

Laborschule Bielefeld's Student Parliament

Maja Boigs

Abstract

At Laborschule Bielefeld, student committees are of great importance to realise a democratically arranged school life. In order to explore primary students' perspectives on their school-political participation, students of the school's Level-II-Parliament were interviewed as part of the qualitative study described in this article. It showed that the interviewees attributed positive aspects of the Level-II-Parliament in the resulting opportunities for co-determination and the acquisition of personal competences. I further argue that participation in the Level-II-Parliament offers opportunities for primary students to experience democratic principles, while extended reflections on decision-making processes could even strengthen the interest in and the approval of parliamentary decisions.

Keywords

Student parliament, co-determination, primary level, democratisation, participation, political learning

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1 Introduction

As a so-called experimental school of the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia, Laborschule Bielefeld (which directly translates to Laboratory School Bielefeld) aims to realise democratically arranged learning processes

and interactions in everyday school life. Thus, the democratisation of Laborschule Bielefeld shall be advanced and democratic values and behaviour within the students shall be strengthened. In this context, numerous student committees are of great importance at Laborschule Bielefeld. They are intended to enable and motivate students to participate in shaping their everyday school life. This opportunity is offered to the students of the primary level through the parliament of school level I (including students aged five to seven years) and the parliament of school level II (including students aged eight to eleven years). There, representatives of each group discuss and decide on matters concerning their school life. In particular, through the formulation of a constitution for the primary level (in which possibilities, limits and procedures for student participation are defined and made transparent) and through the scientific documentation of this project, a multifaceted examination of the conditions and implementation of student participation at Laborschule Bielefeld has already taken place (cf. Freke et al., 2017; Freke et al., 2020). The perspectives and attitudes of the students themselves who participate in the student committees, however, have rarely been analysed. In order to explore students' perspectives on opportunities of co-determination in the scope of the Level-II-Parliament, students who were members of this parliament in the school year 2019/20 were interviewed as part of the interview study described in this article.

I begin by introducing the research object of the interview study, namely the Level-II-Parliament of Laborschule Bielefeld, in chapter two. In chapter three, I briefly outline the methodological approach of the study. In chapter four, I present key findings on the students' perception of co-determination through the Level-II-Parliament and discuss possible effects of students' participation. Finally, I highlight the key findings in chapter five.

2 Subject of research: The Level-II-Parliament of Laborschule Bielefeld

Guiding principles of Laborschule Bielefeld are its orientation towards democratic education and 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. In order to meet the need for establishing opportunities for stu-

dent 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) on 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 (Biermann, 2017, p. 26; Asdonk et al., 2017, p. 66).

One of these school parliaments, which is the focus of the presented study, is the Level-II-Parliament. Here, concerns are discussed that affect students of the entire school level II, which is years three to five of Laborschule Bielefeld. The Level-II-parliament consists of two spokespersons and two representatives from each of the nine groups of level II, who are elected by the groups of level II each year. These representatives of their groups have voting rights in parliamentary decisions. In addition to that, two educators are present during these parliamentary sessions; having been elected by the students of the parliament, they play a supporting role without being able to vote on decisions. The parliamentary sessions usually take place once a week, at least once a month. There is a regular procedure of the parliamentary sessions: First, the three positions 'today's head of parliament', 'topic guardian' and 'time guardian' are assigned to different students each week and the main contents of the last parliamentary session are recapitulated. Subsequently, topics to be dealt with are collected and discussed. 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. For all parliamentary sessions, an educator takes the minutes and the minutes are both shared with the groups of level II by their representatives and as a report within the school.

By the constitution of level II, which was developed from 2015 to 2018, the Level-II-Parliament is recognised as a central body of the democratic structure of Laborschule Bielefeld. This constitution defines areas of school life in which self-determination or co-determination of the students must be implemented. Nevertheless, the constitution of level II also specifies 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, e.g. for safety reasons (Freke et al., 2020; Laborschule Bielefeld, n.d., pp. 17–19).

3 Methodological approach of the presented study

To explore students' perspectives on the Level-II-Parliament in an opened research process, I chose a qualitative research approach. Using a guided interview methodology, five interviews were conducted between 21 May 2020 and 7 June 2020. All students were in year four and five of Laborschule Bielefeld and had been active in the Level-II-Parliament for a time period between one and three years. As face-to-face interviews were not possible due to contact restrictions in the context of the Covid 19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted online with the audio track recorded and subsequently transcribed, following the transcription procedure described by Dresing and Pehl (2015). As the analysis method for the generated interview data, I chose qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (2015). The inductive procedure within the framework of category formation allowed the intended explorative format of the study to unfold its validity, and deductively developed categories additionally allowed a theory-guided interpretation and evaluation of the material. The interpretation of the material was carried out through a summarising structuring.

It should be noted that due to the Covid 19 pandemic, there was a long time-gap between the last parliamentary sessions and the interviews, which most certainly biased the interviews to a certain degree and thus the findings presented in the following.

