# RESEARCH REPORT

# DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

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The "Research Report on Democratic Education in Schools" was produced by the partners of the DESC project and published in January 2023. Martina Paone, research manager at QUEST, has been the main researcher coordinating the study.

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Project: "DESC- Democratic Education in Schools " Nr.number: 2021-1-BE02-KA220-SCH-000032620

DESC
DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS



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**Project:** DESC – Democratic Education in Schools

**Dissemination level:** Internal
**Version:** 1.0
**Delivery date:** 22.01.2022
**Keywords:** research, methodology, theory, questionnaire, interviews, focus groups, democratic education, Europe

**Abstract:** This document is the first draft of the research report, that summarises the findings of the research activities that countries of the consortium have undertaken in the first part of the project.
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# INTRODUCTION

Lev Tolstoy set up in 1859 in Yasnaya Polyana (Russia) the first school which could be considered the embryo of democratic schools: it was inquiry-based, experiential, and rather than coerce children to conform to a rigid curriculum, children could learn and explore what they found interesting, and beneficial for themselves.

After this beginning, hundreds of schools all over the world blossomed with these characteristics. Some call themselves “democratic”, others do not use this term but they apply in the practice several democratic education aspects. Among these, there is not a commonly accepted wording for one definition, because everyone of all these schools and learning communities have their own way of interpretation and living some basic ideas, where priorities and focuses can vary in quite a big range of forms.

This diversity of different cultures is actually a wanted result of this approach, where dynamic and organic growing processes (not pre-established, unified or centralised) are understood as a need for cultural evolution.

Before looking at the basic ideas of this approach, a clarification needs to be done: when talking about Democratic Education we don't mean the activity of teaching democratic or civil values or structures in specific lessons or workshops, and we are also not talking about parental education styles that could be called democratic (sharing probably basic values, and being connected in many cases to Democratic Education community settings).

Here, and it seems to be the commonly associated area when using the term "Democratic Education", we refer to schools, or school-like settings like learning communities or learning Hubs, where democratic education is the fundamental philosophical and pedagogical approach.

Democratic schools’ experiences have existed since a century in Europe, and dozens of new democratic schools are blossoming every year in Europe. Democratic Education is mostly practised in small private schools, considered arguably as a social – if not economical elite. Those schools are pioneer vanguards, “pioneers of possibilities” as Derry Hannam phrased it (2020). Small, private, community-based schools that

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despite the great success in terms of children's wellbeing, tend to remain marginal, isolated happy islands that do not manage to reach the majority of children. Moreover, these experiences also struggle for the very way in which they are created: being outside of the classical state school system, but with the willingness (for most of them) of being inclusive and economically affordable, most of these schools struggle financially and suffer for not being supported by public funds, or by a legal framework that acknowledge the very existence of these projects.

At the same time, the need for this kind of project starts to be recognised even outside of the “bubble” of pedagogues, academics experts and practitioners of democratic education.

The European Union, in its most recent reports pointed out for the need for children to acquire life/personal and citizenship competencies, but also for the necessity to find an alternative educational proposition, to be able to offer to schools a method to present these competences to children. Similarly, statistics show that schools are generally not suited to help students to be satisfied in their life (OECD, 2017) to be satisfied in their job (Gallup 2013;2017) and to develop a strong sense of belonging in their school community (PISA and the EU report, 2018). Despite these calls for renovation in schools, the traditional educational system seems reluctant to change, and until now, there has not been a systematic exposure of public schools to democratic education in Europe.

Starting with these premises, in 2021 a group of enthusiastic practitioners, researchers and teachers decided to write a project with the ambition of spreading democratic education in state schools.
The DESC project (Democratic Education in Schools) was funded by the Erasmus+ funding KA2, and it started in February 2022. This three-year project has the objective to put in communication democratic schools and state schools from four countries, plus a university, a school network, in order to start a dialogue and offer training to the public education system with which the state schools could enrich their daily life at school and promote Life and Citizenship competencies.

In this context, this research was set up as the building block of this three-year project, in order to explore the state of the art of democratic education in Europe, and to explore the possibilities of the application of democratic education in state schools.

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# 1. THE THEORETHICAL FRAMEWORK

## 1.1. Objective of the research and research questions

The objective of this study was to analyse the current status and development of democratic education in schools in Europe with the twofold goal of:

1. Divulging what is democratic in schools (history, diffusion, state of the affairs)
2. Identifying what are the needs and the gaps from both democratic schools and state schools regarding the application of democratic education.

The first objective was driven by the interest in filling a gap in the literature by providing educational professionals, teachers and academics with an up-to-date description of the phenomenon of democratic education in its multidimensional aspects.

The second objective was, instead, triggered by the willingness to understand what are the challenges in democratic education in order to provide meaningful solutions. Thanks to the findings of this research, indeed, the partnership of the DESC project will design a specific training for teachers, that will be spread publicly, and will also produce specific guidelines that will target national and european educational stakeholders as well as policymakers, in order to highlight the importance of diffusion democratic education in the state school system.

These two dimensions or theoretical research and practice emerges jointly over course of the analysis that will unveil in the next pages.

