day when I heard the noise of vacuum cleaners and that of dishes being put in the dishwasher. By the way, the school is full of electrical appliances which children use with great ease as the message on the storeroom implies.*

...the school is a living proof of the fact that what we call sustainable and self-organised educational institution is not a utopia. Everywhere you look you see beautiful things made of re-usable material. Lots of resources are preserved in order waiting for the next user and use. From kids' bikes parking lot to the brushes case, things echo a feeling of responsible use and respect to the people who share the premises."

If one can discern the developing profile of a self-sufficient, responsible and creative future citizen in the journal extracts above then the answer to the previously posed question is a positive one.

3.3 Parents' side of the story

"Oscar's mum drives 80 km a day from home to school and back but at least she is certain that her boy is well taken care of and happy here. When I asked her how other parents she knows react to her decision to have Oscar here she told me that most of them acknowledge the truth of her arguments for this institution but they are unable to follow mainly due to their finances or they just wait to see if this whole endeavour will bear any fruit. While we were having this discussion, Oscar was jumping on the trampoline giving us a live proof of his mother's claims."

In an article which captures most of parents' assumptions about their children's education, Alan White (2017), an inspired educator with long experience in traditional schools as teacher and principal, refers to a number of clichés we have all heard of, defended or followed at least for some time in our lives. According to these, what we usually display as personal qualities in our adult life is what our parents and teachers chose for us, it is dependent on the amount of hours of instruction and tests we received and it is related to the level of obedience and focus on hard work starting at a very early age. A sociocratic school's philosophy invites parents to reshuffle the cards replacing these assumptions with others more supportive of personal decisions and 21st century-oriented beliefs about education. He claims "*As parents you are...with one foot in the past and one in the present. Your child has one foot in the present*

and one in the future….The experts who are currently directing the agenda for children in traditional education will be ancient history." and one can hardly come up with a reasoned argument to confront him. We must not forget that parents themselves are products of an educational system which had been conceived and shaped in the socio-cultural framework of a period, most likely long before them, and was applied on them aiming at an outcome with little to offer to the context it would be utilized. Therefore, breaking the chain of old-fashioned and doubtful hypotheses might be the first wise thing to do. It is just another significant question seeking an answer.

Is it possible for a school to shape parents' expectations from schooling? How can schools maximize positive parental contribution to children's development and minimize negative input?

3.4 What's going on in a circle?

"Comfortably seated on the floor, children and coaches had a white sheet of paper in front of them with their name of it. The paper went around in the circle in a clockwise mode and each person held it for a minute and put the positive qualities of the person which might be useful in case they were appointed as the chairperson of the circle meetings. When the circle was complete there was an extra minute allowed for people to add any new thoughts. Norah who can't write yet was helped by Mariken. Right after that each person took turns to read the qualities on their paper. Finally, the most important qualities were put on the big portable notice board and were discussed within the group…

…The first big event of the day was the circle meeting to decide on the leader and procedure of the meetings in the future. Three of the most experienced children would act as mentors for the rest of the group. All children took turns to express their feelings and opinion about the whole procedure and there were 3-4 of them who said they were not interested in participating in the meetings. These ones were asked to give a very good reason for this and their decision was respected."

Circles are an essential part of the Sociocratic method and their function satisfies the needs for organisational effectiveness and equality between members. Buck &Villines (2007) emphasize the quality of shared-decision making by consent and not by voting, a procedure which includes a lot of feedback and the voiced will and critical thinking of all participants in a circle. A schematic representation of the procedures and work patterns taking place according to the Sociocratic method can be seen in Image 2.

Image 2. How circles work, from the book: "Many Voices, One Song: Shared Power with Sociocracy"

Matters are discussed thoroughly and concrete proposals are expected. Participants are invited to convene bearing in mind that they are looking for an aim, a way to achieve it and everyone's contribution. Consenting to a proposal means everyone's decision to work collaboratively for the implementation of a task everybody agrees to be launched. The whole procedure prepares children for future democratic exchanges, it trains them in the diversity and tolerance pit, it teaches them how to handle their reservations, hesitations, uncertainties, doubts or discomfort in a civilized manner. But most importantly children learn that all these feelings and thoughts have their place in our world, they are welcomed because they promote life in its most colourful and rich version and disseminate the belief that all humans belong to the biggest circle, the globe.

How can schools build stronger bridges between childhood and adulthoodhelping the young generation shape and pursue a personal vision with a global positive effect?

3.5 Where the world turns into a playground

"I asked Anja about her thoughts of having a mixed age group of children all under the same roof and asking them to follow a common daily routine. She confirmed what I had seen happening in a Finnish school I visited some years ago: older students learn to care about the wellbeing of the younger ones. They monitor, protect, share, play with them as if they shared family bonds. She also said that the same attitude is true the other way round. The little ones were worried when they saw an older student cry and they always informed the coaches if they saw something strange going on. I saw this happening when I was invited to play

"Stratego" with a mixed age group in the nearby park. The kids were communicating so wonderfully and they enjoyed the luxury of a green park right next to their school. No coach escorted them there and there was no monitoring by an adult even though playing included running through trees and bushes next to a stream…The kids played with a lady's dogs who happened to be at the park and when the time came to return to the school everyone called for each other and made sure the whole group was safe and sound at LOS."

