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Inclusion and Democracy – two sides of the same coin?[1]

Experiences of Participatory Action Research with children in Iceland

This paper examines the relation between inclusive and democratic education which build on human rights and especially on the right of participation. Furthermore, it analyses the situation in Iceland, reflects two examples of practical steps with students in Akranes und shows what steps can be taken in direction towards more inclusive and democratic conditions – not ignoring that school is an institution with a huge power imbalance. At the end, it gives a further perspective by introducing decision-making through sociocracy.

1   Connections between inclusion and democracy

Maybe, inclusion and democracy are not obviously directly connected on first sight; for many people, inclusion is associated to persons with disability and democracy to states. But there is a connection if inclusion means that every person has to have the opportunity to be included in all matters of society without any barriers (physical, communicational, normative, or whatever) and if democracy means that every person has the right to participate in all matters of society (Himmelmann, 2004, 9; Schmidt, 2019).

This has an impact on eco-systemic levels – e. g. on the microlevel in opportunities of every person being acknowledged in their neighbourhood, on the mesolevel being represented in the region in a parliament, and on the macrolevel of the state being accepted as a citizen. Talking about democracy, very often there are three connected meanings – the democratic state, the democratic society and democratic everyday life (Himmelmann, 2004). And one could say that it is exactly the same in inclusion – the inclusive state (with inclusive and consequently non-discriminative legislation and structures), the inclusive society and inclusive everyday life. The analogies of the levels are obvious.

There is one more common aspect: Both concepts, inclusion and democracy, will never be reached by 100 %, they function more like a „north star" (Hinz, 2006), which gives orientation about the direction of thinking and acting. But no one can be sure about that ‚we did it' or ‚we have it'. Hopefully, there are lots of situations where barriers for common thinking and working – and reaching something together – are decreased. But there always will be situations in which imbalances of power, dominant interests – in short cut of the Index for Inclusion: barriers in cultures, policies and practices (Boban & Hinz, 2003) – will exist and limit democratic and inclusive processes. Societies are hierarchical, so there will always be discrimination. But the question is: how much discrimination, how extreme?

In this sense, inclusive and democratic education are something like two sides of the same coin. They are about participation of all, and they need one another (Simri & Hinz, 2021): Inclusive but not democratic education stays hierarchical: If all children are treated in the same

suppressive way and everyone is included – is this better in any aspect for children? What has been won then? Democratic but not inclusive education stays selective: If children have to be labelled as being competent by adults or they need a specific competence to participate in any processes – and there are even tendencies in the convention of the rights of children saying that (see CRC Art. 12) – this is more or less democratic. So, in the end, the one without the other is neither inclusive nor democratic.

2 The key and the heart: Human rights and participation

It is not by incidence that the last paragraph ends with a connection to the CRC. Human rights can be seen as the key to inclusion and democracy, they are generally valid for all people, and neither a state nor an institution nor other persons can deny them. But, as said before, they have to be fought for, the obligation to human rights is not realised automatically.

When human rights are the key to inclusion and democracy, participation is the heart of these rights. Participation is needed for democracy and for inclusion, both do not function without participation. But it is not that easy because there are different understandings of participation (Boban & Hinz, 2022).

- A granting of the right to participation builds on a functional understanding of participation and implies that others, often adults, have the power to decide when, in what situations and to whom the right shall be granted. Adults could evaluate the ability of the child to participate and decide on the fields of discussion.

- A guaranteeing of the right to participation refers to the obligation of ensuring children´s unnegotiable right to participation and builds on a human right's understanding. Participation then is a purpose in itself, rather than a means for the purpose.

Even in the CRC (1989), there are different tendencies: In Art. 13.1 the child has the „right to freedom of expression", meanwhile in Art. 12.1 it is said that the child „who is capable of forming his or her own views" has the right to be heard – that sounds a bit contradictory. But this does not mean that granting is totally bad and guaranteeing is totally good – the point is to reflect the limits if only one of the two tendencies is in focus and being realised.

In many publications, there are figures about a ‚ladder of participation' with nine steps (Hart, 1997). This seems to provide some orientation, starting with rhetoric sham participation and ending with full self-advocacy. But there are also limits: First, the question arises whether full self-advocacy is the optimum for inclusion and democracy. Second, it is a formal scheme ignoring the subject of participation as well as its context and the power structures (Tiedeken, 2020, 21).

