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Mike Weimann

"How to change"
from 29:36 to 54:20

WebIDEC2020 – Nepal
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What can regular schools change to become democratic and more child-friendly?
Typical characteristics of conventional schools and how to change them.

Approach: From analysis to action



"Hurray, the school is on fire! Our childhood dream is finally true." This is the title of a successful movie in Germany from the 1980s. Even a German punk band became pretty famous with their song that had the same title.

When children's mood is improving when school is burning then at least something is wrong with the school. We – as IDEC participants – know this and agree on it. And we are not the only ones. We have an old German book from 1930, 90 years old now, with the title: "The school - an outrage against the youth". And we have considerable academic research about the damaging effect of the structures of conventional schools and the way children are treated there. These results apply to schools all over the world and are not very much different from country to country (as far as I know).

What bothers me is the fact that the disadvantages of conventional schools are well-known. The regular schools don't function as intended. Evidence is straightforward. There is no doubt that students suffer. But despite all this the system runs as usual – for decades at least, and no fundamental change is in sight.

On the other hand, democratic schools have gained a lot of experience – and by several studies we have more than sufficient theoretical background and arguments for different ways to run schools. You may have heard the talk of Peter Gray some days ago – he did his own research and reviewed several results from others, very impressive. And he is by far not the only one who presents results that are convincing and demand urgent action. – Democratic Schools are a convincing alternative to the criticised educational institutions. Unfortunately

we can see just a small increase in numbers of Democratic Schools worldwide – in many countries people fight for permissions to open such learning centers – for example you might have heard from Greece – even Bavaria, a large state of Germany doesn't allow these schools.

I am convinced that we have to try as hard as possible to change the conventional school system – for the sake of the happiness of hundreds of millions of children. It is not bad to develop our more or less small democratic schools (as we did in Berlin too). They are successful and some work as lighthouses like the Democratic School of Hadera or Summerhill. But they are not enough.

Therefore I want to present today some ideas how conventional schools can change their structures towards democracy inside themselves.

Before I talk about this longer list of ideas I want to give a short overview of the aspects that have to be changed. I want to lay a foundation on which we can build our claim that conventional schools cannot simply proceed as usual. We must not tolerate the style conventional schools are run until now.

Analysis

Many years ago, I started to discuss the conventional approach of adults to children with some friends of our Playing truck here in Berlin. Sometimes we didn't know how to deal with children who behave very differently from what we expected. In these years we learned about Anti-Pedagogy, a theory about pedagogy. A German researcher, Ekkehard von Braunmühl, studied the principles and methods pedagogy (as a concept) is promoting. He found out that traditional pedagogy is not reaching its own goals, damages children's chances to develop their potential – and therefore has no justification anymore to explain how children have to be raised.

During this time his book “Anti-Pedagogy” hit like a bomb. Together with some friends we wanted to spread the word of these revelations. We started discussions with educators, wrote texts and confronted the public with a touring exhibition.

Some time later, I realised a kind of flaw in our own approach. We talked to adults, parents and teachers and educators of kindergardens. We hoped to influence them – so that they might change their behaviour and the concepts of the institutions they were working in. We did not ask children about their views and their wishes about which parts of the world, their world have to be changed.

Therefore I started to discuss the issues of child-rearing and school with a group of young people, age 12 to 16. After a short period of time it was clear that the school is a major field where general changes are urgent. By then we started with an analysis “What we see as wrong at school”. It ended up in a poster with 14 points of criticism. The poster was designed professionally, it was printed almost 9.000 copies. We carried it into the public. I was big fun – because it was controversial, teachers tried to suppress it – which made it even more attractive to spread it.

I want to give you a short overview of the 14 points the young people had formulated. They are so comprehensive that they build a stable basis for the demand to change the school system. The list illustrates the need for action, the earlier the better.

