Democracy at school

Subtitle: Experiencing participation together

Brief description

Democracy at School – Experiencing Participation Together enables pupils to explore democracy in everyday school life. Based on the whole school approach, it views schools as spaces for dialogue, shared responsibility and active participation. Through activities such as elections, school council simulations and reflective discussions, participants explore how decision-making works and how pupils' voices can shape school culture. By combining practice with an examination of specific participatory rights, the method promotes civic skills, inclusion and responsibility. In international youth exchanges, it promotes mutual learning by comparing participatory structures and showing that democracy grows through shared experiences, but also that there are very different opportunities for participation for young people.
This method is part of the compendium "Navigating Democratic Challenges". It was developed as part of the project "Navigating Democratic Challenges – Civic Education in German-Turkish Youth Exchange", a collaboration between the German-Turkish Youth Bridge (DTJB), the Arbeitskreis deutscher Bildungsstätten (AdB) and Toy Gençlik Derneği (TOY).

Time required: at least 120 minutes – the full version can serve as a key component for 1–2 days
Target group/minimum age: 14 to 18 years
Group size: 15–30
Materials required: worksheets (annex)
Author/organisation: The method was developed on the basis of a project presentation by Aslı Özen, Osmangazi Anadolu Lisesi (Ankara, Turkey)

Which module is the method suitable for:
(X) Politics

Which keywords can be assigned to the method:
(X) Democracy
(X) Empowerment
(X) Power relations
(X) Human rights
(X) Participation
Suggest up to three additional keywords: intercultural learning, justice, participation

Learning objectives / what skills will participants acquire:

- Understanding of democratic participation in schools in both countries: pupils learn to evaluate and compare participation at different levels of the school context.
- Experiencing democracy: By conducting elections, pupils see how democratic decision-making works. They can actively explore various related possibilities.
- Cultural exchange: Students compare how democracy works in schools in both countries and learn from each other.

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- Critical thinking about participation and representation: Young people examine how they can assess and evaluate the conditions for participation and co-determination in schools.

Learning content / thematic focus:

- Opportunities for participation in the school context
- Different forms of participation
- Different legal conditions for student participation
- Obstacles and strategies/activities for overcoming them

Description of the process

Step 1. Introduction: Key terms relating to the topic of student councils (15 min.)
Musical walk (based on Kodály Listening Walk)
The aim of this step is to familiarise pupils with important terms relating to pupil representation. At the same time, their listening and speaking skills are trained in an entertaining and interactive way. Walking around the room breaks up groups and facilitates encounters.

Procedure:
- All students receive a card (see Annex 1) with a short text or a term related to student representation (e.g. school choice, council, chairperson, vote, committee, general assembly, etc.).
- The music is turned on. While the music is playing, the pupils move freely and informally around the classroom.
- When the music stops, they quickly find a partner.
- All students read their text to their partner (no discussion or explanation – just reading aloud).
- As soon as the music starts again, they swap cards, separate and start walking again.
- The activity continues until everyone has read and heard at least 5–6 different cards.

Note for moderators
This method engages students on several levels: they hear different voices and accents and practise reading aloud in an authentic and relaxed environment. This helps to create an open and stimulating atmosphere.

Step 2. Experiencing democratic participation (2–3 hours)
Introduction to the topic of student councils: How does a democratic election work?
Question to the whole class:
"Who are your class representatives?"
"How are elections held in your classes?"
"What is the role of the class representatives?"

At the beginning of this session, the pupils are introduced to the idea of democratic participation through student councils. They should first report on their own experiences with the work of student councils. It is a good idea to form mixed small groups for this.
In a further step, the teachers can explain the basic principles of democratic elections and co-determination (see, for example, materials from the method "Participation ladder in action").
The pupils form mixed small groups and discuss how they are involved in school life.

Question for the small group: Why is participation important?

In a second step, the pupils are given access to documents that form the framework for democratic participation in the participating partner countries:

Note on the Turkish context:
In Turkish schools, student council elections are conducted in accordance with the official guidelines of the Ministry of National Education,
"Millî Eğitim Bakanlığı Demokrasi Eğitimi ve Okul Meclisleri Yönergesi" (Ministry of National Education Directive on Democracy Education and Student Councils).
https://mevzuat.meb.gov.tr/dosyalar/286.pdf
This guideline specifies how elections are to be conducted, how school election committees and student councils are to be formed, and what tasks and responsibilities the student representatives have. It promotes democracy in schools by supporting students in participating in decision-making processes, developing leadership skills and forming student councils.

Note on the German context:
In Germany, different guidelines apply to co-determination in schools in the 16 federal states. An overview is provided, for example, at
https://www.bildungsserver.de/schule/gremien-der-schuelervertretung-sm-12681-de.html.
The legal basis for pupil co-determination can be found for each federal state at
https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Landessch%C3%BClervertretung_(Deutschland)

After accessing the documents, the pupils should evaluate the extent to which their experiences with participation correspond to the provisions of the guiding documents. This can be done in small groups or in a plenary session. The pupils can present their results in a plenary session at the end of the meeting.
Note for moderators: It is important not to evaluate the students' results.