Nevertheless, it is important to evaluate, in which way persons have the opportunity of participation. Talking about the example of school, it is an important difference if children are asked about their likes and dislikes once or twice a year – or if children are continuously members of the school development team (Hinz et al., 2013). To give another, ‚much bigger' example of children in society: It is a big difference if children are invited once a year in the states parliament, e. g. in Australia, Jemen, or South Africa, asking them for giving feedback how they see the situation of children, or if children are the sole members in their neighbourhood children's parliament like in more than 500.000 children's parliaments in India, where they elect their ministers and thus have continuous influence on society development (Boban & Hinz, 2020, 371f.). The critical question is to what extend children have the opportunity to evolve from 'objects', who are granted the right to participation by being

questioned on certain matters, to 'subjects', who are actively involved in decision making and therefore are guaranteed the right to participation continuously in the whole process.

Another model of children´s democratic involvement, Shier's (2001) "Pathway to participation", goes further as the ladder mentioned before as it presents five levels of participation – in analogy to the ladder – and additionally three stages of commitment on each level.

- The first stage contains are openings and occurs when there is a general willingness to work at a specific level,

- the second stage contains opportunities and occurs when there are skills and resources to work at this level and participation is supported in a purposeful way and

- at the third stage contains obligations, meaning that there are policy requirements to ensure participation on the level in question.

Schools and other organisations can use the model to analyse the level of children's participation, to start discussion and dialogue, and enhance the understanding of the concept of children´s participation. Also, it can help to explain the demands of the articles 12/13 and possibly shed light on their shortcomings, as the CRC does not demand for participation on the highest levels. However, Shier points out that higher levels of the model do not mean ‚better' levels – as mentioned above. He emphasises that different levels are appropriate in different circumstances and the model can help to find the correct height for the task (Shier, 2006).

Laura Lundy (2007) proposes one of the probably most useful models to realize children´s right to participation. It builds on a new conceptualisation of article 12, based on four key concepts: space, voice, audience, influence. They imply that adults have to ensure safe, inclusive and motivating spaces for children to express their views, they must receive opportunity and support to use their voices, they have to be listened to and it must be assured that their voices are reacted to and have influence. But still the question is: what happens next, how should the communication continue? How can children be sure that their contribution has impact on how things develop?

Here, feedback to the children is essential to create mutual trust and respect. Children have to be informed about how and why decisions were made and how their input has influenced these decisions, or why it did not. Student councils, children´s forums and other instruments for children´s participation and influence can promote meaningful engagement and participation of children. But when sufficient feedback is not provided, and ongoing conversation built on mutual trust is lacking, children can become frustrated because they experience their participation and interaction with the adults in charge as not meaningful and superficial. Then they will eventually withdraw and loose interest and faith in expressing their views, as they do not see that they have any influence on what is going on. Frameworks around children´s participation in development and decision making must include ways for providing sufficient and regular and continual feedback to children. The prominent challenges of creating such frameworks are (Lundy & Hanna, 2022):

- that spaces for children to express their voices are inclusive, making it possible for all children to be heard, especially disabled children and

- that children's views are always fully considered and acted upon.

And it is important to reflect together how far participation in a concrete context can go, what can be decided together – and where are limits because others have decided already. This is because participation – as equal persons with equal status in an inclusive and democratic situation – is embedded in an institutional context which is consequently neither democratic nor

inclusive but hierarchical by structures of the state. Therefore, it is important to have this in mind and to reflect it together while participating in processes – it is almost impossible to participate without being taken over (Tiedeken, 2020).

On this contradictory basis, the view goes to Iceland and to practices there – a country with a high standard of democracy from an international perspective, one of the five top nations in the worldwide Democracy Index 2021 (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2022, 12).

3 Practices of children's participation in Iceland

In Iceland, the CRC was ratified in 2013 and included in the Icelandic law (Law on the UN-convention on the Rights of the Child nr. 19/2013). According to the CRC and Law nr. 19/2013, it is therefore a legal obligation to give due weight to children´s views concerning all matters affecting them. But how does this work in practice? And are the ways chosen successful? Do children have true influence in matters concerning them in Iceland?

Since the ratification of the CRC, Iceland has turned in regular reports about the implementation process to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. The most recent were the 5th and 6th periodic reports in 2018, where children were also consulted. A survey was sent to children aged 10–18 nationwide and an ad hoc meeting with children was conducted, where main issues were discussed. The results influenced the periodic report but were also written in a special children's report (Prime Minister's Office, 2018). In 2020, nine Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) sent a joint supplementary report to the 5th and 6th periodic reports and at the same time, the Ombudsman for children and children themselves sent their reports to the committee (UmBi, 2020).

