

Learning
The culture of learning

As a principal, you cannot impose a culture of learning on your school, but the example that you set and your commitment is decisive. Therefore, your choice is one of the most important decisions a principal has to make: What kind of a culture of learning do you want your school to embrace? Are your teachers generally aware, that learners must be involved in their learning process, and that cooperative teaching and learning methods encourage them to critically approach, and take an interest in, all the possible dimensions of a topic, inviting them, to discuss and disagree, form their own opinions, argue for, negotiate and even change them. Such a culture of learning is not a luxury, and neither is in good teaching nor in education for democracy and human rights.

Moreover, such a culture of learning not only serves your students, but also has much in common with the culture of democracy. We may conceive school as a micro-community that offers young people opportunities to take responsibility for issues in school life and to experience decision-making processes in dealing with them. Democratic communities, both at the micro and macro level, are learning communities, as no player may define the common good alone. Majorities decide, but their decisions may fail to solve a problem or turn out to be unfair. A learning community can draw conclusions from such decisions and correct them.

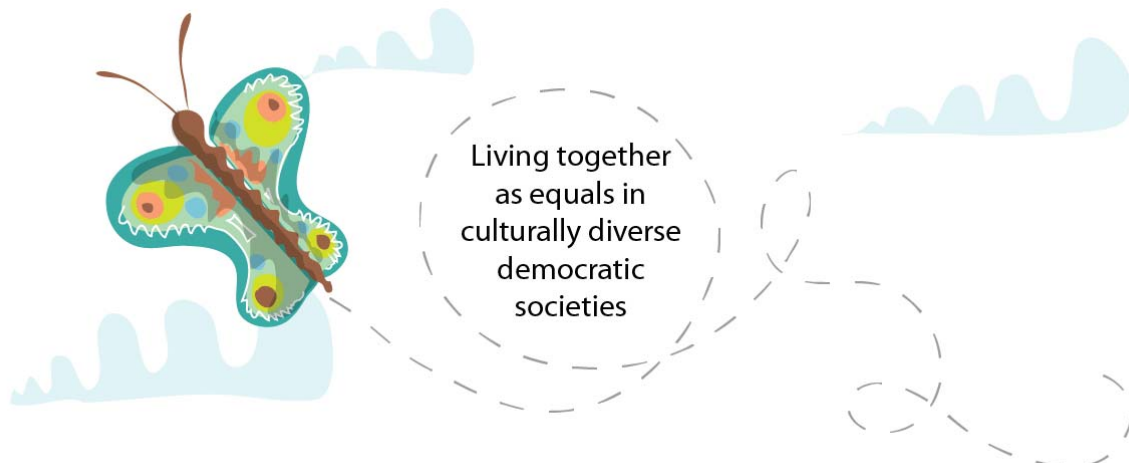
How can teaching encourage and enable students to actively participate in their societies?

The scientific method

Reasoning and justification are impossible if learners are uninterested. In didactics it is accepted that the essence of learning is motivation. Learners must be able to link the issue in question with their existing knowledge, and it must appeal to their interests. Both, knowledge and interests are to be cultivated in the learning process. In exploring the world, the “scientific method” has evolved. It is a step-by-step process that includes Observation, Question, Hypothesis, Experiment, Analysis, Conclusion and Start all over again. Reasoning and justification in teaching require that teachers take their learners’ characteristics, interests and needs into consideration when planning or teaching their lessons. Enabling students to master the process of scientific research provides a good possible answer to the major “Why’s” of teaching.

Approach with care

The core element of democratic citizenship is what we call the “critical approach”. It is a process that follows the steps of the scientific method. It requires that citizen be interested in the common good and familiar with the method of collecting information on different aspects before forming an opinion on an issue. Learners can be trained in critical thinking and judgement at school, requiring a whole school approach on behalf of the teachers. Students need plenty of tasks and learning opportunities across the range of subjects in the curriculum. Good teaching strongly overlaps with EDC/HRE. The CoE competence model for democratic culture includes skills that also draw on the scientific method, “Autonomous learning” and “Analytical and critical thinking”. More: [Competences For Democratic Culture](#), p. 49.



Learning environment

In the school, classes are small communities where young citizens can be empowered and encouraged to play an active part. Teaching can provide young people with the basic skills they need to develop their competences in scientific research, critical thinking, participation and decision-making. The learners who have enriched their experience in such ways of learning are well prepared to become active and participatory democratic citizens.

You are not alone

Perhaps this perspective on your role as a principal in developing a culture of learning at your school seems unfamiliar, and the tasks expected from you quite daunting. We are fully aware of the range of duties and responsibilities on your hands, and how time-consuming your legal obligations are. However, we can assure you that you are not alone. The Council of Europe has a long history of promoting and developing Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights (EDC/HRE), in an on-going process in which principals from schools across Europe are involved. If you wish to learn more about the history of EDC/HRE, visit <https://www.living-democracy.com/textbooks/volume-1/part-1/unit-4/> on this website.