Step 3:
(optional) Step 3a: Simulation: Conducting a simulated student council election for the encounter context
To help the young people practise, a simulated student council election can be organised.
This includes:
- forming an election committee and an election committee
- preparing ballot papers
- setting up a ballot box and a voting booth
- conducting the election and counting the votes by the pupils
- Announcement of the results and discussion of the results

Reflection in small groups:
Possible guiding questions:

- What was easy to do, what was difficult?
- What did you learn about democratic elections?
- How did it feel to take part in an election?

- Were the elections fair and just?
- Is everyone satisfied with the result?
- Why is fairness important in elections?
- What would you do differently next time?

Learning objectives:
- Understand how democratic elections work
- Recognise the value of fair and transparent decision-making
- Encourage students to actively participate in school life
- Relate the concept of democracy to your own everyday experiences

Optional Step 3b: Statements
Discuss the following statements in the group:
"Students from politically engaged families may understand democracy better, while others need more help."
"Students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds may have greater difficulty understanding democracy education because they have had fewer opportunities to discuss civic engagement at home or at school."
[…]
Alternatively, we recommend that small groups take a look at the European Convention on the Exercise of Children's Rights (https://rm.coe.int/168007cdaf). Various German and Turkish language versions and accompanying materials are available online on the Council of Europe's website ( ): https://www.coe.int/en/web/children/publications

Step 4: Campaign: Let's improve our school! (1–2 hours)
Teamwork – Creative campaigns for a better school
(see: Annex 2)

Task:
Form small teams and assess where measures for more democracy are needed in schools. If you are in a specific school exchange situation, this can be organised directly by conducting a school tour in small teams, during which areas and fields in need of improvement can be marked with green/red cards. (Green = good, red = action needed).

Group work:
Each team will:
1) explore the school as a specific place of democracy and mark places/areas where action/improvement is needed with green/red buttons; here, small teams can also conduct interviews with other pupils, teachers and parents at the schools
2. Collect ideas that would improve school life.
3. Create a short campaign to promote the ideas.
4. Present the idea in a plenary session or during a school tour. A small poster exhibition on the topics, which can be visited (and commented on) by everyone in the school, may also be interesting. (longer version).

Evaluation, reflection and consolidation of results:
Suggestion for a reflection sequence (60-70 minutes)
Aim of the final reflection

- Reflect on your own experiences and learning gains regarding democracy and student representation
- To encourage exchange between students
- Develop ideas for engagement at school and beyond

Phase 1: Individual reflection (10–12 minutes)
Format: Individual work
Method: Written or note-based reflection
Questions:

- What was new or particularly interesting for me in the workshop?
- Which insights will help me with democratic participation at school?
- What would I like to pursue further on a personal level?

Objective:

- Gather your own perspectives and prepare for discussion

Phase 2: Small groups – exchange & comparison (20–25 min)
Format: mixed groups of 3–5 participants
Method: Card query / brainstorming
Tasks:

- Exchange experiences, new insights and useful ideas
- Consider together: Which ideas can be implemented at our school?

Key questions:

- How do we experience democracy and co-determination in our schools?
- What challenges do student representatives face?
- Which methods or projects do we want to pursue further?

Objective:

- Intercultural exchange on school participation
- Developing joint ideas for action

Phase 3: Plenary session – Social perspective & transfer (20–25 min)
Format: Fishbowl / open discussion / short statements
Methods:

- Fishbowl: Groups discuss in the middle, others listen, switch
- Everyone names one key insight or idea for action

Key questions:

- How do student councils reflect democratic processes?
- What are the differences and similarities between Germany and Turkey?
- Which ideas from the seminar can I pursue further at my school?

Objective:

- Connecting individual experience, school practice and social relevance
- Make concrete ideas for action visible

Phase 4: Conclusion & transfer (micro→macro, 10 min)
Format: Tandem discussion + plenary session
Method

- Tandem: Everyone shares their most important insight or concrete idea for action
- Plenary session: Moderator summarises and asks the question: "What steps can I personally take to strengthen democracy in my school?"

Objective

- Ensure sustainability
- Develop options for action for school and beyond

Note

Democratic school development and the involvement of the wider social environment in school life are seen in many countries as key to promoting the development of democratic skills.
For an international/binational exchange programme, it is important to have both a preparation and a follow-up phase. These can be carried out online so that the pupils are well prepared for the exchange. In the online preparation phase, the groups can meet and discuss initial topics.
The follow-up phase is for reflection. Students can talk about their experiences, share their insights and think about how they can apply this knowledge in their everyday lives. This can also be done online. If the results of the interventions are presented in an exhibition or if specific recommendations have been taken up, it may be useful to organise an online meeting of the groups afterwards to see what impact the exchange has had.
If the exchange also takes place directly within the school environment (class visits), it may be interesting to involve other pupils/parents/teachers/school administrators in the activity, e.g. by creating a poster exhibition or a democracy walk in the school, where issues can be identified and marked as public interventions (cards) that work well or should be improved. Here, too, it may be helpful to assign the teams to conduct interviews or photo research in the schools.