The two objectives of the research have been operationalised in the following research questions that have been guiding the research process:

- *"What is the situation of democratic education nowadays in Europe?"*

- *"What are (or could be) the main challenges and needs that are facing both democratic schools and state schools in the application of democratic education?"*

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- *"What could be done to solve the above challenges? "*

According to the well described categorisation of Ritchie et al (2014) and Marshall and Rossman (2011) the first research question (*"What is the situation of democratic education nowadays in Europe?")* could be described as more explanatory and descriptive, in the attempt to expound around a phenomenon and examine its reasons, components and associations.

The second research question (*"What are (or could be) the main challenges and needs that are facing both democratic schools and state schools in the application of democratic education?")* is on the contrary exploratory in its intent to investigate little-known areas of a particular subject and contemporarily evaluative in its attempt to draw conclusions on the "effectiveness of the existing offer of democratic education" and its limits.

Finally, the last research question (*"What could be done to solve the above challenges? ")* reveals its generative attempt to provide new ideas for the development of democratic education practices.

## 1.2. The research process and methods

**Positionality**

Before getting into details of the different methods, it is important to spend a few words about the positionality of the researcher. The typology of subject and research touching the educational, social and political domain, demands the need to critically recognize the influence that the author(s) could have on the outcome of the research itself. As the subject of social research is complex, dynamic, an acknowledgement of the researcher position is essential to ensure that researchers' own biases are accounted for. It is therefore important to highlight that the main researcher involved in the analysis - Martina Paone- has a personal experience with democratic education, having been the founder of a democratic school that was opened in Brussels for 4 years. There is therefore a very personal attachment to the object of study and a clear alignment with the pedagogical approach under study, that can have an influence on both how the research has been conducted, its outcomes and results (see Rowe, 2014). Taking full awareness of the lens through which, the researcher has analysed the phenomenon of democratic education, she has however tried to include a vast array of voices coming from different approaches, and to include critiques, pitfalls and complexities of the democratic education philosophy, not omitting therefore even the strongest criticism to this approach.

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**Research Method**

The research is based on qualitative research methods for its need to grasp an in-depth understanding of democratic education as a social phenomenon, using a process of collecting, analysing, and interpreting mostly non-numerical data the goals is to make sense of democratic education in this pluridimensional aspects and contextualised aspect, interpreting therefore the phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them, putting the focus on a descriptive and observational level. (see *Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Aspers and Corte, 2019)*

The qualitative research approach has been based on four main research methods:

- Literature review
- interviews (in the form of questionnaire).
- Focus group
- Case study

**Literature review**

The first step in this research has been the evaluation of the available literature on democratic education. This has been done not only with the objective of systematising, collecting and synthesising previous research (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003) but above all to create a firm foundation for advancing knowledge on democratic education, through comparing and facilitating theory development. Indeed, the literature review, that we can find in the next chapter has the following objectives:

- to survey and synthesise the literature in the educational science, psychology science and social science
- to critically analyse the information gathered by identifying gaps in current knowledge; by showing eventual limitations, controversy and by formulating areas for further research

By integrating findings and perspectives from many research studies (via a multidisciplinary approach that surveyed education science, political science, social science and psychology) the literature review had brought an overview of the present knowledge produced on democratic education in Europe, as well as be a solid ground to the other research methods (focus groups, interviews and case study) that formed the most empirical part of this study.

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**Questionnaire**

Over the course of the preliminary phases of the research, the partner of the DESC project realised that the literature review was not enough to grasp the complexity of the study of democratic education.
Indeed, despite a great quantity of theoretical and philosophical writings on this topic there are few sources that could give information on the current situation in schools, what are the difficulties and needs of school staff involved in democratic education or what state schools think about democratic education.

The DESC partnership decided therefore to include interviews in the form of "questionnaires" to be sent to democratic schools and state schools, in order to get first-hand information.

A questionnaire has been considered an appropriate method in order to reach a good amount of school in the short period of time, reduce the cost of data handling, ensure consistency in the collection and analysis of the data and assuring the comparing exercise feasibility
Interviews using written questionnaires are widely used in research on education because they are a powerful means of both obtaining information and gaining insights (see for instance Hannan, 2007).

Two different questionnaires with targeted questions had been produced: one for democratic schools and one for state schools. The questionnaire was composed of open-ended questions, where respondents provided a response in their own words. Particular care has been put in asking clear and specific questions.
The questionnaire has been sent to schools applying democratic education in nature Europe. The scope has been limited to the pilot countries of the partnership: Belgium, Italy, Estonia and Bulgaria.

Before analysing the data, it has also proceeded to consider every country's specificity, exploring and mapping exhaustively the entire educational context that was subject of analysis in order to have a clear comparative reference framework. An overview of each country analysis is provided in chapter four, before introducing the empirical data in chapter five.

| COUNTRY | DEMOCRATIC SCHOOLS | STATE SCHOOLS |
|---|---|---|
| BELGIUM | 5/7 ( 4 SCHOOLS) | 9 |
| BULGARIA | 2/2 | 18 |
| ESTONIA | 2/2 | 13 |
| ITALY | 5/17 | 23 (22 SCHOOLS) |
| **TOTAL** | **14** | **63** |

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**Focus Group**

After having performed literature review, mapped every country specific educational context, and having proceeded to the questionnaire, the results of the research have been tested by two discussions in focus groups. Focus groups are used to informally gather information from a small group of individuals who have a common interest in a particular subject - in this case democratic education in schools.

