



# Sociocracy in schools

## CASE STUDY OF APPLICATION OF SOCIOCRACY

### BOS DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL

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#### 1. About the school

BOS has been the first and only democratic school in Brussels. It is based on a democratic philosophy, it is multilingual, inclusive and has a strong focus on outdoors. The school at the time of the case study has 15 students in the age 3 to 12.

The school has been initiated by parents, firstly as a forest kindergarten in 2017, who then become open to children up to 12 years old and incorporated more and more the democratic education philosophy.

The organisation that manages the school (Brussels Outdoor School) runs also several other activities besides the democratic school:

- a research pole in the field of democratic, inclusive and outdoor education in which context runs several Erasmus+ projects with European partners all across Europe.
- summer activities for kids in the school age.
- One day a week forest school activity for children coming from other schools



## 2. Governance before Sociocracy

Since 2017, BOS school has been constituted as a non-profit organisation called Brussels Outdoor School, and follows this legal structure having a Board of Directors and a General Assembly.

Since the very beginning, the Brussels Outdoor School organisation felt that collaborative governance was the best way to go ahead but also one of the most difficult aspects to put in place.

On the one hand, the organisation always did its best to associate the values to their practice. In line with promoting democratic education – where children and adults are bonded by trust and respect, not by authority and fear – also the adults felt the importance to have a community organised democratically. Therefore, BOS tried to be a laboratory of collective governance, where children and adults could learn that taking decisions does not imply that someone dominates over others, that someone speaks louder or that someone has positions of power.

On the other hand, BOS immediately realised that the road to shared governance was also a very difficult one, and not always all members of a group felt secure and heard.

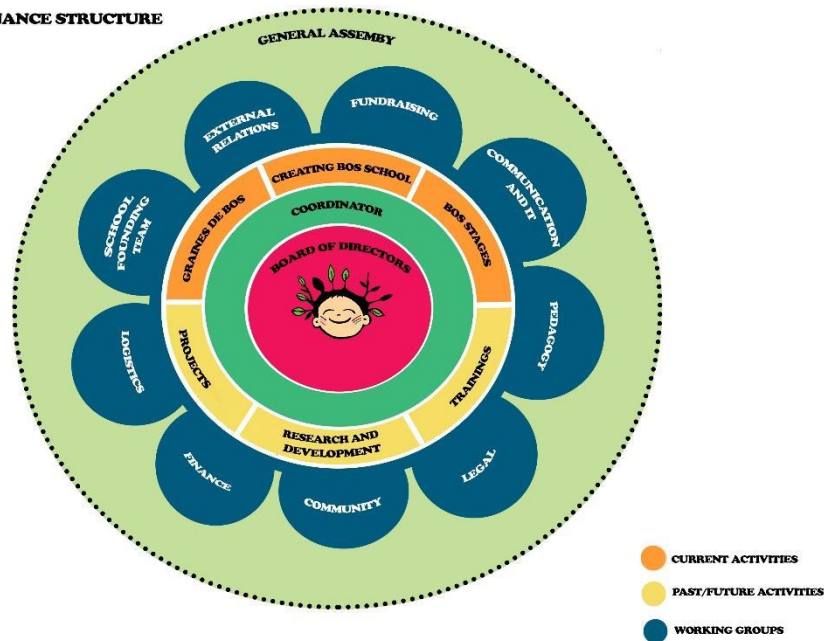
For instance, after one year from the creation of the organisation, one of the founders was not reconfirmed as Board Member due to her style of leadership that was not prone to share power.

At the same time, a quantity of work has been put in place by the coordinator of the project and co-founder Martina Paone, to establish from the beginning a clear and collaborative mechanism of decision making. Guided by the coordinator, the organisation put in place a continuous reflection towards a collective governance structure, believing in the participation of all our community at an equal level (employees, volunteers, board members, etc..) and in a greater decentralisation of decision-making for a more efficient and healthy organisation.

