

Sociocracy in Schools: A research by Wondering School

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Abstract

In this article we introduce sociocracy and its 4 main principles: consent, circle process, open election and double-link. We present sociocracy as a democratic governance method which can be implemented alongside any pedagogical approach in schools. Democratic governance (including sociocracy) and student's autonomy in their learning process are then presented as the two defining principles of a democratic education. Lastly, we list a series of pedagogical devices that are used in democratic schools as a way to support student's autonomy. Within a democratic governance we point out sociocracy as an inclusive and equitable way of decision-making, as collective decisions are made through the consent of everyone involved.

This article is in conjunction with the [School Circles film](#).

Keywords: sociocracy, consent, circle process, open election, double-link

For the last several years democratic societies have been slipping back toward authoritarian ways of governance. Democracy is fragile. To reverse this trend, we must build an education system that does not simply give lip service to democratic principles, but puts into practice an actual democracy within the school. Furthermore, traditional school is commonly sustained by authoritarianism, as students are denied autonomy to actively participate in the decisions that affect them. This authoritarian education system is in direct contradiction with the values of democracy and holistic education, which acknowledge every person as unique and important for the society.

Democratic education, on the other hand, is founded on listening to the students' voices so they can make decisions regarding their learning process and the school life. Democratic governance and student's autonomy are two pillars of a democratic education in which every person's needs and ideas are heard to build the school community. However, democracy is often practiced as the "rule of the majority", which can generate exclusion of minorities, polarization, segregation and reinforcement of a status quo. Alternatively, some schools, organizations and communities are discovering a new way of making collective decisions which takes everyone into account - sociocracy. In this governance system decisions are made through the consent of everyone involved, so all voices are heard and included. In

this article we present the main characteristics of this method and relate them to democratic education, so we can build communities in which we can all belong to.

WHAT IS SOCIOCRACY?

Sociocracy (also called Sociocratic Circle Method or Dynamic Governance) is a method of governance based on four principles: consent, circle, sociocratic selection and double-links. These principles define the basis of a sociocratic organization. In Sociocracy decisions are made through consent and groups of people are organized into "circles" in which people have authority within a domain of responsibility. These circles can elect representatives and leaders to link circles together, and like a fractal, these linked circles can be structured in a way to govern an organization of any size, whether it is a family, a school, a business or an entire nation.

The word "democracy" has its origins in the Greek, it comes from "demos-kratos". 'Demos' means people or citizens and 'kratos' means power or rule. Meanwhile, "sociocracy" comes from "socius-kratos" - "socius" meaning companion or associate - as decisions are made in small groups (circles).

The terms "sociology" and "sociocracy" were both coined in the mid 19th Century by French philosopher Auguste Comte.

He believed that a government led by sociologists would use scientific methods to meet the needs of all the people, not just the ruling class. Later, American sociologist Lester Frank Ward expanded the concept of sociocracy, believing that a well educated public was essential for effective government, and foresaw a time when the emotional and partisan nature of contemporary politics would yield to a more effective, dispassionate, and scientific discussion of issues and problems. Democracy would thus eventually evolve into a more advanced form of government, sociocracy.

Later, in 1926, peace activists and educators Kees Boeke and Betty Cadbury established a school, Werkplaats (Children's Community Workshop) in the Netherlands. This was the first practical implementation of sociocracy. It involved staff and students making decisions together about the running of the school, with consent decision-making.

One of the students at this school, during World War II, was Gerard Endenburg who grew up to become an engineer and entrepreneur. In the 1970's, he inherited his father's business and transformed it into a sociocratic organization. Endenburg took several ideas from his school and combined it with systems thinking, management, engineering and cybernetics principles to develop the Sociocratic Circle Method (SCM). SCM clarified and defined the four principles of sociocracy and established sociocracy as a viable governance system for businesses and organizations of all sizes.

Finally, sociocracy can still be viewed both as a method of governance as well as a political philosophy. As a political philosophy, sociocracy posits that lifelong learning and scientific understanding (especially founded on sociology and systems thinking) when used in conjunction with an inclusive consent-based decision-making structure, can significantly improve or replace democratic systems in meeting the needs and wishes of society. In this sense, sociocracy can also be called a deeper democracy, as it could be seen as a way to improve democracy or make it come true.

4 PRINCIPLES OF SOCIOCRACY

The four fundamental principles that define the sociocratic method are:

1. **Consent** - no objections to a proposal
2. **Circle** - group of people using consent decision-making and rounds
3. **Sociocratic Selection** - open selection of roles
4. **Double Link** - feedback and communication between circles

Consent

All decisions in sociocracy are made with consent. A decision is made when everyone in a group gives their consent to a proposal. Consent means that you can work with the proposal and are willing to move forward, either because it's your preference or because it's something that's within your area of tolerance. The shortest definition of consent is "no objections," so decisions are made when there are no remaining paramount objections to a proposal.