The two focus groups were done in Tenerife on the 30th of October to refine and further explain the findings obtained by the questionnaire: one focus group was gathering experts, researchers and adult staff from democratic education. The other was gathering teachers and headmasters form state schools.

The discussion in the focus group allowed to Provide verification in interpreting data that might otherwise only be conjecture, and Provide alternative explanations and interpretation of findings that may not be obtainable using traditional quantitative methods (Merton and Kendall 1946)

During the focus group the moderator conducts a collective interview of participants and creates open lines of communication across individuals. Focus groups rely on the dynamic interaction between participants to yield data that would be impossible to gather via other approaches.

The process of the focus group was looking more at a “responsive interviewing” model, as proposed by Rubin and Rubin (2011) looking more at out how people perceive an occurrence or object and, most importantly, “the meaning they attribute to it”, rather than to use a mere positivistic approach of finding the truth or a definitive answer, but rather to seek to understand what participant in the focus group believe, see or experience. Given the complementarity of these methods, the focus group helped in gathering a richer understanding of their perspectives of the experts invited.

**Case study**

After the previously mentioned research methods, the partnership of the DESC project felt the need to enrich this research with an example of how democratic education could work within the state school system. This decision was motivated by the answers obtained from the questionnaires, which were pointing out the need to see practical examples and success stories, but also by the willingness to take advantage of this great occasion to give visibility to a pioneer project in state school: the Suvemäe-TKG public democratic school. A case study methodology has been chosen as it brings to an understanding of a complex issue or subject and can extend experience or add strength to what is already known through previous researches, even though it detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their relationships (Grauer, 2012) .

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# 2. WHAT IS DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION?

In this section it will be presented the main theoretical framework, providing the definition, history and glossary for Democratic Education. There will be described what democratic education is and why it should be important to practise it in state schools. The following preamble is inspired by the work of the "International Working Group on a Theory of Democratic Schools" and the "European Democratic Education Community - EUDEC" , to which it has been included the literature analysis of the most recent publications of books and articles on this subject.

## 2.1 An ontological difference

As Biesta (2006) pointed out, the central question of all pedagogies should be “what it means to be human”, and only after having answered to this question we can then start the work of educating.
Many educational practices are therefore based upon philosophical ideas about what it means to be human. What makes democratic education different from any other kind of educational approach - and therefore also against the tide- should be understood therefore in the different answer that democratic education gives to the question “what it means to be human”.

Answering to this question, we can see there is a quite difference between “Progressive Education”, and Democratic Education. Progressive Education is understood as comprehensively innovative approaches promoted and tested across the world throughout the 20th century by experimental or laboratory schools and other establishments based on progressivist philosophies, the “new education” principles, and critical pedagogies. Such practices were encouraged and implemented by a long list of visionaries, reformers, and proponents of “active school,” “experiential learning,” “child-centered pedagogy,” collective upbringing and peer cooperation, etc. (Bowers, 1967; Darling and Nordenbo, 2003; Gribble, 1998). Intrinsic to them all, their variety notwithstanding, was a criticism of the traditional, conventional pedagogies prevalent in mass schooling (see GAWLICZ and STARNAWSK, 2020).

To understand the vision of progressive education towards the question “what it means to be human”; we can see what the Belgian progressive politician and philosopher John Pitseys (2014) rekon about the use f

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democracy in school. He raises an apparent paradox arguing that the school is not a democratic place and is not, in principle, destined to be. In fact, he argues that schools bring together individuals who are supposed to know, teachers, and other individuals who do not yet know who do not yet know, the pupils. This knowledge concerns academic knowledge and skills, such as and academic skills, such as learning to reason, write or reasoning, writing or mathematics. But it also concerns values that are supposed to prescribe what is civic or moral to do. He argues that the existence of inequalities in knowledge or skills between individuals is not enough to justify different political status: democracy is distinguished from other political systems by the fact that every citizen has equal rights and freedoms, regardless of their competence or personal morality. However, this asymmetry is special since education aims by its very definition to lead the student out of the state of a minor. The ideals of freedom and equality presuppose a mature, emancipated identity, the realisation of which presupposes precisely education: the end of compulsory education is supposed to correspond to the acquisition of a form of intellectual majority for the pupil.

Pitseys argues that it is in the name of its educational mission that the school is conceived as a home of discipline and a domestic system in its own right. Its democratic function is through the quality of the education provided, and by the social and civic competence of the teacher.
That democracy should be taught but not practised in schools is based on the a priori assumption that democracy only takes place between citizens, and that students are not yet full citizens.

What is really important here, is that Pitseys clearly puts forward the basic assumption of all progressive (and non) education. So, if he were to answer Biesta question “what it means to be human” and therefore “what is means to be children” in progressive education, Pitseys could say that children are half citizens, not yet adults, and therefore they do not have granted full rights yet, and they are waiting to become a whole person.