In 2019, the governance of the organisation was looking this way:



## BOS' GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE



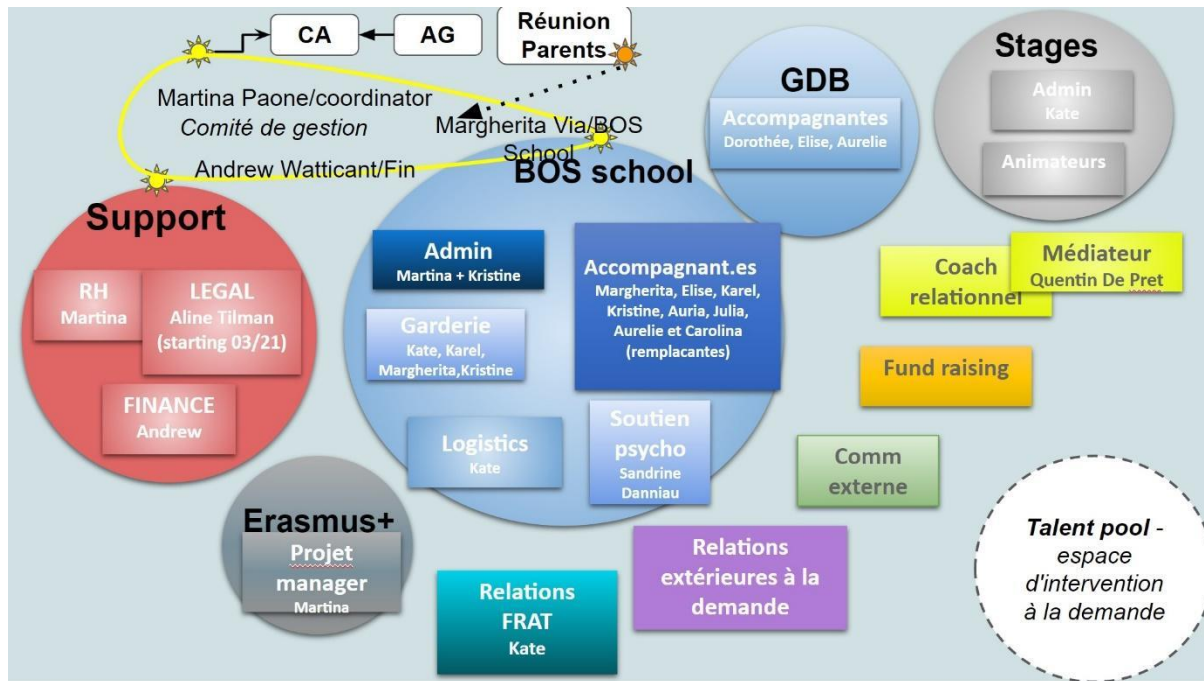
As the image shows, the organisation was formally managed by a Board of Director who was solicited only for urgent matter, whereas the coordinator was bearing almost all the responsibility of the structure, and putting into connection several working groups (in blue) that met to organise the three activities that were launched at the moment: the BOS school, the BOS camps, and the forest school “Graines de BOS”.

When the BOS school turned into a democratic school, working five days a week, the limits of this governance setting emerged quite clearly:

- Most of the responsibility was in the hand of the coordinator, who did not have a clear role and therefore was under great stress
- Although there were defined domains for every working group, the coordinator had to support the development of every one of them, and real autonomy was almost never created.
- The Board of Director was not supporting the Coordinator in an established plan of meetings
- Some of the personnel, working in the activities “grains de bos” or “stages” were not part of the working groups and there was not clear communication among the BOS school and the other activities, besides the role of the coordinator as a point of contact.



After a governance crisis, enacted by this and other issues, in December 2020 the team decided to contact Quentin De Pret, professional coach in collective intelligence and organisational restructuring. After the training, the organogram of the organisation was looking this way:



In this structure, we can see several new improvements:

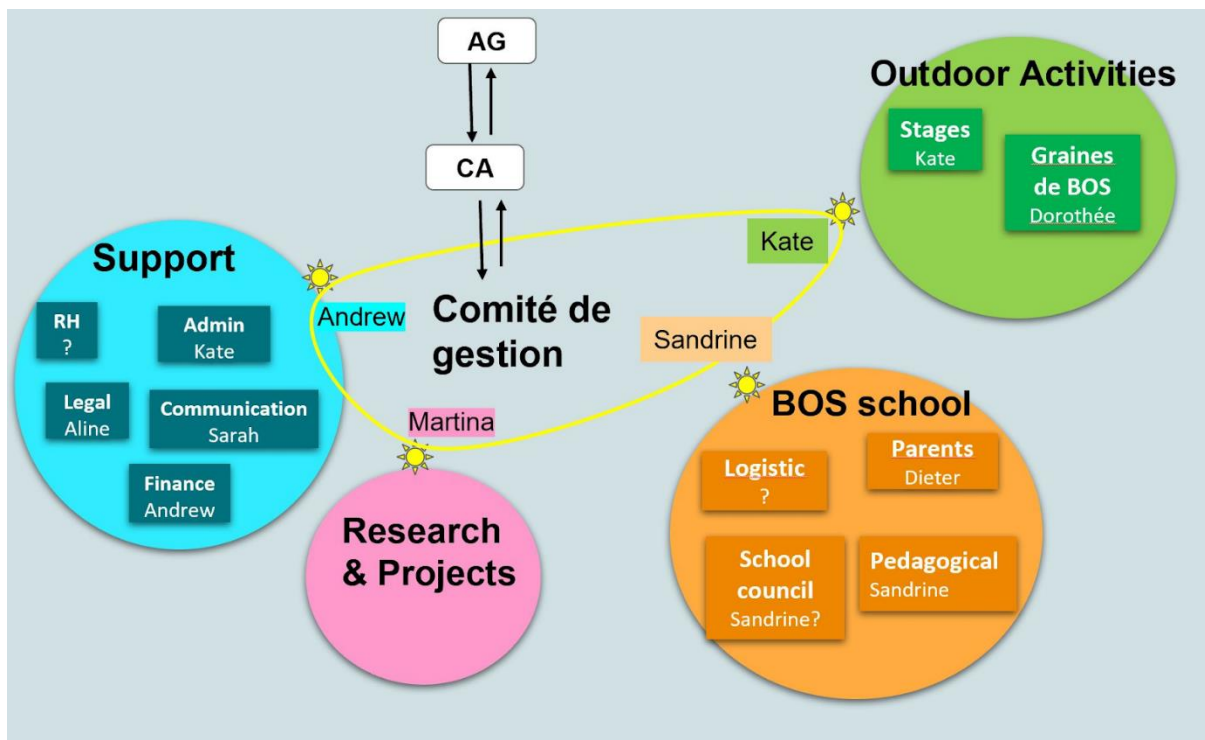
- A Management Committee (Comité de Gestion) is created to alleviate the overcharge of the coordinator. The Comité de Gestion (CDG) is composed of the coordinator and the leaders of the two main circles - the support circle and the Bos school circle. In the CDG is the place where the main decisions that are not on the daily management are to be taken, corresponding therefore to a General Circle in Sociocracy.
- The different working groups have been grouped in two main circles that are connected to the CDG – support and Bos school – whereas other three circles (Erasmus+ projects, activity Graines de BOS and activity Stage) are not connected to the CDG – which creates still a problem in communication flow and decision making. Similarly, some roles are still not connected with the role.
- The role of a coach and mediator on demand, is included as permanent resource
- All the major roles have been clarified and written

- Parents are not a circle, but an external meeting which can bring proposal to the CDG
- The coordinator remains the person that supervise the daily life of the NGO, and is the point of contact with the Board of Director

Despite the new structure providing evident step forwards, and improvement, above all for the introduction of the CDG, the simplification of the different working groups in circles, and the identifications of domains and roles, some issues were still present. One in particular was showing the disconnection of the Stage and Graines de BOS activity from the “core” of the organisation, mainly due to the disinterest of the people working in these activities towards the collective management of the organisation.

In order to solve these governance issues that were still creating tensions, the coordinator worked to improve the structure of the organisation and tried to introduce some adjustments together with the other members of the CGD. At the same time, when the coordinator took a parental leave a new internal crisis arose between the newly appointed coordinator and the CDG, and between the CDG and the General Assembly.

On her coming back from the leave, Martina Paone proposed some changes, that have been implemented and designed in the below structure:



This new structure had the following features:

- The role of the coordinator was substituted by the CDG as a collective management organ, formed by the first links of all the operational circles
- Four circles were organised, each one of them sending their leader to the CDG as the general circle
- All activities and roles were included in circles, everyone with clear domains
- The Board of Directors (CA) and General Assembly (AG) were separated from the circle structure.

This structure was still lacking some of the key features of sociocracy (as the double linking, top circle, implementation circle etc..) moreover, some of the key processes of sociocracy were not put in place (open elections, culture of feedback) and this was creating problems of communication, bilateral talks and growing tensions.