4 Central findings of the study: Perspectives on co-determination through the Level-II-Parliament

Co-determination – in what way?

The five interviewees mentioned the condition of the sports changing rooms and toilets as examples of issues dealt with during their mandate in the Level-II-Parliament, reporting that these issues were discussed intensively in the Level-II-Parliament on a recurring basis over the years. As other topics discussed in the parliament, the students named the efforts to get more playground equipment in the outdoor area, the purchase of football goals, the de-

sign of the school carnival celebration, the installation of clocks on the school grounds, the school design and the repair of water dispensers.

Regarding the discussion culture in the Level-II-Parliament, the interviewees predominantly reported constructive, appreciative interactions and found that satisfactory solutions could be reached together during the parliamentary sessions. Concerning the decision-making process, three of the interviewed students focused on the mutual exchange on the respective topic. For instance, Max¹ explained (l. 117 f.): “We always make sure that no one is totally dissatisfied”² and reported: “We can always talk about all the topics and we always find a way to work everything out together” (l. 212–214). With regard to disagreements, Kim emphasised (l. 289–291): “If we can’t agree, we always try to find a solution together”. As a means of reaching an agreement in the case of divergent views, four of the interviewees mentioned voting as a central procedure: “Voting is our magic potion” (Kim, l. 299). Ann found that decisions through voting are accepted by all participants and justified this with the principle of the majority: “The majority decides and the decision stands and then you just have to accept it” (l. 145–147).

The interviewed students considered participation in the Level-II-Parliament to be effective and precious for having a say in facets of school life. The students obviously perceived de facto co-determination through their participation in the Level-II-Parliament. At the same time, two of the interviewed students expressed the wish to invest more time of the parliamentary sessions in issues they considered important. This implies that although they ascribe a potentially great relevance to the Level-II-Parliament regarding their school spheres of influence, these do not appear to be fully exploited. Furthermore, the students perceived certain limitations in deciding how to deal with specific issues: on the one hand, due to the limitedness of financial school resources, and on the other hand, due to the fact that staff members of Laborschule Bielefeld have the right to decide on certain issues independently of the approval of school parliaments. In this case, it seemed to Max (l. 125–129) that “it doesn’t matter if all the children are happy with it or not”. Such challenges in limiting

¹ In order to preserve the anonymity of the interviewed students, I use other names than their real names.

² The interviews were conducted in German. For this article, I translated the quotes into English.

the actual scope of action and power of student committees are also described by Bauer (2018).

Co-determination – for whom?

As key reasons for being elected as representatives of their groups in the Level-II-Parliament, the interviewees presumed their many years of experience in these positions, as well as their communication and social skills, especially trustworthiness, reliability and argument-avoiding behaviour. In terms of desirable qualities of Level-II-parliamentarians, the students also listed social skills and qualities such as self-confidence, assertiveness, good cooperation, attentiveness during parliamentary sessions and the ability to speak convincingly in front of others. These statements indicate that, according to the assessment of the interviewed students, especially students who already have previous experience and competences in the areas of representation, discussion and agreement are given further options for co-determination through the Level-II-Parliament. In this case, it could be assumed that differences between the students of key stage II in terms of their discursive skills and strategies of conflict management would be intensified by the selection of representatives participating in the Level-II-Parliament. Such an exacerbation of inequalities would undoubtedly not be an objective of the democratic education concept of Laborschule Bielefeld. On the other hand, two of the interviewees justified their election as spokespersons by the lack of interest of their classmates in participating in the parliament, which meant that there was no great competition for the position. Thus, it seems plausible that students are not exclusively elected to the Level-II-Parliament according to the criterion of ability, but also according to their motivational situation, and thus experience expanded opportunities for co-determination at school.

Furthermore, the interviewed students find that the Level-II-Parliament also offers possibilities of co-determination to those students of level II, who are not members of the Level-II-Parliament: On the one hand, the interviewees report that the representatives of each group take into account the presumed position of their group in their argumentation and voting during parliamentary sessions. On the other hand, all students of level II can express concerns for parliamentary sessions, they are included in some votes, have the opportunity to criticise parliamentary decisions after hearing the minutes and, as

a consequence, contribute to a possible revision of parliamentary decisions. Nevertheless, two of the interviewees reported that these options for level-wide co-determination are not very widely used, as few concerns are articulated and a lack of interest regarding the Level-II-Parliament is noted within the groups. As a measure to strengthen co-determination and the involvement of the groups in parliamentary processes, one of the interviewed students suggested strengthening the weekly group-internal meetings in order to address the role of the Level-II-Parliament and to facilitate possibilities of interference.

Personal and political learning opportunities through participation in the Level-II-Parliament

The interviewed students describe beneficial effects of their participation in the Level-II-Parliament on their self-confident appearance, social interaction and constructive, solution-oriented handling of conflicting opinions within a democratic society. Charly (l. 251–257), for example, describes “that you [...] have to deal well with other people” and “that you should have assertiveness, that you should say that you have an opinion, that you should say what you think and what you feel” as learning effects of their participation in the parliament and Paul (l. 235–240) reports: “It seems that I am not so shy anymore. For example, if things don't get ahead, [...] I can take matters into my own hands a bit better than before”.