Ahoi! Was wir an der Schule falsch finden

Lernzwang
Nicht das lernen, was man will
Der Glaube, daß der deutsche Lehrplan für's Leben notwendig ist, ist unbegründet. Die meisten Sachen lernt man aus eigener Erfahrung und eigenem freien Willen. Zum Beispiel lernen auch Kinder: Die hoch nicht in die Schule gehen, lesen und schreiben, wenn sie es wollen. In der Schule können Kinder nicht das lernen, wofür sie sich gerade interessieren oder was ihnen gerade wichtig erscheint, da die meisten Lehrer den Stoff straff und planmäßig durchziehen, ohne auf Lust und Interessen der Kinder zu achten. So wird ihre freie Entfaltung (siehe Grundgesetz) und Erfahrungssammlung behindert. Das macht das Lernen uneffektiv.

Massenhaltung
Zu viele Kinder in einer Klasse
In der Schule müssen zu viele Kinder fast ohne Bewegung täglich mehrere Stunden gemeinsam in einem Raum durchhalten. Es ist bewiesen, daß man dadurch mit der Zeit aggressiv wird. So kann man nicht lernen! Zum Lernen ist es außerdem notwendig, daß man eigene Erfahrungen sammeln und die ist kaum möglich, da man sich nicht zurückziehen oder allein sein kann.

Schülersortierung
Nur Gleichaltrige
Es ist langweilig, wenn in einer Klasse nur Kinder gleichen Alters sind. So lernt man andere Lebensumstände und -ansichten nicht kennen. Verschiedenartige Köpfe voneinander lernen und sich unterstützen.

45 - Minuten - Takt
Verkrampfte Zeiteinteilung
Wie lange Schüler brauchen, um neuen Stoff zu kapieren, ist sehr verschieden und kaum planbar. Ein festgefahrener Stundenplan stört so bei vielen dem Lernprozess. Für die meisten ist es belastend, daß sie nicht ausschlafen können.

Einzelherrscher
Der Lehrer sitzt am längeren Hebel
Im Fall eines Streiks haben die Schüler selten eine Chance sich durchzusetzen. Gegen LehrerInnen, die schlechten Unterricht geben und ungerecht sind oder einen nicht leiten können, kann man sich kaum wehren. Der Lehrer kann durch schlechte Noten / schlechtes Zeugnis - kein Schulabschluß - Kack-Berufschancen großen Druck ausüben. Fehlende Gleichberechtigung erschwert das Lernen ungemein.

Gedankensteuerung
So sein, wie andere es sich wünschen
Die Schule ist nicht nur zum Lernen da, sondern will den Schülern jetzt schon vermitteln (Antrainieren), wie sie sich zu verhalten haben, was richtig / falsch / gut / böse ist. Sie will aus den Schülern angepaßte Staatsbürger machen. Nicht nur die Meinungen, sondern auch die Gedankenfreiheit wird bedroht, denn die Kinder sollen nicht nur sagen, was die Lehrer hören wollen, sondern auch noch glauben, daß es richtig ist.

Langeweile
Uninteressanter Unterricht
In den meisten Fächern sollen die Kinder nur mit ihrem Denkvorgang und Gedächtnis Unterrichtsstoff kapieren, der sie häufig nicht mal interessiert. In der Regel steht der Lehrer vorne und redet und redet. Aus einer Unzahl von Kopien und Büchern muß der Stoff erarbeitet werden. Träumen, spielen, die Dinge der Welt erkunden - das ist in der Schule nicht möglich.

Scheinwelt
Lernen hinter Mauern
Die Schule will die Kinder auf das Leben vorbereiten (als würde es erst viele Jahre nach der Geburt beginnen). Aber anstatt im praktischen Leben Erfahrungen zu sammeln und zu lernen, sitzt man in meist langweiligen Schulgebäuden und es werden einem Videos und Kopien und fachliche Experimente vorgesetzt. ... Wo lernt man, wie man miteinander klarkommt, wie man am besten Probleme löst usw.? Das alles wird höchstens theoretisch besprochen.

