

## PROMOTING DEMOCRACY AT SCHOOL

### Strategies to foster democratic learning environments in classrooms

School is one of the first environments that young people encounter outside their families, where they have the opportunity to experience social relationships, and where they spend a large portion of their time over many years during their youth. Schools can serve as a setting where democracy is practiced daily and experienced firsthand, allowing students to understand how a democratic society functions, engage in civic participation, and develop civic-related awareness and social responsibility.<sup>1</sup>

Experiencing democratic learning environments (DLEs) at both the school and classroom level helps students to become engaged citizens, both now and in the future.<sup>2</sup> **Teachers of all school subjects can promote democratic learning environments in their schools and classrooms.**

This *Teacher Snippet* offers practical examples for creating democratic learning environments in the classroom, based on data from IEA's International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) and the *IEA Research for Educators* book *Experiencing Democracy in the Classroom*.



#### Key Features of Democratic Learning Environments

Creating democratic learning environments in schools involves every aspect of school life, from teaching and learning, school governance and culture, to cooperation with the community.<sup>3</sup> The key features of DLEs at the classroom and community levels include:

1. Open classroom climate: such an environment allows students to bring up issues that matter to them, engage in discussions on controversial topics, express their own opinions, and listen to others while exploring different perspectives.<sup>4</sup>
2. Active and experiential learning: teachers adopt approaches and methods that engage students in experiencing, analyzing, reflecting upon, and collaborating on civic-related topics. They act as facilitators, guiding students in learning and practicing democracy.<sup>5</sup>
3. Democratic processes in the classroom: teachers engage students in democratic practices within the classroom and encourage their participation in the wider community. This implies the co-organization of classroom settings and rules, shared planning of civic-related activities between teachers and students, the use of formative assessment, and, more broadly, fair and transparent assessment practices.<sup>6</sup>
4. Cooperative learning: teachers actively involve students in the learning process through inquiry, discussion, and collaboration in small groups to achieve a shared goal.<sup>7</sup>
5. School-community cooperation: students have meaningful opportunities to practice citizenship in real contexts, linking what they learn in school to contemporary, real-world issues that shape today's societies.<sup>8</sup>

## Democratic Learning Environments in ICCS

IEA's ICCS has deepened our understanding of how important democratic learning environments are for students' civic learning and engagement.<sup>9</sup> Through the student, the teacher, and the school questionnaires, ICCS has also provided examples of how school and teachers can actively help create these environments.<sup>10</sup>

### Openness in classroom discussions

Students' perception of the openness of the classroom climate is positively associated with students' civic knowledge. According to ICCS 2022 student questionnaire results, students have a positive perception of the openness of classroom climate when:

- teachers encourage students to make up their own minds;
- teachers encourage students to express their opinions;
- students express opinions in class even when their opinions are different from most of the other students; and
- teachers present several sides of the issues when explaining them in class.

### Democratic processes in the classroom

Across countries, teachers reported they promote students' participation by encouraging and allowing them to:

- take part in decisions related to teaching content;
- participate in establishing assessment criteria;
- contribute to the choice of the teaching materials; and
- take part in establishing classroom rules.

### Active and experiential learning

Examples of active and experiential learning reported by teachers participating in ICCS include:

- students working on projects that involve gathering information outside school;
- students participating in role-plays;
- students debating current civic issues; and
- students researching and/or analyzing information gathered from multiple Web sources.

### School-community cooperation

In ICCS, both teachers and principals reported the use of activities taking place outside of the school. These served to promote students' civic engagement and strengthened the relationships between the school and the local community. Examples of these activities included:

- activities related to environmental sustainability;
- activities related to human rights;
- activities to raise people's awareness of social issues, such as poverty and gender equality; and
- activities aimed at protecting the cultural and historical heritage of the local community.

## How to Foster Democratic Learning Environments: Ideas from Teachers' Practices

### Active and experiential learning through role-playing

Role-playing is a meaningful activity for students to personally experience, analyze, and reflect on civic issues. Through role-play, you can create within your classrooms a simulated context centered around societal issues, which can help students to develop civic knowledge, attitudes, and skills.