Furthermore, it seems apparent that the interviewed students are aware of political, especially democratic key principles such as majority vote, equality and consensus. Even though these principles are not always explicitly named but often paraphrased, the interviewees include them in their argumentations multiple times. Moreover, all students identify aspects of the Level-II-Parliament that they perceive as political, whereby they implicitly refer to all three areas of politics, policy and polity. Therefore, I argue that participation in the Level-II-Parliament helps to shape students' knowledge of political principles and their perception of democratic decision making. On the other hand, some of the students' statements indicate that their view of politics is rather fragmentary and that certain simplifications of political concepts are made, such as reducing politics to business and democracy to participation. It must be noted, of course, that these are primary school students and therefore full political knowledge could barely be expected.

Furthermore, two of the interviewees expressed a certain fatalism regarding the repeated treatment of certain topics in the Level-II-Parliament without any prospect of finding solutions. They hardly saw any constructive ways to resolve such unwelcome discussions and to avoid them in the future. With regard to a point of criticism of democratic education concepts (cf. Breit, 2005, p. 54; Lokies, 2012, p. 113), it must be asked whether these forms of dissatisfaction and awkwardness can be attributed to insufficient reflection of their experiences in the Level-II-Parliament. Possibly, solutions to the dissatisfaction articulated by the interviewees could be found if, following thematic discussions in the parliament, there was more space for extensive reflections on how the discussion was perceived by the students and what could be learnt from this for further discussions. Furthermore, from the perspective of critics of democratic education approaches, the described discussion culture and the associated feelings of inefficiency and frustration could foster negative attitudes of the students participating in the Level-II-Parliament with regard to politics and democratic participation (cf. Sammoray & Welniak, 2012, p. 126). In the interviews analysed, however, hardly any indications of such politically disaffected attitudes were found: Firstly, three of the interviewees had already been active in the Level-II-Parliament for more than a year and had thus consciously decided on the option of re-election, which would hardly be the case if the students would feel mostly annoyed and disappointed from their participation in the parliament. Likewise, two of the interviewees could also imagine continuing to be active in school parliaments and the student council in the future. Secondly, even those students who felt that co-decision-making was a hallmark of politics, and thus felt that their participation in Level-II-Parliament was to some extent political, felt that this co-determination was valuable and important, and expressed pleasure in their activity. Thirdly, one respondent described the feeling in the case of very close voting results as “hard” and “stupid” but did not describe the general mood after such votes as burdened, and emphasised the acceptance and legitimacy of the decision made by a vote. Therefore, it cannot be concluded that negative feelings and evaluations during parliamentary sessions per se have a negative effect on the basic motivation of the students to participate in politics. On the other hand, evidence was found that the students’ experiences of participating in the Level-II-Parliament and so deciding on aspects of school life had a positive effect on their appreciation

of the Level-II-Parliament and on their motivation in proactively addressing unsatisfactory situations.

5 Conclusion

I have elaborated that the interviewed students of the Level-II-Parliament were familiar with main procedures and regulations of the parliamentary sessions and the institution of the Level-II-Parliament. The interviewees saw positive aspects of the Level-II-Parliament in particular in the resulting opportunities for co-determination in everyday school life in areas relevant to them, the constructive atmosphere and the acquisition of personal competences resulting from participation in the Parliament. But the students also articulated some dissatisfaction regarding the Level-II-Parliament, namely with regard to recurring, inefficiently discussed topics in the Level-II-Parliament. In this regard, I argue that an extended reflection on the students' experiences at the parliamentary sessions, as demanded by critics of democracy education approaches, can bring more understanding of certain processes and extended dispositions to handle them. However, there was no evidence to suggest that such negative experiences concerning the discussion culture during parliamentary sessions would directly lead to negative attitudes towards politics and democratic participation as suggested in the research literature. In this context, a deepening examination of the development of concepts of democracy and politics among students participating in parliamentary bodies might be of interest.

Based on the presented findings, I further argue that the practices of Level-II-Parliament offer opportunities for students of the primary level to experience central democratic guiding principles and that the interviewed students perceive mostly efficiency and meaningfulness behind parliamentary structures. In terms of the Level-II-Parliament, democratic structures seem to be legitimised to a certain extent through their success. Regarding which students participate in the Level-II-Parliament, I argue that students who already have social skills and personality traits useful for parliamentary work are preferably chosen by their groups as representatives. Although the interviewees also saw potential opportunities for involving the groups of level II in the content and decisions of the Level-II-Parliament, the actual involvement was perceived as limited, which was explained by, among other things, a lack of interest in the groups. Increased group-internal discussion of the topics, working methods

and objectives of the Level-II-Parliament could possibly contribute to increasing the motivation to participate in parliament within level II. Thus, the group of students participating in the Level-II-Parliament could be more heterogeneous and parliamentary decisions could meet with even more approval within level II.

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