Schulversagen?
Eigentlich versagt die Schule
Das oft von Staat und Schule beschworene Ziel, freundliche, friedliche und gut gebildete Schüler aus der Schule zu entlassen, wird nicht erreicht. Viele Schulabgänger sind wieder gebildet noch friedlich. Die Zufriedenheit und Friedfertigkeit lassen zu wünschen übrig. Nicht einmal Industrie und Wirtschaft sind mit den Schulabgängern zufrieden. Damit fehlen die Gründe, warum man das zur Schule gehen in Kauf nehmen muß. Die Schule erfüllt ihren Zweck nicht.

Alptraum Schule
Tägliches Leid durch Angst und Frust
Nach Schätzungen geht
• 1/3 der Schüler gern und ohne Probleme zur Schule,
• 1/3 der Schüler langweilen sich in der Schule, paßt sich an, und kommt ohne großen Schaden durch,
• Dem dritten Drittel der Schüler geht es in der Schule mies - und das täglich! Ein Grund für viele, Medikamente zu nehmen, Alkohol zu trinken oder krank zu werden. Einige werden von der Schule in den Selbstmord getrieben. Wo bleibt bei einer so vermiestem Kindheit das „Wohl des Kindes“, das im Grundgesetz gefordert wird.

Nix Chancengleichheit
Viele bleiben auf der Strecke
Das Argument, daß das jetzige Schulsystem wegen seiner Chancengleichheit so gut ist, stimmt nicht. Die Möglichkeiten, die Schüler in der Schule haben, hängen unter anderem sehr stark von dem Eltern (Zeiteinteilung, Geld, Ansichten, ...) oder der Sympathie der Lehrer zu den Schülern ab.

Zensurenterror
Alle müssen dasselbe lernen
Die Menschen sind verschieden, sollen aber alle das gleiche lernen und zum selben Ziel kommen. Sie werden durch Noten in gut oder schlecht eingeteilt. Man lernt nur noch für die Noten. Mit ihnen wird man erpöckelt und zum Lernen gezwungen (erzwungen - oder ö). Das macht Angst und nimmt die Freude, Lernen wird dadurch erschwert.

Teilzeitgefängnis
Der Zwang anwesend zu sein
Der Schüler wird gesetzlich gezwungen, in die Schule zu kommen: Ob es ihm dort gut oder schlecht geht, ob er Probleme hat oder ob er gerne woanders wäre, um z.B. dort zu lernen, ist egal! Zwang auf Menschen auszuüben ist Gewalt. Sogar im außerschulischen Leben werden Hausaufgaben angeordnet. Die deutsche Schulpflicht bricht die Grundgesetz (schon wieder).

Lehrerfrust
Lehrer sind auch Menschen
Auch viele LehrerInnen sind mit dem Schulsystem unzufrieden und leiden darunter. Sie gehen selbst nicht gern in die Schule. Manche geben sich kaum noch Mühe. Viele schaffen es nicht, die vielen Probleme, die durch die Schule entstehen, zu bewältigen. Oft sind die Schüler die Opfer dieses Frustes.

KRATZA

Schüler: Benno, Meggy, Schmalder, Mike, Raupä, Anna, Toxi und einige andere Kinder. RäumtZanker © 2007/08, Medienwerkstatt für NichtmedikerInnen, Heidestraße 19, 10627 Berlin - Preussener Berg Netzwerk Spiel / Kultur

What we see as wrong at school

Compulsory learning

You don't learn what you want to learn

Children cannot follow their interests at school. They have to do what is on the curriculum. Their curiosity is thus suppressed. Many become numb and dull.

Mass classes

Too many kids in one classroom

Children in groups of 25 must spend many hours a day in one room. They can move little and cannot live out their individuality.

Selection of students

Only kids of the same age

Classes consist of children of the same age. This sorting is detrimental to development, because children can learn a lot from older and younger ones. Small improvements and experiments with cross-year learning from 6 to 8 year olds (what is happening in Germany) confirm the "disadvantages of homogeneous learning".

