

# Sociocracy in Education

## Case Study: LOS, Duerne, Netherlands

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### Summary

LOS is a sociocratic school located in the small village of Duerne in the south of the Netherlands. LOS stands for "Leren, Ontdekken, Spelen" - "Learn, Discover, Play" - "Instead of classrooms and a curriculum, LOS Deurne has functional spaces in which pupils and supervisors develop activities" (1).



Image credit to School Circle documentary <http://www.wonderingschool.org/school-circles-documentary/>

Founded in January 2017 by a group of five mothers whose vision is to "facilitate a learning environment for heart and soul" (1), the school uses sociocracy for "determining agreements and maintaining them" (1), principally with the use of circles for decision-making and conflict resolution. The main one of these is the LOS Circle, the school-wide circle, which is held every Thursday morning and during which all decisions made in the smaller circles are announced.

The school has no fixed age range and students learn in mixed age groups as

"By playing and discovering together, we act as each other's mirror. If you dare to look in the mirror, there is a lot to learn" (1).

Though inspired by sociocracy and other theories, they are also open to experimentation to find what is effective in the education of the students and communication between parents, students and teachers. The answers to the framing questions were obtained during an interview with Mariken Althuizen, one of the founding members.

# The organisation LOS

## Beginnings

The school's founders decided to start using sociocracy as they had already gained some experience of using it at the Democratic Education Eindhoven (DOE 040) (1) school. Althuizen says,

"I thought it was a really beautiful way of listening to each other, and to actually get better decisions... So when we started our own school it wasn't even a question, it was just, that's how we're going to do it because we find it so valuable." (2)

Their way of "selling" sociocracy to the school's participants is that

"it's just a given. This is how we do it, so you either join or you don't." (2)

The implementation process involved the founders taking what they knew from the previous school (DOE), but also experimenting with their own way of doing things. During this process, Althuizen says, they valued practical experimentation over using "the original kind of sociocracy" (2).

For example, they decided that it is more important for the students' wellbeing to wait until they want to join the decision-making circles rather than "dragging the kids to the meetings". In Althuizen's opinion, the absence of people in a decision-making circle is a kind of decision itself;

"Actually they will say, 'I trust you with your decision'; so their voices are heard as well" (2).

During the implementation process the school's success lay in the fact that "the sociocracy stays sociocracy, but the way that we do it, we made it our own and we listened very carefully to the children" (2).

What Althuizen felt did not go so well during the implementation was the mediation circles. These circles started out "like a judicial committee, like in Sudbury (3)". However, they found that

"That was too harsh and too focused on punishment and guilt, and we wanted it to be more [of] a reflection, like [a] loving circle. So we...totally changed that, and it didn't work the first time; didn't work the second time as well as we wanted it, so we've changed that four times already" (2).

None of the founding members of the school have any formal level of training in Non-Violent Communication (4). However, Althuizen says of the idea of NVC in general,

"It's just the basic basis of all of our school, so... Yeah, it's important because it's the one ...thing that we keep coming back to: respect each other, respect the environment, respect the materials, respect yourself; so, it's always about love for each other." (2)

Althuizen reports that if they could have gone back in time, they would have done "nothing" differently,

"Because I think that everything is happening exactly how it's supposed to happen, because you will learn from everything that you do" (2).

Her advice to a team that is starting up with sociocracy is to

"Talk to each other. Be really, really open", and "take the time before to actually get one vision that you all feel good about and then keep reminding yourselves and each other of that vision" (2).

## Now

One thing which is going well at LOS right now is that the children who have been a part of the school for a while are starting to take the initiative, and to organise themselves.

"It's not about making the decision or giving your opinion, it's about the process, and getting to get to give your opinion. So the kids can learn, and they find that very helpful..."

We had a kid that was, she's 13 now, just turned 13; she was at home for two years because it was all so, too much for her, and so scary.

And now she's in the school, she's [been] in for three months now (something like that), and she actually was chair...in circle for the first time last Friday, so we were very proud of her" (1).

However, something which Althuizen says could be improved is for more children to join in the circles. They do have a rule that "if there are more adults than kids in the circle present then the adults leave" (1); but at the moment the school has only around eight circles with around three or four children in each.



Image credit to LOS <http://losdeurne.nl/>

Right now, sociocracy in conflict resolution at LOS "works really well". The sociocratic element is that they use circles if there is a conflict, known as 'mediation circles'. The focus of these circles is on the children involved in the conflict to reflect on what they did. Previously, says Althuizen, they

"Started more like a Judicial Committee... who did what, whose fault was it, who's going to be the one solving what; and now it's more like a reflection type circle" (1).

The circles always have 3 children meditating as well as two adults, along with the children who are actively involved in the conflict. Those mediating ask reflective questions, so that

"It's not about 'whodunnit' and who gets punishment, but it's about why did the conflict occur and how can we prevent it or solve it" (1). If they need to, children can use the reflective questions cards created by the adults at the school.

The elements of sociocracy which Althuizen personally enjoys and upholds the most are those of flexibility and open-mindedness:

"Through the process; during the process, even, you change your mind. Because everyone of us has a certain idea of how things should go, and then you talk about it and you hear someone else's opinion, and you think start thinking again, and during the circles you actually change your mind or you come up with a better plan even than you thought of before" (1).

Information about decisions is shared by entering it into the school database and then announcing which decisions have been made every Thursday during the school circle. They also have an interactive whiteboard called the 'Talking Wall' where the children "will record their own voices with the decision and then we put a picture in, so even the smaller ones can push the button and hear what's their role" (1).

Althuizen shows minimal knowledge of the actual technique of NVC but says of the general idea,

"It's just the basic basis of all of our school" (1).

Elsewhere she describes the communication process at LOS as communicating "with heart and soul" (1).

Communication with the children and the parents are key aspects of the support systems at LOS;

"By talking to the parents, we make it easier for the kids to be where they are, and to make their own decisions" (1).

The one thing that Althuizen has learnt or integrated with sociocracy that she'd love to teach every human on planet earth?

"Shut up and listen! Everyone talks, but no one listens. So listen. Listen to each other, listen to the kids, listen to everyone with their strange opinions or strange ideas" (1).

## Future

Lately, LOS's dream is "to grow to about 80 kids, so that would be a community of about a hundred people ...and just stay as loving and connected as we are right now" (1).

Althuizen says she expects the organisation to evolve

"Naturally, organically; go with the flow, don't expect too much, just whatever happens is good" (1).

In response to the question, "If your organisation was to grow, is sociocracy scalable, sustainable?" Althuizen replies,

"Yeah, I think so (1)".

## References:

1. Interview with Mariken Althuisen, 19/10/17.
2. DOE 040, 2018. 'Vison and Mission' [page in Dutch]. <http://www.doe040.nl/algemene-info/visie/>
3. Interview with Mariken Althuisen, 19/10/17.
4. Hudson Valley Sudbury School, 2018. 'The Sudbury Model of Education'. <http://sudburyschool.com/content/sudbury-model-education>
5. Centre for Non-Violent Communication, 2018. 'What is NVC?' <https://www.cnvc.org/about/what-is-nvc.html>
6. LOS Website, 2018. 'Vision' [page in Dutch]. [http://losdeurne.nl/portfolio\\_page/visie/](http://losdeurne.nl/portfolio_page/visie/)