

*Participation***Why should we strive for democracy?****Democracy**

“Democracy is government by the people in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised directly by them (direct democracy) or by their elected agents under a free electoral system (representative democracy).

Pillars of democracy:

- Sovereignty of the people
- Government based upon consent of the governed
- Majority rule
- Minority rights
- Guarantee of basic human rights
- Free and fair elections
- Due process of law
- Constitutional limits on government
- Social, economic, and political pluralism, including recognition of independent civil society organizations
- Values of cooperation, fair competition, and compromise.”

Council of Europe (2016): [Competences for Democratic Culture. Glossary of key terms.](#)

Participation

“Current democratic standards go beyond classical representative democracy, where the key role of citizens is to delegate by vote to their representatives the responsibility for elaborating and implementing public policies, to participatory democracy, where public institutions comply with the principles of good governance and citizens have the legitimacy to engage in all phases of the public policy cycle.”

Council of Europe (ibid.)

This ideal model shows how the intensity of participation can vary from 0 (non-existent) to level 5 (full autonomy).

1. People are not informed about a decision concerning them. They are expected to obey rules and carry out orders.
2. People are informed about a decision concerning them. But they have no chance to influence it.
3. People are consulted. But their stance isn't necessarily considered in the decisions concerning them.
4. People are empowered. Their stance is fully considered in the final decisions concerning them.
5. People are autonomous. They make decisions concerning them on their own.

In this participation model, information is the key variable on level 1 and 2, and liberty and equality on levels 3 to 5. In other words, authoritarian school leadership would result in participation on level 1 or 2. In a democratic school community, students would have the opportunity to participate on levels 3, 4 and wherever feasible, on level 5. What this model does not show, however, is that participation needs to be learned, and students need to develop competences to understand the information about issues and decisions involving them.

In school, as in society as a whole, democracy is faced with challenges of inclusion. Citizens have equal rights, but they are unequal in terms of their levels of competence and empowerment. School principals and teachers must make efforts to encourage younger or shyer students to participate in decision-making, as well as making older and more dominant students aware of their responsibility.

Deliberation and discussion

Ideally, we want decisions not only to be fair and equal, but also well-grounded and sound. This requires deliberation by the people involved in a decision-making process. It develops thorough reasoning and the exchange of differing or controversial views and arguments. The participants need to keep well informed and observe procedural rules in deliberating, so as to reach a mutually acceptable agreement in their decisions.

Deliberating stands for comprehensible and logical argumentation, disclosing and reflecting (personal) preferences, dialogically balancing individual interests with the interests of others, orientation towards the common good (solidarity), as well as honesty and authenticity.

This describes the ideal that a democratic community should strive for, both in school and in the community as a whole. On both levels, deliberation must be learned through practice, although competence levels among participants will vary considerably. Moreover, as time is a scarce resource in everyday practice, a balance must be found between deliberation (wherever possible) and more strictly regulated discussions (as far as necessary).

Why strive for democracy?

Why should we strive for democracy in school and in society as a whole? Democratically governed societies fare better in many important respects; however, they must also cope with certain weaknesses that pose challenges for a democratic school community.

Strengths

- **Fairness:** As all citizens enjoy equal rights of participation, decisions made by the majority are more likely to be accepted by the minority (“loser’s consent”).
- **Quality of decision-making:** As all citizens, experts and interest groups can participate in public discussion and decision-making, and free media keep the public informed, different views and conflicting interests are considered. Decisions are more likely to deliver effective and widely accepted solutions for problems and issues.
- **Peace within and without:** Democratically governed communities rarely begin a war, as citizens will not support such a policy. They are also more peaceful and less prone to violence as a means of achieving a political outcome.
- **Commitment and responsibility:** Democratic governments encourage citizens to identify with the community and take responsibility.

Weaknesses (challenges)

- **Complexity:** In modern societies, many issues have become so complex that a high level of expertise is required to understand them and discuss measures to deal with them. Participation tends to be the domain of the better- informed citizens and experts.
- **Unequal opportunities:** It follows that citizens may enjoy equal rights of participation, but in reality the opportunities to participate are unequally distributed. If left unattended, this issue may lead to frustration and disappointment with democracy among those citizens who find themselves excluded.

These weaknesses pose challenges for schools and the education system, as they hold the key to address these problems. Empowering young citizens to keep abreast with the issues and problems of their communities is the best strategy to prepare the young generation for their future, as well as to strengthen democracy.

Competences

Empowerment for democracy relies on acquired competences. We develop our competences through practice, by dealing with new situations or problems. This explains why the learning opportunities which participation in a democratic school community offers to students are so important. The Council of Europe’s competence model distinguishes between four dimensions of competence – values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge and critical understanding.

- Values include the “recognition of active citizenship” and “support for democratic processes and procedures”, both of which students can acquire through active participation in school life.
- The attitudes of respect – towards a person, a belief, or a principle – or civic-mindedness – “a feeling of belonging to and identifying with the community” – are taught not through preaching, but through personal experience and reflection. That is why it is so important that you and your staff (hopefully the parents as well) serve as role models.
- Skills include the ability to “build consensus and compromise within a group”. As teachers know, skills need to be acquired through repeated practice
- Knowledge and critical understanding “of the diverse ways in which citizens in public deliberations and decision-making” cooperate requires learning through practical experience and reflection in an EDC/HRE class, but cannot be acquired through learning from the book alone.

Council of Europe (2016): [Competences for Democratic Culture](#), pp. 35 ff