45-minute-classes

Cursed time-table

Classes are interrupted usually after 45 minutes. However, most students have a different rhythm. Some of them stop much earlier – others would like to continue. Also the uniform morning starting time disturbs many.

Single ruler

The teacher has the power

In principle, the teacher has the right to decide many things - regardless of whether the students agree. Students who do not agree risk punishment, bad grades and communications to parents. The corresponding fear interferes with

learning.

Thought control

To be that way like other people want you to be

Students must adapt, they should adopt the values of the school or the teacher - even if they have different priorities and would rather act or think differently. (The "thought control" - I would like to admit this - is a little less pronounced today than 25 years ago).

Boredom

Uninteresting content

Many students are bored. The material is taught abstractly by the teacher. Learning rarely takes place in practical life. Dreaming, playing, exploring the things of the world - this is not possible at school.

Virtual world

Learning behind walls

The students spend most of their school time sitting in the school building. The topics are taught to them with blackboards, worksheets and sometimes experiments. Not enough attention is paid to the world outside school. How to get along with each other is discussed theoretically.

Failings of school

In reality school fails

The goal often conjured up by the state and the school, namely to release friendly, peaceful and well-educated students from school, is not achieved. According to the INSM Education Monitor 2020, the dropout rate in Berlin was 9.6%. About every 10th student leaves school without a degree.

The school nightmare

Daily suffering of anxiety and frustration

Students suffer from fear of failure at school, poor grades and unsympathetic or unfair teachers. They are also bullied. Family conflicts are often related to the school. 20% have taken stimulants, antidepressants and sleeping pills. Every year there are suicides related to school.

No equality of opportunity

Many are left out

The equality of opportunity that is claimed does not exist in the school. The sympathy of the teachers and the views and abilities of the parents play a role. In Germany 20% of the pupils get additional private lessons. They are expensive, estimates say parents spend up to one billion Euros a year.

Terror by grades

Everybody has to learn the same

Students are different, but are judged the same - with grades that are often not objective and not very meaningful. Grades are scary, which makes learning more difficult.

Part time prison

The obligation to attend

Compulsory schooling violates the Constitution of Germany (§127 Berlin School Law). The central sentence from Art. 2 does not apply at school: "The freedom of the person is

inviolable.” The comparison with prison is not perfect, since you usually go to prison only if you have committed a crime.

Teacher's frustration

Teachers are human beings, too

Teachers also suffer from the school system and everyday school life. They then do not like to go to school and do not make much effort. Often the students are the victims of this frustration.

That was the quick run through the old school poster of the children's rights group KRÄTZÄ, in which I worked. The full text is available in English on the KRÄTZÄ website www.kraetzae.de.

These 14 points are a comprehensive critique of the regular school system – at least the German one. For those who deny that the school is in crisis in the face of this flood of arguments, I have some more facts ready.

- Around 14 percent of the working-age population in Germany is considered to be functionally illiterate; that is 7.5 million people. Another 13 million make mistakes even with common words. Here is my question: Are the numbers so high because people had to go to school or despite having went to school? Both would be a blatant school failure. Only if the numbers were higher without schools would that be an argument for school. Finding that out would be a research task.
- The OECD director of education Andreas Schleicher stated only last year: "In Germany the school system is organized like a factory." In Germany, the principle applies: "Close your classroom door and follow the curriculum according to the rules - the main thing is that parents do not complain. Therefore, the teaching profession is "also intellectually unattractive too".