Summing up the main results of these reports, it can be stated that children's voices should be listened to a lot more and especially reacted to when it comes to matters that affect them in the Icelandic society. Formal ways to ensure children's participation and involvement still must be developed better, especially the participation of children belonging to minority groups. Appropriate support, accommodation and accessibility must be ensured. It also seems that children and adults do not always know the CRC well enough and understand that it is part of Icelandic law. The report states that awareness of children's participation has grown in recent years, and that children's opinions are more increasingly sought before decisions are made. It is mentioned, however, that these consultations could be more frequently and focused and they could reach a more diverse group of children where it must be ensured clearly that legitimate attention is paid to what children have to say (Prime Minsters office, 2018). Referring to Lundy's (2007) model of children's participation, Iceland can still do better in creating inclusive spaces and provide more support for all voices. But above all, efforts have to be made to increase audience and influence.

It is the role of the Ombudsman for children to safeguard children's interests and gather and share information about the situation of children in Iceland. The Ombudsman's office was established in Iceland in 1995 and has developed since then. Following the periodic report from 2018, it became the Ombudsman's task to organise a children's forum every other year, with the purpose to empower children by increasing their democratic participation in matters that concern them and thus ensure their influence on policy making and public discussion, in accordance with Article 12 of the CRC. Children from all over the country take part and are given the opportunity to express their opinions and share their experiences of having more or less influence on their own lives. The children's forums are also meant to encourage schools to increase democratic participation of children in school-life. The ombudsman's office has organised two children's forums so far, in 2019 and 2022, the latter was delayed for one year

due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2019, 150 children from all over the country took part, and in 2022 they were 120. Most participants were chosen through National Registry. It is said on the Ombudsman's website that "special measures were taken" to ensure the involvement and participation of minority groups (Ombudsman for children, n.d.), but these measures are not explained in more detail.

The results of the 2022 forum were handed over to the Prime minister of Iceland by children's representatives. The Prime minister then presented the contents of the report in Althingi, the Icelandic parliament, bringing forward the main issues children had emphasised (Jakobsdóttir, 2022) This was happening in June 2022, right before summer vacation, and so it remains to be seen how and when the Althingi will react to the matters raised by children, but it is the task of the Ombudsman for children to follow up and monitor the process.

Apart from the children's forums, the Ombudsman operates a children's advisory group on the matters concerning children in the Icelandic society. Children aged 12–17 from all over the country can apply to participate in the group on the Ombudsman's website. In order to create space and opportunity for disabled children to discuss and advice on issues concerning them, the Ombudsman established an expert group of disabled children and youth in 2018. It became very clear that in spite of a clear policy of inclusive education in Iceland, children still experience segregation: They are very aware of children being labelled after clinical diagnoses or special educational needs (Sigþórsson et al. in this volume) and that these students are often subjected to lower expectations and become dependent on the support they receive (Köpfer & Óskarsdóttir in this volume). Children describe the visibility of the support as uncomfortable and labelling and say that many special education and support arrangements build on segregation from their peers (Jörgensdóttir Rauterberg & Hauksdóttir in this volume). They also point out that it is often forgotten that disabled children and children defined with SEN are very diverse and have different strengths, abilities, and interests. Disabled children point out that they usually do not have any influence on how support is organised and who is supporting them and that they are not enough involved in making decisions regarding their own matters and their views and opinions are not considered (Snæfríðar- og Gunnarsdóttir, 2019).

The discussion above reveals, that there are still children in Iceland whose voices are not to be heard, or not heard enough, and not all children have the opportunity to participate in decision making processes on matters concerning them. Iceland is on the way but solutions are still to be found for all children to participate and have influence. In the process of developing inclusive education, voices of children that experience barriers to participation first hand are extremely important in order to successfully develop inclusive practices (Messiou, 2012).

4 Projects for the development of participation of children

In Akranes, a small town in south-west Iceland with about 8.000 inhabitants, there has been a recent development in democratic involvement of children and youth. The two examples below illustrate this development on the municipality as well as the school level.