On the contrary, Democratic Education sees human beings coming into the world as unique individuals through responsible responses to the external environment. Children are considered whole, competent beings equipped with the curiosity and the motivation to be able to be themselves, finding who they are and pursuing their happiness. In this sense, democratic education gives the same rights to children as to adults – provided that children can sustain the responsibility connected with the corresponding right.”. We can see therefore that there is an ontological difference between the general understanding of most educational approaches that see the role of adults as the one of forging, leading, and the ethos of democratic education where adults are peers that – thank to the major experience - accompany the child in a journey of self-discovery.
Finally, it has been also pointed out by some scholars (Suissa, 2006 among others) that the concept of human nature exposed by the proponent of democratic education is one that human nature is naturally benevolent. There is, indeed, an educational belief that children have in some sense an innate capacity for curiosity,

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motivation and altruism. Greenberg would say that children are extremely good (and therefore do not need to be taught) in all those behaviours they will need as adults, such as creativity, imagination, alertness, curiosity, thoughtfulness, responsibility, and judgement. What children lack is experience, which can be gained if adults guide students in open ways.

Practitioners and authors promoting democratic education therefore believe that if trusted and given them full support and the tools to express who they are, children can reveal their full potential. It is therefore the environmental factors that determine the extent to which children will be able to reveal themselves or they will be coerced and forged into something they are not. This constructivist aspect explains the central role that democratic education thinkers attribute in the processes of education and socialisation of children to accompany their potential to be expressed thanks to the help in developing personal and social skills.

In this sense, we can easily understand that the objective of democratic education is to allow children to live a happy and meaningful life (see Gray, 2020; Hannam, 2020) and to accompanying children in a non-interventionist way, so that as Neill was pointed out, “the function of a child is to live his own life——not the life that his anxious parents think he should live, not a life according to the purpose of an educator who thinks he knows best” (as quoted in Bull, 1970).
Children are clearly considered not empty vessels to be filled with learning, but they have all the curiosity and motivation to follow their own path and are duly accompanied in their self-discovery journey.

So, democratic education is ontologically opposed to “Conventional Schools”, if we consider it as traditional, curriculum centred, strongly directed, which is focused on academic studying and uses unified evaluation systems, but it is also very different to progressive education. Despite Democratic schools are embedded in this tradition, there is a clear ontological difference: adults don’t take a step back from their central position and really give over the power of decision making to the individual and the group. In progressive education "student centred learning" and "project-based learning" are partly implied, becoming the curriculum also less about encyclopaedic studying in favour of interdisciplinary competences, and evaluation techniques also becoming more personal, in these environments, even reducing academic pressure, there is still directed education, because there is a curriculum that has to be followed, and the adult has a superior power position managing the activity. There are also other aspects that distinguish progressive educations from democratic education, for instance: segregation by age, not unlimited permission to play freely, no possibility to move free through the different spaces. The decisive criteria for the mentioned paradigm shift to Democratic Education is the implementation of a real Self-Directed Learning, where the adult’s step back from the central power position.

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## 2.2. Basic ideas of Democratic Education

Over the last years, many different meetings, conferences, publications of the democratic education movement took place where experts working in this field, academics and independent researchers gathered to discuss the theoretical and practical basis of democratic education.

In particular, EUDEC (European Democratic Education Community) dedicated a specific working group on the theory of democratic education, whereas several EUDEC and IDEC conferences were also focused on defining the essence of democratic education. It is fair to say that this community of experts and academics agree on two basic principles of democratic education, accepted widely as the foundation of this approach: SELF DETERMINATION and DEMOCRATIC COMMUNITY PROCESSES.

These two basic concepts are also the central ideas that are described in related literature, and have deep possibilities of interpretation of the important meanings and facets they carry within themselves and the complexity when setting them into relationship with each other. Following these two principles will be explained with a closer look.

**SELF DETERMINATION:**

Self-determination in the context of democratic education means a process where children take primary charge of their choices, including those connected with planning, continuing and evaluating their learning experiences. This freedom of deciding about their lives has never to be mistaken by licence (see Neill, 1978).

Self-determination in this context could be analysed on three different angles: self-determination as human right, self-determination as mental health and self-determination as a learning process.

- **Human rights:** We could say that the right to free self-determination is the central spirit of human rights. The capacity to develop a reflective consciousness and the free will resulting from it can be seen as the central difference to other animals, and even from a spiritual perspective the free will is what makes us human, carrying this "divine" potential within.
  This natural right was suppressed over long periods of history and it has been conquered quite recently in history by still a small percentage of the global population.
  Even though the basic human right of self-determination has been widely accepted in most modern democracies, it has not reached childhood yet. Children are mostly still handled as objects of our

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"education" with no voice and no vote, even in very direct issues of their daily lives. It is sufficient to remember that children's fundamental right to participate in events concerning their own lives has relatively recently been recognised, in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Children's right to be heard is legally extended to all actions and decisions which affect children's lives: within their family, their school, their community and at national policy level.

Few years after the publication of the Convention Roger Hart (1992) wrote a paper entitled "Children's Participation: from Tokenism to Citizenship", published by the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre. In this piece, the author adjusted the Ladder of Participation, a concept developed by Sherry Arenstein referring to involvement of citizens in decision making (1969) to include children. The ladder explains the various degrees of respect the rights to participation in projects, ranging from manipulation instead of real participation at the bottom of the ladder to child- initiated, shared decisions with adults at the top (see image). Hart defines participation -a fundamental right of citizenship - as "The process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives" (Hart, 1992). The respect of children rights, according to Hart, would guarantee that they will become engaged citizens able to value their and others rights.