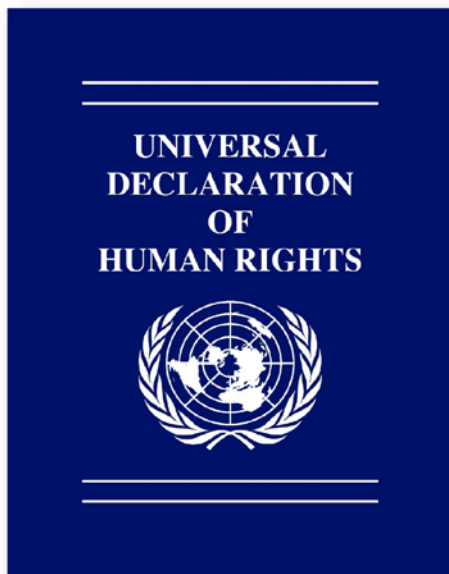
We can close this chapter here: The school system is in a crisis of incredible big extent. At least in Germany.

Before I proceed with the options I suggest to improve the system I have to mention two other reasons why the current structures of schools have to be abolished.

Human rights

are formulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (established 1948 by the United Nations). They are violated for school students. Therefore we do not need to base our criticism on the malfunction of conventional schools – measured against their own goals. We can simply demand these rights for children.

20 years ago we compared the 30 articles of this document with the situation children are in (in Germany). More than 50% are not valid for children. Regarding school the following articles are not valid or fulfilled:



Article 3

Right to liberty

Article 12

Protection against arbitrary interference with privacy

Article 18

Right to freedom of thought

Article 20

Right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association

Article 24

Right to reasonable limitation of working hours

Article 27

Right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community

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I would like to hear the result if you would do this comparison in your country.


Psychological needs

You may have heard of the Theory of Selfdetermination, at least Christel Hartkamp has mentioned it in her IDEC talk some days ago.

This empirical theory was a result of research on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Edward Deci and Richard Ryan identified three essential psychological needs that are essential for psychological health and well-being of an individual. They call these three needs **autonomy, competence and relatedness**. Sometimes they are called autonomy, mastery and purpose (or slightly different).

This theory has developed intensively during the last 20 years, there are many videos out there. You find an overwhelming amount of information about it at <http://selfdeterminationtheory.org/>

Founders of SDT: Edward Deci & Richard Ryan – U of Rochester NY



<http://selfdeterminationtheory.org/>

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If you compare these findings with the coercive school system you easily realise that schools do not comply with these standards. The mentioned fundamental psychological needs are not satisfied. Students are inhibited by school law regulations to influence their environment towards a healthier way of life.

The inconsistency with the selfdetermination theory is another good argument why conventional schools have to be changed fundamentally.

Action

Finally I arrive at the part of my talk where I want to discuss ways to improve conventional schools. It is from all experience unlikely to hope for fast and big or even complete changes of these schools. Culture and tradition are like big ocean liners, they risk to overturn if you steer them too quickly. Therefore you have to be careful not to overwhelm others when suggesting changes.

The discussion about this approach started during a conversation with Derry Hannam some time ago. He reported from the World Forum for Democracy at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg that the participants of their conference had supported the idea that each week one day should be reserved for self-directed activity in all schools. Which was a big surprise and would be a good starting point to bring some momentum into regular schools. Derry reported about it in his IDEC talk some days ago – calling it the “20-percent-principle”, because one out of 5 weekdays is 20%!

Later, EUDEC applied for becoming part of Horizon 2020 the “biggest EU Research and Innovation programme”. (The application wasn’t successful unfortunately.) As one idea of a potential contribution to this programme we compiled the following ideas. This proposal consists of a preamble and a number of items. First I read the preamble then I will discuss the potential changes in detail.

Draft

We suggest that **every school** in Europe adopts fundamental features of democracy.

We have prepared the following **list of 15 items**,

Each item makes a difference towards a change towards **human rights for children** in their life at school.

These characteristics can be implemented by individual **schools** or by **school authority** or by **lawmakers**.

The list contains **feasible changes**.

Schools or other entities can **pick one or more** from the list of suggestions – any start is a start.

Set up network to **make changes visible** to others.



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The following list of the mentioned 15 different items that could be implemented in any school independently of each other is a result of a review of the structures of Democratic Schools – like the one we started 13 years ago. We looked for the main characteristics our school has and traditional schools could take over.