After the role-play, you may then expose your students to perspectives that they may find unfamiliar, encouraging them to analyze and understand these views through discussion and structured reflection activities. Be sure to design dedicated opportunities for reflection for your students, in addition to providing them with supportive tools (such as mind maps or reflective journals).

#### Example—Exploring social standing and social stratification through role-play

You can use the role-play to simulate the social ladder.

- Assign each student a role from a variety of social standings. Allow them to role-play various scenarios and personally experience what it means to belong to a certain social position.
- During the reflective session,
  - prompt them to think (and develop awareness) of inequalities and social stratification, to experience what it feels like to occupy different positions in society; and
  - encourage them to reflect on their own perspectives regarding the implications of these differences.

Interested in learning more? Have a look at an example from the Netherlands: "A classroom role-play activity: Understanding the social ladder."

## Classroom discussions

Classroom discussions provide students with opportunities to reflect on civic issues and to develop critical awareness and debating skills. They encourage students to speak publicly, listen attentively, and share their opinions.

- Begin by choosing a topic connected to students' lives or current events.
- Introduce the topic through videos, photos, stories, or real-life examples to build up context and engagement.
- Be sure to share the purpose of the discussion in advance and to arrange seating to encourage interaction and collaboration.
- Create shared rules for turn-taking and listening, involving students in the rule-making process.
- Allow student voice, minimizing teacher talk.

### Example—Debating on elections

You can implement debate activities based on traditional debate formats, modified for use within a single classroom.

- Divide your students into groups and assign each group a statement concerning a controversial or complex issue, presenting at least two opposing positions (for and against), on which individuals or teams debate their arguments in a structured manner.
- Students research supporting and opposing arguments and are encouraged to critically evaluate the reliability of the information gathered.
- During the debate, students present their arguments and aim to provide stronger reasoning than the opposing group.

Interested in learning more? Have a look at an example from Slovenia: "A debate on voting and elections."

## Cooperation with the wider community

Creating meaningful connections between what students learn and experience in school and what they can engage with outside of it, establishes a continuous learning process that links school and society. In this way, school–community cooperation becomes an essential component of civic and citizenship learning and practice.

School-community cooperation can include partnerships with external organizations (such as non-governmental organizations or advocacy groups), collaborations with local authorities (e.g., local municipalities), the involvement of parents and the building of school-to-school networks.

In school-community activities, you can engage your students through cooperative learning.

### Example—A debate beyond school walls

Debates carried out at the classroom level can also be fruitful occasions to involve experts and/or local organizations. Experts can:

- Provide students with insightful information that can aid in their search for points to support their arguments;
- Offer detailed feedback on the arguments presented;
- Answer questions that arise during both the preparation and debate sessions; and
- Share information on materials and sources as well as local activities for civic engagement.

Interested in learning more? Have a look at an example from Italy: "Debating on politics."



Use the QR Code to access the examples and view the book.



## MORE INFORMATION

ICCS collects data from students in their eighth year of schooling, typically aged 13.5 years or older, as well as from teachers who instruct eighth-grade students in core subjects, including those related to civic and citizenship education.

This *Teacher Snippet* is based on the *IEA Research for Educators* book, *Experiencing Democracy in the Classroom. Building Democratic Learning Environments to Promote Civic Learning* by Valeria Damiani (editor) with contributions by Bruno Losito, Gabriella Agrusti, Maribel Alves Fierro Sevilla, Tatiana Arrigoni, Eva Klemenčič Mirazchiyski, Tiziana Morgante, and Remmert Daas.


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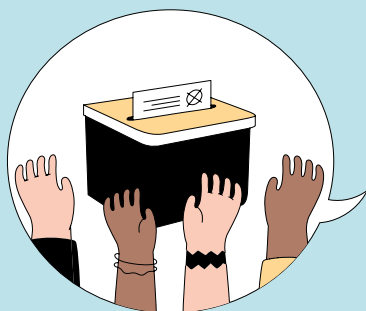
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## EXPLORE THE RESEARCH

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