4.1 Children in Akranes – development to a child-friendly city

The municipality of Akranes advocates in a positive and ambitious manner towards promoting participation of children and youth in town politics and decision making. Every year, there is a town council meeting organized and directed by youth delegates, where they present children's and young people's opinions and proposals concerning town matters. The first youth town council meeting was held in 2002, and since then it has been prepared and organised by the

local youth centre in cooperation with the town's youth council and the student councils of the town's two comprehensive schools and upper secondary school. To prepare the meeting, the youth and student councils consult children and youth living in Akranes, and since 2018 they have organised a children's forum, where children and youth from 5th grade and up are invited to discuss matters concerning them. These forums have been prepared by sending surveys to children and youth in Akranes, using the results as a basis for the topics of discussion in the forum (Skagafréttir, 2020). Here the question can be raised whether all children in Akranes had the opportunity to answer the surveys, or received sufficient support to do so. Did all children have the chance to influence the choices of topics? In 2022, this challenge was met by sending information material about the children's forum to all classes in both schools and ask the teachers to have a discussion in class and ask the children to bring forward important matters, their opinions and emphasis. Also, children could put notes in a post-box. Children could then volunteer to become delegates on the forum and take these points with them.

In 2020, Akranes started the process to become a child-friendly city. The Child Friendly Cities Initiative is led by UNICEF and supports municipal governments in realising children's rights at the local level, building on the CRC. At the time, there are two municipalities in Iceland that have successfully completed the implementation process of becoming a child-friendly city and 19 municipalities all over the country are working on it, Akranes being one of them. The process of building a child-friendly city contains eight steps and it takes a minimum of two years to complete the first cycle of implementation. Steps are: 1) ensuring consensus on starting the process, 2) data collection, awareness raising and education, 3) making action plans, 4) developing strategies and 5) taking action, 6) writing a report, 7) evaluation, and 8) recognition. After receiving the recognition, cities must continue to make efforts to maintain child-friendliness, set new goals and develop strategies to reach them. Thus, the process is seen as a continuous cycle, not a one-time-only initiative (UNICEF, n.d.). Close cooperation with schools is part of the process. In Akranes, the project managers of the child-friendly city project collaborate closely with schools, kindergartens and the leisure centre in order to reach out to children and to involve them in the process. This means that schools should find ways for all children to be included and have continuously influence on the process.

4.2 Brekkubæjarskóli – development of participation of students

Brekkubæjarskóli, one of the two comprehensive schools in Akranes, has been concerned with democracy, diversity and inclusive education for the last decade at least. In the school, there are students with roots in more than 20 countries, speaking more than 24 languages. Projects for increased participation are for example student-led interviews where students themselves evaluate their learning success and present to their parents instead of the teachers, class meetings, choice of field of interest in their studies, student participation in organising events and more.

The school had a department for special education, but during the last years, the services have changed to supporting all children in an inclusive environment (see Jörgensdóttir Rauterberg & Hauksdóttir in this volume). But does that imply that all children have the opportunity to take part in decision making about their own education and about education in Iceland in general? Are all children appropriately addressed and supported to be a part of the democratic community of the school? Or probably the question is: do the democratic practices exercised in the school include all children? Does every voice really matter?

Since 2019, the school community is a research partner in a participatory action research (PAR) project which also is the Ph.D.-study of the first author of this chapter (Jörgensdóttir Rauterberg, 2022; Jörgensdóttir Rauterberg & Guðjónsdóttir, 2023). The aim of the project is

to identify, develop and strengthen inclusive practices within the school and promote children's participation in school development. The project has two main goals:

- To engage with children's voices and explore their experiences and ideas of quality education, practices that promote or hinder inclusion, and belonging to school community and

- To create a framework which establishes practices that promote inclusion, democracy participation and involvement of all members of the school community and ensures and manifests formal ways for all voices to emerge and being listened and reacted to.

The methodology of PAR was chosen as it builds on active participation of the parties most affected by the research. Participants in PAR take an active part, get the chance to reflect and to see things from a different angle, learn from the process and make changes to the better (Kindon et al., 2007). All members of the school community, children, personnel and parents, participate in the research, where the children are seen as the most important contributors, as they form the largest part of the school community, are 'subjects' of education. They experience opportunities and barriers to education and participation first hand and are thus in the position to provide the most useful information and suggestions on how school has to change in order to include every single child.

