

*Participation***What does democracy have to do with schooling?****Basic approach, effects, competences, paradoxes, constraints****a) Learning and living democracy**

Democracy can, and should, be learned at an early age. The learning approach that our website “Living Democracy” promotes can be summed up as follows:

- We need to learn about democracy in order to be able to live in democracy
- We need to live in democracy in order to be able to learn about democracy

These theses point to the fact that on the one hand, democracy depends on education to be put into practice, and on the other hand, that practising democracy is the key to learning about it. Therefore, education must ensure that young people learn about democracy if a society wants to remain or become, democratic. As schools are officially responsible for the education of the young generation, they need to practice democracy in order to foster the students’ learning about democracy.

b) Effects

Participation not only fosters learning about democracy but, as research has shown, also has a positive effect on student health, student learning and instruction in general: The regular assessment of student feedback on instruction and the involvement of students families and communities in schooling has led to improved student learning and achievement and overall higher quality of schools and instruction. Analyzing instruction from diverse perspectives (students, teachers) is a highly effective way to improve it. Furthermore, student participation has shown to have positive effects on self-esteem, student-adult and student-student relationships, as well as the school ethos. The involvement of teachers or students in school reforms has led to promising results.

c) Paradoxes*The institutional paradox*

Schools are subject to the norms, values and laws of a specific state. They are responsible for the education of the young generation. Students cannot choose not to attend school, as school education is compulsory. Their parents must send them to school. Teachers are not free to teach what they like; they are employed to teach what the state has prescribed in the curricula. They are required to grade the students according to their achievements in prescribed subjects. Principals are employed to make sure that schools run according to official laws and regulations. Thus, schools are not a place where free and equal people interact to reach common ground. The relationship between the groups is determined by hierarchies and diverse means to exert power for the purpose of preparing the younger generation for modern life and allocating them to diverse, unequal positions within society.

The pedagogical paradox

The teacher-student relationship reflects the fact that more experienced and knowledgeable educators convey their knowledge and experience to unknowing and inexperienced learners. The inequality between teacher and student, as well as between parent and child, defines the need for education, but also represents an obstacle to democratic practice.

d) Watch out for constraints and pitfalls

- Start with yourself! Find out what measures and changes are within your personal reach. You represent a role-model for your school. Only if you demonstrate and practice democracy in action can you expect democratic practices on the part of your teachers.
- Are you really willing to grant a voice to the members of the school community? Nobody wants to find out that their engagement and involvement was for nothing. Instead of practising pseudo-democratic activism, it is preferable that you make well-informed decisions and communicate them transparently. Pseudo-democracy is counterproductive and tends to undermine trust in further democratic practice.
- Even if you do provide a real and honest opportunity for democratic practices, don't expect people to fol

low it immediately. Indeed, some people may even resist it. Democratic practice is demanding and thus requires patience from everyone involved. Do not be discouraged. Keep going! In the end it will be worth it.

- Be very clear about the possibilities within which decisions can be freely made and the limits that must not be exceeded (e.g. budgetary restrictions, the law, minority rights, your obligations and responsibility as school leader, conflicting roles).