However, the pessimistic scenario emerging by Hart's analysis, has not greatly improved in the last 30 years. We can see that in most matters that concerns their life, children are not involves, and therefore their basic right not respected.

Limitation of human rights to children and youngsters has been considered by many "adultism". Adultism is defined by many scholars (Bell, 1995; Bonnardel, Y. (2015); Fletcher, 2021; Gong and Wright, 2007) as the behaviours and attitudes based on the assumptions that adults are better than young people, and entitled to act upon young people without agreement. Such scholars consider that we live in a society where there is structural adultism, and schools are created in order to serve an adult-centred society that overlooks the rights of the children. According to this stream of thought, the formal and informal systems, processes, organisation, and outcomes of schools ensure, reinforce, sustain, or transfer bias towards adults.

Engaged in respecting children rights and fighting adultism in its multidimensional aspects, democratic education sees self-determination of children as a fundamental prerequisite for democratic societies. This aspect of self-determination (personal freedom/responsibility) is therefore strongly connected with the second principle of democratic education which is the democratic community processes.

**Mental and physical health:** Psychological findings (La Guardia, J. 2017, Ntoumanis N, Ng JYY, Prestwich A et al, 2021; Ryan, R. M. & Deci, E. L., 2017) show that self-determination, or the so-called internal or external locus of control, is one of the most important factors for mental health.

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Motivation—energy directed at a goal - plays a big role in our lifestyle choices and in our ability to make sustained changes as needed to maintain our health. However, researchers have found through many studies that when people are more autonomously motivated, they are more likely to have good mental health, on the contrary, passively relying on external motivations to achieve something in life can be extremely harmful. Ryan and Deci (2017) have suggested that the tendency to be either proactive or passive is largely influenced by the social conditions in which we are raised. In a former publication, the same authors (Deci and Ryan, 1985) describe that autonomous orientation represents the highest degree of development as it guarantees the possibility to adjust one's behaviour in harmony with the surrounding environment and to achieve good satisfaction in the interpersonal relationships, as well as a sense of self-realisation. According to self-determination theory, the pursuit of autonomous goals will improve well-being because these goals are in line with one's true self, concerns, and values and therefore, satisfy the basic psychological needs. Conversely, the pursuit of controlled goals will restrain well-being because these goals do not accurately reflect the interests and values of one's deeper self and are thus unlikely to satisfy basic psychological needs (Gillet et al., 2012). Likewise, Miquelon and Vallerand (2008) show that autonomous motivation is also extremely important for health also when persons are facing challenges, because it enables individuals to be protected against stressful events, as it provides them with sufficient psychological resources stemming from more adaptive forms of coping. (Migliorini, Cardinali & Rania, 2019). Literature also underlines that being autonomous promotes internalisation of values and awareness of intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics and of their relation to behaviour and health, in line with the psychosocial approach (Williams and Deci, 1996).

Of course, it is not black or white, but self-determination could be rather imagined as a continuum at the extremes of which we find intrinsic motivation and autonomous regulation on the one hand and the external determination of behaviour and amotivation on the other (see Figure 1).

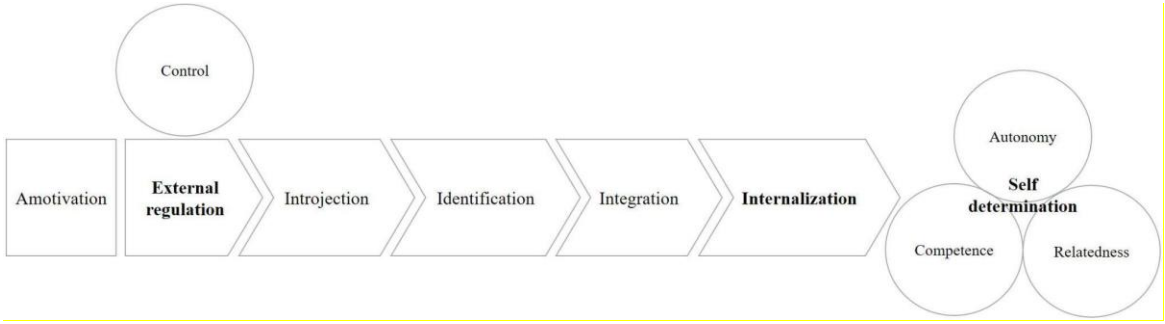


*Figure 1 SDL process of internalisation. Source: Migliorini, Cardinali & Rania, 2019*

Between the two poles, we can imagine a process of internalization of causality, through which the individual makes his own reasons for the behavior that others had initially presented to him.

There are therefore purely external forms of regulation (punishment and rewards) and more internalized extrinsic regulation forms, such as introjection, whose behaviors are guided by the

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dynamics of seeking approval, and identification, in which values are consciously accepted and transformed into elements of the self (Grolnick et al., 1991; Vallerand and Bisonette, 1992; Deci et al., 1994). Finally, the integration process organises and makes congruent different identifications, making the experience of the self as a unit possible.

Having a plethora of psychology studies analysed the clear impact that self-determination has on mental health, we need to understand the fundamental role of the school in either fostering or thwarting children's well-being and personal growth by promoting or inhibiting seòf-determination.