Circle



Circles are small groups of people which are the basis of the circle organization. They make decisions sociocratically, listening to all the voices, following rounds and getting everyone's consent. A circle is a self-governing and semi-autonomous team of people who work together within a specific area of responsibility,

a **domain**. A circle makes decisions only within their domain of authority, although their decisions can have impact organization-wide. All the day-to-day work of the organization is performed and regulated within the circles and all the circles combined define the structure of the whole organization.

Sociocratic Selection



This is the selection (or election) of people for roles, based on the principle of consent. People are not chosen by a majority vote, but based on the strength of the arguments and the consent of the whole group. This is a significant paradigm shift from the way we vote in national or local elections. Sociocratically, people are elected

to fulfill responsibilities within a circle and the organization for a set period of time. The selection process can also be used to select proposals in decision-making.

Double Link

The connection between two circles happens through a double link. This means that *at least* two people from one circle take part in the decision-making in the next higher/larger circle: the leader and one or more representatives. This double linking enables a two-way flow of information and influence between two circles. The double link allows sociocratic organizations to scale like a fractal, while maintaining equivalence, feedback and flow of communication between circles, no matter how big or small the overall structure is.

and develop student autonomy in the learning process. There are several approaches and pedagogical devices that can be implemented in line with the principles of democratic education.

Among the Traditional, Behaviorist, Humanist, Cognitivist and Socio-cultural pedagogical approaches we can say that most democratic schools we know have a predominantly Humanist approach, often inspired by references to self-directed education and unschooling. In Portugal and Brazil, democratic education was also heavily influenced by Movimento Escola Moderna (“Modern School Movement”) and Escola Nova (“New School”). In Brazil, due to the influence of Paulo Freire, democratic education is also often accompanied by a socio-cultural approach. Therefore, the pedagogical approaches of democratic schools can be diverse. And they can all use sociocracy as a method of governance. Even a school with a traditional approach can implement classroom meetings, student councils and school councils and use sociocracy as a decision-making method.

Some pedagogical devices that are put into practice in democratic schools to guarantee and develop students' autonomy in their learning process are:

- **Project Based Learning:** students learn through an investigation process structured around complex and authentic issues. Students choose the theme, question or objective to direct and create their project until they reach a final output. In this way, they are the protagonists of their own learning process. Projects can be carried out individually or in groups.
- **Nucleus:** students are organized into groups according to their degree of autonomy, responsibility and cooperation with studies and the school community. These nuclei can be called: Initiation, Development and Deepening.
- **Committees:** teams formed to help in the organization of the school space, in the completion of routine tasks for the health and maintenance of the community. These groups are usually formed during school meetings, according to the needs of the school community.
- **Study Groups:** are formed from themes proposed by students and/or educators. They may be questions or topics that they would like to explore. Each group usually has a facilitator or tutor who guides the study process.
- **Study Guide:** a document planned by the educators to be used by the student inside or outside the school space. It aims to assist students in autonomous study, thus favoring the understanding of concepts, resolution of situations, readings, theoretical and practical deepening, among other aspects of the teaching process and learning.

- **Self-assessment:** the student evaluates their own learning process, based on criteria defined together with the educator/tutor.
- **Mentoring:** each student has a mentor, who can work with each student individually or in groups. The mentoring sessions deal with the goals and aspirations of the student and issues that not only focus on academic performance, but also on the relationship with their peers, educators and family.

Yaacov Hecht, author of the book “Democratic Education” and co-founder of Hadera Democratic School in Israel, adds another principle to Democratic Education:

3. Curriculum based on Human Rights.

We can expand this idea and talk about a problem-posing curriculum, which develops critical sense, awareness and engagement with the world (Freire 1974). Some democratic schools aim to stimulate critical thinking, political debate, democratic involvement and awareness, however, many democratic schools we know don't necessarily have a curriculum based on human rights.

Therefore, the first two criteria for democratic education are those that define all democratic schools. These are 1) democratic governance and 2) student autonomy. Furthermore, in democratic schools, power is in the hands of the “people”, that is, the school community. And sociocracy is a means of implementing democratic management in any school interested in a more inclusive and equitable way of decision-making.

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The authors are educators and sociocracy facilitators at
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Marianne Osório is an educator, researcher and facilitator of democratic practices (including sociocracy) in learning communities. Former science teacher in a state school in Brazil and Master of Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment from the University College of London (UCL), her focus of research has been the praxis of a liberating education, according to Paulo Freire's ideas. Currently she's doing a MBA in School Management to research sociocracy as democratic management in schools.

Charlie Shread is an independent filmmaker and sociocracy facilitator from the UK with experience facilitating group workshops and leading activities with children and adults. His work has focused on democratic education as well as craftspeople and small organisations dedicated to positive social and ecological impact.

Together they created [Wondering School](#), an independent research project that investigates practices of a liberating education. They have visited more than 40 schools and education projects around the world and have facilitated workshops along the way. Throughout their journey they produced the [School Circles](#) film about democratic schools in the Netherlands that use sociocracy. They have participated in many Q&As with universities and schools about School Circles and have facilitated sociocracy workshops in India, Austria, Germany, Portugal and Online. They have trained in sociocracy with John Buck and Edwin John and currently they offer training and mentoring to schools/educators wishing to implement sociocracy in their own contexts.