The list consists of Dos and Don'ts.

The Dos are elements that are essential elements of structures and daily life in Democratic Schools.

The Don'ts derive from the Dos. They relay to supposed typical characteristics of regular schools. These features do not exist in most Democratic Schools.

Definition: School members are students and staff members.

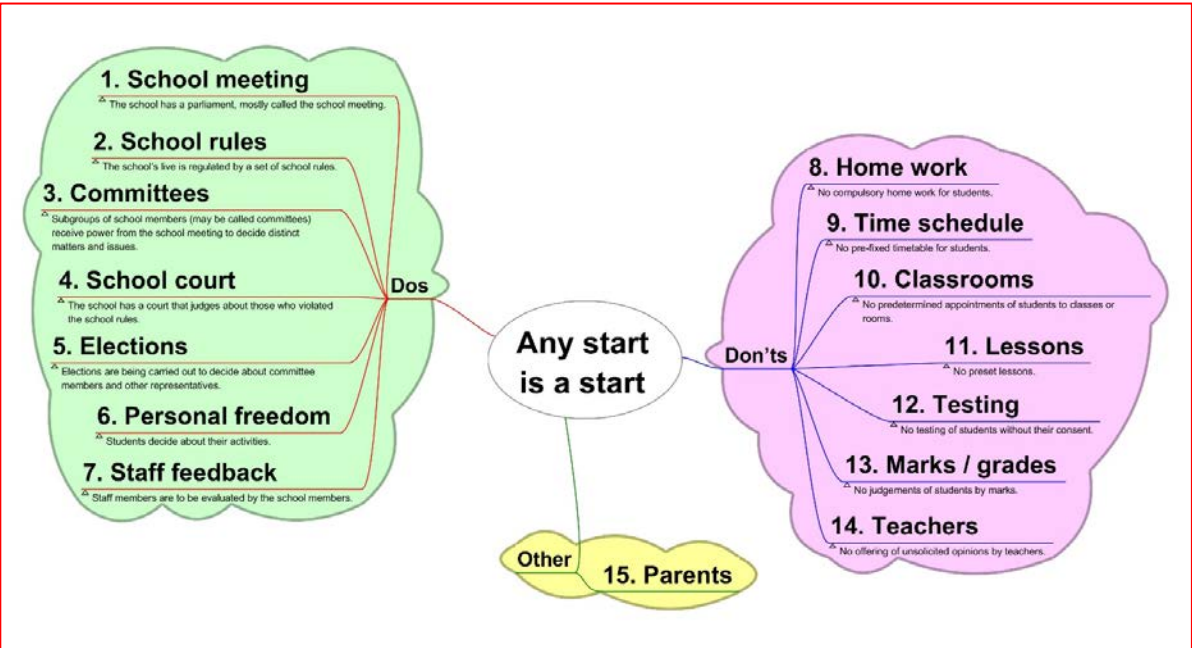
This was the list of 15 individual suggestions conventional schools could implement to transform them towards democracy and human rights for children.

As you may have suspected or noticed the ideas presented by me come from our own experience of our democratic school in Berlin. We started it 2008 – it's in its 13th year now. We have been living with these features over the years, developing them step by step. We are not Summerhill – for sure! – but like Zoe and Henry Readheas said yesterday about their school: We are not an experiment anymore – the system works. One proof of this claim can be, that the greater part of our alumni loves our school.

Despite this the explanations I added to the single points of this list can certainly be put into question, they do not claim to be universally and ultimately the right things to do.

With this in mind I come back to the goal of this discussion.

When we were working on the proposal to the Horizon2020 programme in Europe we thought that this list could or should be presented to all schools – and we suggest to pick one or more points from the list and implement them in their own school. The slogan could be the sentence in the middle of the graph: **Any start is a start.**



What follows are the foils from the talk online during Web-IDEC with separate explanation of each point – to give the reader the chance to get an impression of what could be done to implement it.

The school has a parliament, mostly called the school meeting.