Maria Montessori had noticed that every young individual has its own construction plan which it wants to develop in the course of its life. If it is disturbed in this process, e.g. by the intervention or instruction of adults, the child moves further and further away from it. Montessori calls these interferences “deviations” as something has pulled the child off their intended path of development which they would naturally be drawn to follow, and if consistent and repeated, this can result in physical or psychological causes of illness.

In conventional schooling, self-determination, and so the internal locus of control, is often suppressed or reduced to a minimum. This practice results in great harm for children as such coercive practices are detrimental to children's wellbeing.

This is one of the reasons why in Democratic Education the focus lies first on the development of basic personal competences and socio-emotional skills, instead on cognitive skills and learning achievements. Democratic Education allows children to find their inner motivation, and accompany children to build up their personal and social skills, in order to be able to know themselves and make the choices that are in line with their own preferences.

However, we have come to expect high degrees of authority from administrators, teachers, parents, school boards, even government, yet only a few schools have embraced the notion of total and absolute freedom of choice for the students themselves. The view that a child has the mental and emotional capacities to make these kinds of decisions is a difficult one to market (Peramas, 2007).
Self-determination not only is a key factor is menthal health, but it is also fundamental factor for physical health. The stream of studies on the benefit of nature and outdoor learning are clear in pointing out that it is crucial for children to be able to move, accompanying their learning journey with movement, and not being anchored to a desk for eight hours per day. Self-determination, and therefore freedom for children to move in space and decide autonomously posture, space and movements has therefore a great impact also on the physical wellbeing of children.

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- **Learning processes:**

  From Rousseau to Spencer, passing by Dewey, Thoreau and Piaget, all of them considered that learning should be natural. Huge works and reflections have been spent trying to make learning in the classroom match children's spontaneity outside of it. In Egan's interpretation, the "holy grail of progressivism" has been to discover methods of instruction derived from and modelled on children's effortless learning (Egan, 2002, p.38). Both psychology and education have tried to work on this objective (see Peramas, 2007) . On the contrary, the answer that democratic education thinkers would give watching those efforts, is that there is no better way to learn than allow children to take control of their learning.

  In the last decades, a variety of neurobiological researches confirmed the underlying hypothesis of democratic education tradition practised over more than 100 years: the emotional connection to the (learning) activity, driven by self-determination and so by intrinsic motivation, is substantial on a physiological level to activate the needed neuro-transmitters and isolators, and therefore to promote the long-term learning processes. The belief that children learn best with freedom from coercion was promoted already in the New Ideals in Education Conferences (1914–37) that created the building blocks of the child-centred approaches in modern education.

  Self-determination as a learning process is called self-directed learning (or sometimes also called autonomous learning, self-organised or self-managed education). self-directed education is education that derives from the self-chosen activities and life experiences of the learner; and Self-Directed Education (with capital letters) refers to the deliberate practice in which young people are fully free to educate themselves in their own chosen ways rather than by means of a forced curriculum (Alliance for Self-Directed Education, 2021; Gray, 2017).

  Self-directed learning sees children (and humans in general) as biologically and intrinsically motivated to learn the lessons of the culture in which they live (for more information see De Beer, J. Mentz E. (2016) and Gray, P (2009). Humans throughout history and in most cultures in the world learn in a way which is self-directed. The skills and knowledge needed to thrive in this society might be different to those needed in hunter gatherer societies but science shows us that there are some fundamental aspects of being human and characteristics specific to our species. Self-directed education works with, rather than against, these natural drivers. Children and young people are supported to do what they are interested in, to socialise and play with children of different ages as they choose and to learn through immersion in their communities and with the tools of their culture. Self- directed learning is anchored in the belief that the most efficient, long-lasting, and profound

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learning takes place when started and pursued by the learner and that all people are creative if they are allowed to develop their unique talents.

Studies have shown that when people determine for themselves what to learn, they retain the subject significantly better than if someone else determines what they should learn. This is what Deci and Ryan (2002) called the *"The paradox of achievement: The harder you push, the worse it gets".*

External motivation is only necessary when someone else determines what the student should learn. In conventional education teachers tend to work over extrinsic motivation, using a reward and punishment system. This led to the so-called "bulimic learning" where academic content is taken in under pressure (often developing even an emotional rejection to "learning" and culture) and "spitted" out only for testing result purposes, and don't stay usable on a long term, as studies of re-testing have confirmed even in surprisingly short periods of time and also looking at good first testing results. Bulimic learning creates an environment where students are forced to memorise information with little attention paid to the long-term retention of knowledge and skills necessary to competently practice these skills (see Bensley RJ, Ellsworth T., 1992; Nelson CE., 2010) . The students' physical and mental health is compromised by the pressure inherent to bulimic learning, with educational outcomes typified by students' laments that they are unprepared and "know nothing". As an educational practice, bulimic learning is as unhealthy as its namesake is for the body.

These factors determine the choices of democratic schools to focus on internal motivation rather than external. When the students determine their own curriculum, external motivation is not necessary. In Democratic Education, external motivation is therefore substitute by internal motivation.