The research framework for the study leans on models of inclusive school development and children's participation, like the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2016), Messiou's (2012) framework for promoting inclusion and Lundy's model for children´s participation (2007). All these models build on the idea that inclusion evolves from within and demand that all members of the school or community have ownership in this process. The research framework of the study consists of five research cycles, combining the key aspects of the models mentioning above, including the provision of feedback and ensuring continuous cooperation with children throughout the process (fig. 1). Each cycle has its own dynamic and participants go through different steps, or processes, within it. However, this does not imply that the research process will always go through the cycles in a linear way from 1 to 5. The framework offers a lot of flexibility, like going back and forth, skipping a cycle and going back later and other possible combinations. In short terms, it can be said that cycle 1 and 2 bring forward the issues important to children, cycle 3 and 4 find ways to react to these issues, try out new ways and reflect on them, and cycle 5 reflects on the whole process, implements new ways into practice and reveals the need for further inquiry and collaboration in the other four cycles.
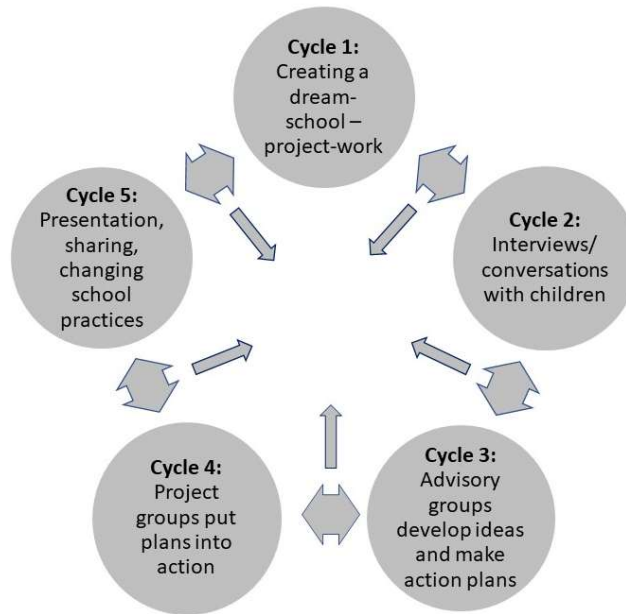
Fig. 1. Dreamschool project Research framework (adapted from Jörgensdóttir Rauterberg, 2022)

In fact, this is a similar process as used in the Index for inclusion, where a school can go through five phases of inclusive development (Booth & Ainscow, 2016). An example of a project that went through all the cycles is the dream-school project, which was performed with 6th and 7th graders in the school year 2020–2021. During that time, the flexibility of the research framework surely proofed itself very useful, as the research process, methods and time-plan had to be frequently adjusted to the ever-changing school situation in the Covid-19 pandemic.

- In the *first cycle* of the dream-school project, children were working in groups and individually on creating a book about their dream school, led by the questions: How do you imagine your dream school? What is important to you? How is the dream school different from your school today?

- In the second cycle, the researcher (first author) conducted interviews with the children about their ideas, analysed the main themes emerging and presented them to the children, who then decided on the themes they want to pursue, in this case: food, school yard and friendship.

- In the third cycle, advisory groups of children were formed on each of the themes chosen. Facilitated by the researcher and a youth worker, each advisory group looked at the ideas on the theme that came forward in cycle 1 and 2. The group then decided on what ideas should be developed more and split into smaller groups for working with each idea. Each group prepared a meeting with the school principal to present ideas and proposals for action plans. On the meeting with the principal, decisions were made on how to continue.

- In the fourth cycle, the project groups put their plans into action. Examples of such projects include children having more choice about the food in school, investigating the need for serving breakfast at the school, designing a poster campaign on friendship and positive communication and creating a piece of art on the school yard, a large sun painted on the pavement, which also is a place for children to go when they feel alone. Alongside painting the sun, children in seventh grade made an education program on how the sun should be used and introduced it in all younger classes. These projects are all ongoing, and are to be

continued, evaluated and developed during the next years in collaboration of children and adults.

- In the fifth cycle, the work was presented to the school community and also with a radio show in the local radio prepared by the children. Also, the results influenced the following dream-school project with the next group in spring 2022.

The work within the research project can be regarded as very successful in many ways, and both children and adults within the school have talked about positive effects on increased participation and democracy (see more in Jörgensdóttir Rauterberg & Guðjónsdóttir, 2023). For example, children mentioned that "this was the first time someone was really listening to us" (child, 11 years) and "I did not expect that our idea would reach so far, but now it has changed how things were done before" (child, 12 years, worked on project on children choosing school food).

But still, experience through these projects reveals that there some children still facing barriers for participation, like communication barriers, accessibility of tasks and activities and school personnel's preconception of children's abilities: "he/she/they would never cope with this kind of activity" (member of personnel). Sometimes, children were afraid to express their opinion: "I am sure that someone will make fun of me" (child, 13 years) or they did not believe that someone would take their opinion seriously: "it does not matter what I say, they (personnel) never listen to what I want anyway" (child, 10 years).