- Gathering of school members
- Decisions by "one person, one vote" principle
- Decides about school rules and distinct decisions
- Attendance is voluntary.
- Meets by regular timetable, usually weekly
- Applications are announced in advance (so school members can decide about participation)

2. School rules

²⁵ The school's life is regulated by a set of school rules.

The school's life is regulated by a set of school rules.

School rules apply to every school member.

All rules are in simple language and available to school members anytime.

School rules are subject to change by the school meeting

3. Committees

²⁶ Subgroups of school members (may be called committees) receive power from the school meeting to decide distinct matters and issues.

Subgroups of school members receive power from school meeting to decide distinct issues.

School meeting's capacity is restricted, it can give responsibility to committees.

Committees may be founded for finances, visitors, the kitchen, room design, staff hiring and many more.

An important "committee" is the school court.

4. School court

²⁴ The school has a court that judges about those who violated the school rules.

Dos

The school has a court that judges about those who violated the school rules.

The school court consists of elected students and staff.

Every school member can bring any case to the court.

Frequency of court sessions is decided by the court.

Number of judges depends on the workload.

A second level of jurisdiction is recommended.

The highest instance would be the school meeting.

Punishments or sanctions are decided by the judges.

Minutes of court sessions should be stored.

Personal records are helpful for good judgements.

School court is elected every half year.

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5. Elections

²⁵ Elections are being carried out to decide about committee members and other representatives.

Elections are being carried out to decide about committee members and other representatives.

Elections are done under the motto: One school member one vote.

Candidates put themselves voluntarily onto the ballot.

Elections are executed secretly.

.....

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Students decide about their activities.

They choose where to be in the school, with whom and what to do.

Freedom of choice is restricted by school rules which can be changed by the school meeting.

Conflicts and complaints about individual behaviour can be brought to the school court.



Staff members are to be evaluated by the school members.

Yearly polls give staff feedback from school members.

Staff has additional tasks compared to students.

Staff has a job description, is hired and paid.

The compliance to their duties has to be evaluated.

Feedback can be voting about every staff member.

School meeting decides about hiring of staff.

No compulsory home work for students.

8. Home work

No compulsory home work for students.

No pre-fixed timetable for students.

9. Time schedule

No pre-fixed timetable for students.

School meeting structures schedule, e.g. for lunch serving or school meeting itself.

Hours of general attendance can be regulated depending on state law.

No predetermined appointments of students to classes or rooms.

Students decide where to be during the day - depending on their activities.

10. Classrooms

No predetermined appointments of students to classes or rooms.

No preset lessons.

Students and staff members negotiate about lessons and how to arrange them.

11. Lessons

No preset lessons.

No testing of students without their consent.

12. Testing

No testing of students without their consent.

No judgements of students by marks.

End of year report cards only if student asks for it.

Certificates are discussed with school members (not just staff).

13. Marks / grades

No judgements of students by marks.

No offering of unsolicited opinions by teachers.

Teachers have to ask whether the student wants to listen to them.

Teachers wait with providing subject matters until asked by students.