When talking about self-directed learning, democratic education does not refer to permissive "no-rules" education like the so-called "laissez faire". Democratic education requires a clear structure, set of co-decided rules and presence of the adults as guides for the self-directed learning and to sparkle curiosity and trigger the internal motivation in students. The degree of "self-direction" and autonomy then vary from a democratic school to another. But, in every school there is a balance between the individual freedom and the needs of others and the whole community.

is a full array of examples from children from democratic schools to showcase how intrinsic motivation works. Some of these are for instance the accounts of how children learn in the Sudbury Valley school, that it is possible to find in the SVS website or the researches put forward by Peter Gray on the alumni of Sudbury school (see for instance Gray, P. & Chanoff, D. 1986).

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The switch from an external directed education to a self-determined represents a paradigm shift in education. This shift does not entail only a change in the students. Indeed, having most of adults experienced an academic biography of directed and coercive education, often the application of self-directed education leads adults to question very much themselves and the social rule they constructed around education. As we have not been educated in questioning the status quo or critical self-reflection, this process of mental "unschooling" or "unlearning'', to understand the needed changes and trust deeply in children's capacity of self-determination and self-organisation of their learning processes, is often a difficult task for many adults, pedagogist and teachers. One of the typical examples in this sense is the difficulties that adults grown in a traditional school system (and therefore teachers and pedagogues) have to understand that free play is an ethological need of children and the youngest for their healthy development. Letting children and young people play is not therefore neglecting their learning, but allowing them to experience the word, develop intrinsic interests and competencies; learn how to make decisions, solve problems, exert self-control, follow rules, learn to regulate their emotions, learn to get along with others as equals and experience joy. Through all of these effects, play promotes mental health and therefore fosters learning (for more info see Gray P. 2011).

**DEMOCRATIC COMMUNITY PROCESSES:**

This second aspect of democratic education is related to the social and interpersonal life in the school: in democratic education every person has a voice and vote, not just for his personal issues, but also for community decision making processes. The possibility for children to have a saying in the decisions about the school, has profound consequences on several levels, that will be explained here below:

- **Community of equals:** Offering the opportunity to children and young to take part into the decision-making process in their school does not just have an impact on the structure of the community processes. It directly affects the way all school actors relate to each other, building trustful relationships.

  In conventional education children grow up in hierarchical structures, and most of the time they do not have any choice than to obey an adult authority without being offered significant options to change their reality.

  This asymmetry has been already portrayed showing the discourse of the Belgian progressive politician and philosopher Pitseys (2014) in the introduction. He indeed argues that the underlying foundation of school is the asymmetry between who knows and who does not know, and that it cannot be a democratic institution, because its target, the children, are not yet full citizens. Therefore, they cannot be considered equals. This asymmetrical setting, however, teaches children

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to be quite passive in accepting rules by a superior person that decides everything for them. In such a situation, the underlying message sent to children is that they are not trustable enough to make any decision. This results in the long run in a lack of confidence in themselves and in others, and to an incapacity to take part and be an active and independent mind.

On the contrary, in democratic education the trust in children is considered as a key element. Democratic education is based therefore on a community of equals, there is no hierarchy between teachers and students, only different roles. Children are seen as human beings that deserve the same respect, attention and care of adults. In democratic schools, children are therefore offered the possibility to have a say in all matters that interest them, and in which they have the competences to decide about.

**Democratic participation and values:**

We saw before that a fundamental right of citizenship (connected therefore with the discussion on human rights), participation is defined as "The process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives" (Hart, 1992). According to Hart, we should not expect young people to suddenly become engaged citizens at the age of 16, 18 or 21, without having prior experience of what it means to use their voice, organise themselves and influence their lives. That means that an understanding of democratic participation and the confidence and competence to participate, can only be acquired gradually through practice, and this practice needs to be embedded in learning (for more info see Licht, Massini, Pateraki and Scimeca, 2019). Historically, the discussion of education and democracy was first addressed by John Dewey, who considered that without an education that allows to understand both our freedom and our responsibility towards other, democracy can neither develop or endure, and therefore he believed that the aim of education should be oriented towards preparing young people to be full and active participants in all aspects of democratic life, among which the ability to think critically, the sense of efficiency and the desire to actively participate in political life.

This conception of education as an active agent to shape the politics already exists in some post structural writings about education (e.g., Ellsworth, 1989; Lather, 1991, Britzman, 2006; Biesta, 2006; 2010, to name only a few). This leads to what might be called an educational form of politics, or a political form of education in educational philosophy, and that is what we call democratic education. Despite it does not yet exist is a general awareness of the importance and necessity of these understandings of education for the practice of "taking care of the future" in complex cosmopolitan times (see Osberg, 2010), democratic education places at the core of its concerns the care for the future of our democracies.