This means of course, that questions remain to what extent these democratic processes are also inclusive. Actually, it is a sign of quality when adults themselves are questioning whether they are able to guarantee equal opportunities for all children. Raising questions opens the minds of all participants for finding better solutions on all levels: the microlevel, concerning individual child or children in one class, on the mesolevel, concerning the whole school and on the macrolevel, concerning the municipality.

5 Possible perspectives: sociocracy as an anchor for participation

After the positive experiences with steps into the direction of democracy and participation in Brekkubæjarskóli, the question arises how to go on in order to create inclusive participation processes for all children. One interesting approach could be sociocracy which is a specific approach to democracy and participation (Boban, Hinz & Kramer, 2022). Ethymologically this term is a mixture from Latin and Greek from ,socius', the companion, and ,kratein', to prevail (Waldhubel, 2016, 239).

Sociocracy tries to build a third way of coming to decisions. One widely used way, especially in bigger contexts, is trying to get the majority. This has the problem that thoughts of the minority could be ignored completely, so in the worst version this could become a dictatorship of majority. The other way, practiced in smaller contexts, is trying to find consensus. This can have the problem, that one powerful person could dominate and/or block the whole process and become an obstacle for decisions. So, both ways have their massive ,downsides' – as everyone can see in initiatives and in international politics (Boban, Hinz & Kramer, 2022).

Sociocracy can also be used as a pragmatic tool for decision-making. Democratic and inclusive procedures could be structurally anchored in schools and elsewhere. The strategy of sociocracy is to find a ,consent' which means that all involved persons give their okay that something is „good enough for now, safe enough to try" (Wilke, 2018, 44). This is less than a consensus, they only say that they can live with it. Of course, persons can also refuse their consent – if they have serious and factual reasons for it. In this case, the decision is blocked and the discussion

continues about the reasons – for making the proposal better by including these reasons until it is located in the ‚comfort-zone‘ of everyone. So, this way of decision-making goes further than thinking in pros and cons and focusses on the way everyone can give his/her consent to a good, more qualified and more sustainable proposal. At the beginning, this might cost a lot of time, but even small children are quickly used to it (Osório & Shread, 2018).

This strategy looks in the first moment like an ‚empty technology‘ because it is a formal thing without any content. But of course, there are ideas in the background: the idea that every person involved has the same right to be heard, that all meanings are important, that decisions have a better quality and more sustainability if everyone has thought about them. So „a culture can be developed which nurtures the common search for the sufficient instead of competing for the best solution, for the optimum“ (Boban & Hinz, 2020, 181; Boban, Hinz & Kramer, 2022) – and that seems to be quite inclusive and democratic.

Sociocracy is practiced in various contexts: First examples were companies – which seems to be contradictory because usually companies are not at all democratic and inclusive. But, as protagonists say, it works and it has revolutionary impact because the principles of capitalism with the power of owners or capital is combined by „the power of decisions of the people who are affected by the consequences“ (Strauch & Reijmer, 2018, 133) – and this is not possible without contradictions, primarily between ownership and equality at all decisions (Strauch & Reijmer, 2018, 134).

In all democratic schools (Hecht, 2011; Boban & Hinz, 2019), as they call themselves, the principle ‚one person – one vote‘ is practiced. So, the film „school circles“ (Osório & Shread, 2018) shows some schools in the Netherlands which are organised in circles – the big circle of the school and some circles with specific persons like parents, children, supporters or specific tasks like finances, houses, communication and administration – a flexible system (Boban & Hinz, 2020, 188). They all are connected by a double coupling – with one person focused on the perspective of the specialised circle and one focused on the perspective of the bigger circle. This way, transparency for all is being secured and no circle will be forgotten. And even in every circle, all persons really sit in a circle for being able to see everyone and being sure that everyone will be heard during various rounds. This way, democracy and inclusion have a solid base to be continuously realised in a participatory way – not just in a functional understanding but being guaranteed actively to each and every topic.

Even if a school is not consequently democratic, this sociocratic tool can be used – in this case it should be reflected in which frame it is practiced, which decisions can be made sociocratically and where hierarchies of power are established. But nevertheless, there is space everywhere for discovering the potential of sociocratic decision-making. Akranes – as a child-friendly municipality – and Brekkubæjarskóli – as a school with a participatory tradition – show this very clearly; both are on the way and will go on.

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