14. Teachers

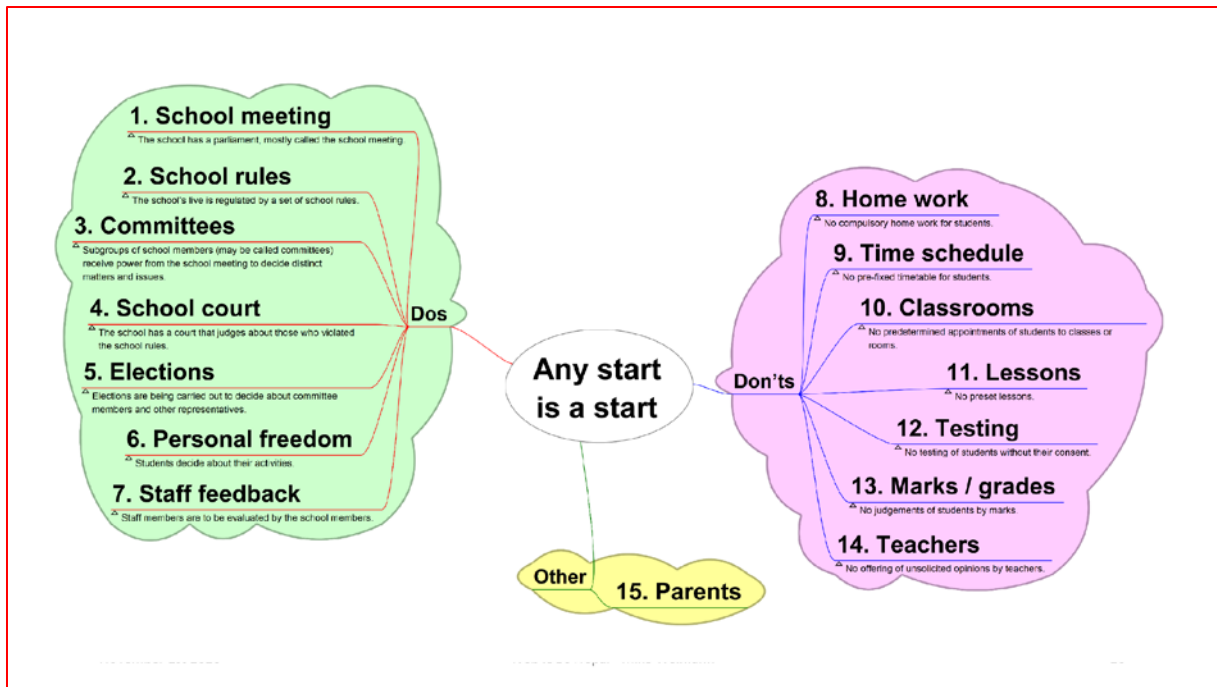
No offering of unsolicited opinions by teachers.

Role of parents has to be defined.

Parents' rights and obligations in school's daily life and general structure are defined and published.

Other

15. Parents



My idea was to present the approach not only to the whole school community – including students. I imagine that some ideas are obviously interesting for them. If there is a legal option to apply some of the suggestions at least some of the students might demand it for them – putting pressure on the adults / teachers.

The process was thought to be accompanied by a documentation. I thought there should be a database where all schools are listed together with some of their characteristics like country, size, type, age of the school and which of these points they started to try. This could be extended to some details of the experience – like duration, and verbal comments about the complications, hurdles, backlashes, feedback from the community of the school and so on.

This database should be online and could function as a tool to evaluate and improve the process the schools went through. It could help other to get in contact and to join the movement. It could help to compare different ways to reach a more democratic, peaceful, happy and successful way children can live in.

Any particular school could use their appearance in this database to present itself as a part of a modern human rights orientated movement.

What we now need are two things:

- a) The list above and its description and presentation are to be improved by people from the world of democratic education. There should be a preamble, a good wording and practice advice for implementing them, some examples, handouts and so on.

For this purpose we need volunteers or even better: a funding from some international funds that care for children or democracy or human rights.

- b) We need the support and cooperation of well accepted organisations or people with sufficient influence in the public domain. We won't be accepted and therefore not successful without such diplomatic effort.

If we want to reach all children we have to leave our (nice) bubble of convinced people. We have to think big.

We can try to start locally – nationally. Any start is start. It would be better to set it up as an international project.

Finally: We need a title for this enterprise!

This one would be too boring:

Human rights for children - democratizing schools

More funny could be:

Until I enjoy going to school

(Or: My school my pleasure, Equal rights for pupils, I decide in my school, Justice for pupils, I like to go to school, My school – a place of pleasurable learning , School - How I enjoy living...)

Who of you knows people we should contact?

Who is interested in this idea and its development?

Address

Until I enjoy going to school

**Set up a network to make changes visible
to others and to the general public.**

Mike Weimann

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