In November 2021, under the push of Martina Paone, who moved from coordinator to leader of the Research&Projects circle, BOS felt the need to finally get into the full implementation of Sociocracy, and therefore she contacted the Soziokratie Zentrum to propose them an Erasmus+ project. The project had the twofold objective of improving BOS governance while at the same time promoting sociocracy as an effective system for schools in Europe.

The project was approved, and by the time of the kick-off meeting in Vienna, Martina Paone and Mia Schmallenbach had the chance to start discussing about the organisation structure with Werner Kratochwil, Florian Bauernfeind and Barbara Strauch from Soziokratie Zentrum Austria. At the time, upon the feedback of the consultants it became clear that the Board of Directors needed to be part of the CDG, as there was a structural conflict between the Board of Directors, which legally had the power, but were not part of the circle structure.

### **3. The Training on Sociocracy in June 2022**

In June 2022, Werner Kratochwil came to Belgium as part of the Erasmus+ project SOCIS, to spend three days at Bos Democratic schools, perform participant observation and deliver a training on sociocracy to the team.

At that time, there had been crucial conflicts in the organisation between one member of the organisation – being in the CDG and supported by the General Assembly- and the rest of the team of around 10 persons. The conflicts ended up with the persons leaving the organisation, and with a new Board of Directors to be elected, as the totality of the team and the General Assembly supported the



remaining CDG and felt quite united in this direction.

During this training, suggestions for the domains and tasks of all circles were made. The school also received information on the four SCM principles and came to a common understanding of sociocracy. At this point the school decided to introduce delegates and started to elect delegates for all circles as additional members in the CDG.

During the training, the school came up with the idea that the Cafe Parent, which includes the parents into the organisation, should not be part of the circle structure. Instead, the parents should choose a messenger, who is responsible for bringing the topics to the pedagogical circle.

It became clear during the training, that the school council should not be part of the circle structure and should decide on activities and clubs, house rules and the budget for decorations and materials for playing and learning.

The new clarity made it easier to know which circle is responsible for which task and helped to empower the circles to decide autonomously within their domain. This way, the Comité de Gestion (CDG), which is the general circle in the organisation, decreased its meeting time and frequency and had to validate only the decisions which affect more than one circle, the common values or the long-time visions, such as financial plan, validation of hiring/firing.

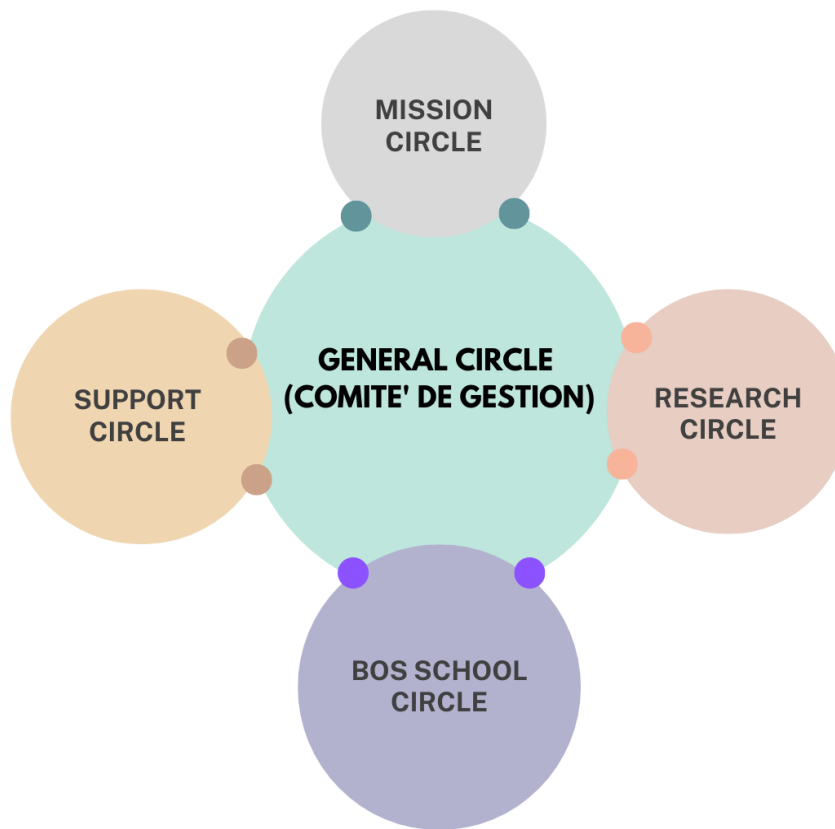
During the training the school also got inputs on meeting structure, got demos on how to decide sociocritical and how to do open elections, which helped to become a common understanding of the way of sociocracy.