The approach presented here is based on experiences from the EU Erasmus+ funded project cooperation "The Power of Democratic and Active Participation in School", which was carried out between Osmangazi Anadolu Lisesi (Ankara, Turkey) and Ludwig-Dürr-Schule (Friedrichshafen, Germany). This cooperation focused on democracy, active participation in school and, in particular, media literacy and information literacy. The aim was to create a small model of real democracy so

that students could experience democratic processes in practice and learn how the media influences these processes.
The method presented here has been adapted for exchange programmes, as it enables students to compare how democracy is implemented in everyday school life in Germany and Turkey. Teachers play an important role in moderating discussions, ensuring that all students participate equally, and encouraging them to think critically about certain rules. However, it is important that they limit themselves to their role as moderators and do not judge the students' assessment of democracy within their schools.

Additional materials (images, links, worksheets, toolbox, etc.):

For Turkey, this method is based on the education programme
MİLLÎ EĞİTİM BAKANLIĞI DEMOKRASİ EĞİTİMİ VE OKUL MECLİSLERİ YÖNERGESİ (Guidelines on Democracy Education and School Councils): This programme promotes democracy in schools by helping pupils to participate in decision-making processes, develop leadership skills and form school councils. https://mevzuat.meb.gov.tr/dosyalar/286.pdf

In Germany, different guidelines apply to student participation in the 16 federal states. An overview can be found, for example, at https://www.bildungsserver.de/schule/gremien-der-schuelervertretung-sm-12681-de.html.

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European Convention on the Exercise of Children's Rights (https://rm.coe.int/168007cdaf). Various German and Turkish language versions and accompanying materials are available online on the Council of Europe website: https://www.coe.int/en/web/children/publications
Musical walk (based on Kodály Listening Walk)
Schierkolk, Jan and Yenigelmez, Caglar: From Steps to Voice – The Participation Ladder (at www.politischbilden.de).

English version, Turkish version

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The method was developed on the basis of a project presentation by Aslı Özen, Osmangazi Anadolu Lisesi (Ankara, Turkey).

Annex 1 Participation in School (engl)

Student Council Concepts and Roles in Turkey

According to MİLLÎ EĞİTİM BAKANLIĞI DEMOKRASİ EĞİTİMİ VE OKUL MECLİSLERİ YÖNERGESİ / https://mevzuat.meb.gov.tr/dosyalar/286.pdf [13.04.2025]

1. School Election Committee

This committee is formed during the election period in each school.

- Led by a teacher chosen by the Teachers' Council.
- Includes two main and two substitute student members.
  This team is responsible for organizing and supervising the school elections.

2. Ballot Committee

A group of students working on election day.

- Guided by a teacher.
- Made up of three main and three substitute students, elected by the student council or the school honor board.
- The oldest student becomes the **Chairperson of the Ballot Committee**.
  Their job is to manage voting and count the ballots.

3. School Student Council

- Each class elects one representative from their own class.
- These representatives form the "School Student Council."
- In multi-grade classes, except for 1st graders, all students can be considered council members

4. Student Council President

- The leader of the student council.
- Manages meetings, decides on the agenda, and informs the school management about the council's decisions.
- Usually, the student who gets the most votes becomes the president.

5. Presidency Board

Includes:

- 1 President
- 1 Vice President
- 2 Secretaries
  This board helps meetings run smoothly.
  During elections, a temporary board is formed to handle complaints or objections about election results.

6. Committees

Small working groups formed to focus on specific topics like education, culture, arts, or sports. Each committee researches a subject and presents their work to the council.
Examples: “Environmental Committee,” “Culture and Arts Committee,” “Social Responsibility Committee.”

7. General Assembly

A big meeting where all student council members come together.

- Important issues are discussed and voted on.
- Every member has the right to join and vote.
  This assembly is the main decision-making body of the student council.

8. Duties of the Student Council President

- Ensuring the student council works effectively
- Communicating decisions to the school administration
- Organizing emergency meetings if needed
- Setting meeting dates and agenda, and informing members
- Representing students in other meetings and activities
- Attending city council or municipality meetings as an observer if necessary
- Can delegate some responsibilities to the vice president or other members

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Annex 2 Participation at school
Campaign Idea Worksheet

Team Members

Leader _____

1. Campaign Title

(Think of a creative name!)

☞ _____

2. Our Big Idea

(What do you want to change or improve at school?)

☞ _____

☞ _____

3. Why is this idea good for our school?

(Think about students, teachers, the atmosphere...)

☞ _____

☞ _____

4. What do we need to make it happen?

(People? Materials? Permission?)

☞ _____

5. Optional: Draw or design a small poster or slogan!

(Use the back of the page or another sheet.)

6. Presentation Tips

- Speak clearly and loudly
- Make eye contact
- Be enthusiastic!
- Support each other as a team

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