Play constitutes an integral part of childhood with significant implications on their development. At the dawn of the previous century Karl Groos (in Gray, 2013) drawing from Darwin's theory elaborated on the value of supporting and extending this innate tendency of children for the benefit of developing skills which would be useful later on in their life. Vickerius& Sandberg (2006) refer to the microsystem and mesosystem of play and their influential power on the development ecosystem of humans during childhood. Gray (2011) supports the views on the significance of play in childhood referring to observations and research conducted at Sudbury Valley. He confirms what was witnessed in this little school in the Netherlands: "The older players reminded the younger ones of what they had to do". Aren't these little reminders a scaffold for learning? Isn't this mixed-age play a source of additional care, support and responsible behavior modelling for the little ones and a how-to-lead example and creativity activator for the older children?

Do our schools promote play and games for the cultivation of a culture of peace?

3.6 Life skills loading

"One of the things that impressed me the most is the fact that kids speak very good English. I grabbed the opportunity to talk to Moos today (his height and looks make me guess he is no older than 9 years old). He told me that he mastered the English language through gaming. He has been playing computer games since he was very young and been talking to his game companions (Americans, English, Norwegians) in English. I am not sure how much this jeopardised his safety but it has certainly boosted his foreign language skills! The same kid is very keen on designing trains. He has been working on a new design which he insists on sending to LEGO in Denmark and asking them to turn his design into a new Lego model. The coaches help him mail his design once it is finished (entrepreneurship on the go!)"

21st century education has been witnessing a rise of the global interest in the development of life skills. The photo puzzle from the visited school in Image 3 sums up some of the skills in focus: entrepreneurship, collaboration, development of manual skills, collegiality, critical thinking opportunities, sharing, openness, learning with and from adults, making toys, cooking, knitting, sewing, artistic expression, creativity, ability to improvise, making a fire, making a decision, applying science, contributing to a pleasant atmosphere, knowing how to behave in a social event and many more.

Image 3. Scenes form life in LOS Deurne

Students in a School of Circles do have many opportunities to learn by trying, using, tasting, applying, negotiating, failing, leading, generating, standing up for themselves. The attitude of the method towards learning and teaching, the function of circles and the increased level of autonomy students enjoy create fertile grounds for life skills development.

How can educators maximize learning to do and how does this change their role in the classroom?

4. What if

Returning back to a conventional school environment after having experienced teaching in a School of Circles is a revelation moment, one of mixed feelings, tripping over disappointment, rivalling your comfort zone and known paths, rebelling against imposed decisions which limit your actions and immunize you and your colleagues against innovation initiatives but also realizing in relief that you manage to revive in the oxygen vision provides.

Centralist educational systems with strict structures and little margins for agency do not necessarily impede the implementation of ideas and methods like the ones practiced in a School of Circles[4]. On the contrary, they can provoke the undertaking of initiatives, no matter

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[4] For some practical examples comprising relevant theoretical underpinning one can visit
https://www.learntochange.eu/2018/10/31/sociocracy-for-choosing-class-delegates/
and https://www.learntochange.eu/2018/10/14/consent-decision-making-for-student-voice/

how small they are, and incubate resistance to whatever undermines change. That little yet enough, freedom along with an increasing number of innovative projects and networks in European educational systems[5] make space for the implementation of methods and strategies like the ones seen in LOS. Teacher training and guidance should be catered for though in a systematic way while opportunities to visit and witness diverse teaching contexts like the ones offered through European funded projects should be intensified. Educators have always embraced innovations which convinced them about the outcome. Activities and projects suggesting democracy oriented approaches in schools are a fact (Council of Europe HRE & EDC campaigns and material, UNECSO's Sustainable Development Goals) and steps towards change continue to be taken. However, societies still need time to make mature decisions about the future of education we want to offer to the next generations based on lessons we have learnt and global incidents of exclusion, hatred, discrimination and profit-driven policies.

What if we started strengthening our stance towards the reformative power of education and discussing about the possibilities in a global circle?

Conclusion

Building bridges among Aristotle's conviction about the qualities of natural curiosity and drive to explore in humans (in Morris, 2009), Emerson's urge for respect to the pupil (Emerson, 1909) and Toffler's arguments about the form and purpose of education over the years (Tofler, 1980), the contemporary educator is in a position to acknowledge that the need for change has a solid theoretical background it can rely on. Change takes time to complete and it surely deals with resistance. What it should not deal with however is neglect or ignorance on behalf of education stakeholders of the education ecosystem as this is structured nowadays. Defining and weighing the impact social, economic, cultural or other factors impose on educational systems is one side of the coin. Acknowledging that there are several solid proposals available to cater for or remedy any shortage and inefficiencies is the other one. What if the answer to the call for a more efficient educational vision matches the various and diverse shades of children's educational needs? What remains is to join our voice with those who have already taken the next step forward and stand by them open-mindedly, critically and supportively for every act which can benefit the world of tomorrow. For according to them (Kordelaar et al., 2020:107) it is as simple as that:

"*We want to raise awareness of the alternatives [to education] that are available. Alternatives in which students can play a larger and more active role.Alternatives that offer*

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[5] "21st century skills workshops" subject is being launched in pilot schools in Greece in September 2020. Campaigns like "Free to Speak Safe to Learn Democratic Schools for All" by the Council of Europe and NGOs like the European Democratic Education Community EUDEC support educators all over Europe with their work.

room for learning, starting from trust and authentic contact.Awareness of the possibilities from a more philosophical and holistic basis."

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