Additionally, the school got inputs on feedback culture and information about sharing circles, which helped to raise conflicts earlier and have a tool for sharing feelings.

With the help of Werner the school also found a good suggestion how people get in and get out of organisation.

At the end of the training, the new structure of the organisation would look like that:





It can be noticed the following changes:

- The “outdoor activities” circle is not present anymore. Thanks to the work of clarification of aim and domains, and the lack of commitment of the persons involved in these activities to the management of the whole project, the organisation decided to discontinue such activities and to focus on the school and the research.
- Double links have been created by open elections, in order to introduce the figure of delegate
- The development circle was not created - for keeping the sociocratic way in the organisation - but the CDG took over this role.





## Immediate results

The training on sociocracy was of immediate importance. The knowledge acquired helped to undertake important steps for the organisation. The following aspects, besides the structural changes, have been fundamental:

- Shared awareness and knowledge of sociocracy. Before that moment indeed, only one person in the organisation had a sound knowledge of sociocracy and tried to implement it and convince others to keep up with this method. But since the training, everyone was committed to keep up with practising sociocracy in the daily life of the organisation
- More transparent communication. Thanks to the introduction of feedback, we managed to start opening up and gathering comments and evaluations much more often, and this gave the possibility to make some problems and tensions emerge in a constructive way.
- Right people in the right roles. The introduction of open elections determined a great change. Thanks to this process, key roles have been put into question, and it has been provided a forum where to openly talk about the most suited persons for some roles. This process also comes with some difficulties. For instance, the team experienced a complicated moment in the decision of the leader of the pedagogical circle, as some persons from the CDG unexpectedly objected to the person that had been covering that role for the previous year, and this determined a tension among these persons, but at the same time it allowed for a problem to emerge and to be named.

## 4. Results after 6 months - November 2022

As things become clearer and clearer after the training, the question was raised whether the school and the research should stay in one organisation. From June to August the organisation underwent a series of collective reflections to arrive at a model of two organisations which support each other: one Democratic School and one organisation for the research, possibly sharing the same top circle.

At the end of August, the Democratic School received the unexpected news that they could not continue to hold the school in the current building, therefore had to move to another premises. The sudden uncertainty about the new location made several parents decide to register their children in another school. This factor, added to the also precarious contract in the new location found, made the team understand the need to take an annual pause to be able to reorganise the logistics for the school.



At the same time, the research team increased and the research activities have grown more and more. All these aspects led the team of Brussels Outdoor School to decide that the best way ahead would have been to create two organisations, one focused on the research and projects on education, and the other only on the school, remaining the two organisations in mutual support and connected.

In November 2022, the General Assembly agreed to undertake such changes and, to mark this step, renamed the organisation as QUEST (Quality Education in Europe for Sustainable Social Transformation). QUEST became a European Network of educational organisations involved in social and sustainable change, by performing research and projects, and by connecting different organisations around Europe. QUEST has a statutory provision the application of sociocracy as a funding value, and therefore the use of consent decision making in all cases, except the ones in which the Belgian law does not allow otherwise.

Martina Paone, research manager at QUEST, decided to enrol into the Sofa Academy, a training program to become a sociocracy expert.

## **Conclusion**

The road to the application of sociocracy for the Brussels Outdoor School has been long and tumultuous. Clearly, the two trainings have marked two crucial moments in the history of the organisation, in which rapid improvements have been made. Sadly, these trainings were not done before the organisation was created, therefore adjustments had to be done while the organisation was active.

Sociocracy helped clarifying more and more the aim of the organisation, and, as over the course of the year this aim became clearer, consequently also many drastic decisions had to be taken. Although these decisions on a first sight had seemed difficult to make (like closing an activity, or dividing the NGO into two) they allowed the organisation to gain in simplicity, efficiency and coherence.