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This basic citizenship skills are fundamental for living in a democratic society. Already in 2008, the Council of Europe's White Paper on intercultural dialogue noted that the competences which citizens need to acquire to participate effectively in a culture of democracy are not acquired automatically but need to be learned and practised, and education is the principal vehicle for this learning: preparing individuals for life as active democratic citizens, support learners in acquiring the competences which they require to participate effectively in democratic processes and intercultural dialogue. Similarly, the Council of Europe's document "Competence for Democratic Culture" (2016) considered that an education system which equips people with such competences empowers students to become active participants in democratic processes and in intercultural dialogue, but it also endows learners with the ability to function as autonomous social agents capable of choosing and pursuing their own goals in life. Despite the theory, as Derry Hannam noticed (2001) "there is still a worldwide political concern that many young people have little interest in or knowledge of their democratic systems of government, and their engagement in the local communities seems quite low. Even those who have either interest or knowledge appear to have shaky confidence in either the capacity of their systems or the integrity of their politicians to work for beneficial change. Potentially it provides dangerously fertile soil for the xenophobia, racism, and nationalistic demagoguery". Powerful cases such as the "Fridays for future" however demonstrate that young generations still mobilise and care for public causes. It is evident from major investigations into citizenship education that successful education for democracy needs to be at least in part experiential. Democratic structures and practices need to be modelled in the everyday lives of students in their classrooms and schools, and teachers need to be equipped with a set of competences to help teach pupils how to live together, as democratic citizens in diverse societies. In this sense, Member States still have to introduce more experiential aspects in the classrooms that allow students to practise democracy, as already remarked in the Council of Europe's document "Competence for Democratic Culture" (2016).

Democratic schools are giving possibilities to students to participate in the decision making. The degree of involvement and the organization of the decision's procedures vary from one school to another. What is in common is that children get trained to speak up, make an impact in the things that matter to them, and being able to argue and defend their thought, as well as listen to others and arrive to agreements.

This is why democratic schools are based on the socio-political belief that having full democratic rights in childhood is the best way to become an adult who is comfortable functioning within a democracy. In these environment children get used to freedom but to responsibility at the same time. They learn from very young to be involved in common decision making and collaborate in solidarity through direct democratic participation. They learn to care for themselves and for others.

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> They learn to speak up and to listen, and find solutions and agreements. They learn that living together requires a whole range of tools and techniques to ensure equal rights and justice, and that these systems need to be revised and adapted continuously. Experiencing democracy is however not just about deciding together. It's about preserving integrity and dignity. About respect and empathy. About solidarity and cooperation. About individual and collective wealth and wellbeing.

This short description of the core features of democratic education might be not exhaustive to represent the variety and richness of this approach, but it could at least provide a general overview of the reasoning behind Democratic Education choices.

## 2.3. Definitions of Democratic Education

In the former paragraph, while providing the description about core aspects of democratic education, it has been repeated quite often that it is complicate to give a rigid definition of democratic education. Among democratic education experts, it is commonly said that there are as many democratic education definitions, as the number of democratic schools existing. This might be an exaggeration, but it suggests that when approaching with this philosophy it is of pivotal importance that we consider that because decisions are taken in each school, by a different collective of people (children and adults), the setting of the school and the basic rules may vary extensively according to the different decisions taken.

What follows is a little collection of different definitions gathered by an international working group on a Theory of Democratic Schools, that was initiated in 2020. This collection exemplifies the difficulty to find one common wording, but shows that the different proposals try to express the same spirit of common beliefs: bring human rights into education.

| DEFINITION | SOURCE |
|---|---|
| Schools (organisations and individuals all round the world) that uphold such ideals as:<br>- respect and trust for children<br>- equality of status of children and adults<br>- shared responsibility<br>- freedom of choice of activity<br>- democratic governance by children and staff together, without reference to any supposedly superior guide or system | This definition defines who can be a member of the IDENetwork. It was set up by David Gribble (Sudbury Valley School) some years after the first IDEC-Conference in 1993.<br>https://www.idenetwork.org/index.php/about/what |
| "The diverse participants in Democratic Education are united in upholding the spirit of the Declaration of Human Rights and the | IDEC 2002 in New Zealand.<br>Found on the IDENetwork Website: |

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| | |
|---|---|
| Convention on the Rights of the Child and implementing this as the primary framework for the day-to-day practices in all learning environments." | http://www.idenetwork.org/index.php/about/what-is-democratic-education |
| "We believe that, in any educational setting, young people have the right to decide individually how, when, what, where and with whom they learn, to have an equal share in the decision-making as to how their organisations - in particular their schools - are run, and which rules and sanctions, if any, are necessary." | 13th International Democratic Education Conference (IDEC) 2005<br>Berlin, Germany<br>www.idec2005.org |
| A social space that fulfils the following criteria, can be called Democratic School:<br>- Firm foundations in a values culture of equality and shared responsibility. (respect breeds respect. Trust breeds trust. Compassion breeds compassion. Tolerance breeds tolerance. Listening breeds listening.)<br>- Collective decision-making where all members of the community, regardless of age or status, have an equal say over significant decisions such as school rules, curricula, projects, the hiring of staff and even budgetary matters.<br>- Self-directed discovery; Learners choose what they learn, when, how and with whom they learn it. Learning can happen inside or outside of the classroom, through play as well as conventional study. The key is that the learning is following the students intrinsic motivation and pursuing their interests." | IDEC / EUDEC 2005 Berlin<br>https://eudec.org/democratic-education/what-is-democratic-education/ |
| “Democratic education is an educational approach grounded in respect for human<br>rights and a broad interpretation of learning, in which students have the freedom to<br>organize their daily activities, and in which there is equality and democratic decision-<br>making among students and staff.” | Bennis, Dana M.; Graves, Isaac R.(eds.): The Directory of Democratic Education, p.8., 2006 |
| "A Democratic School is a socio-cultural space where individual rights are protected within a respectful coexistence inside democratic community processes, so self-determined development and learning is possible, for the single person as for the whole group." | One of the proposals the group was working on in an internal paper in 2021. |

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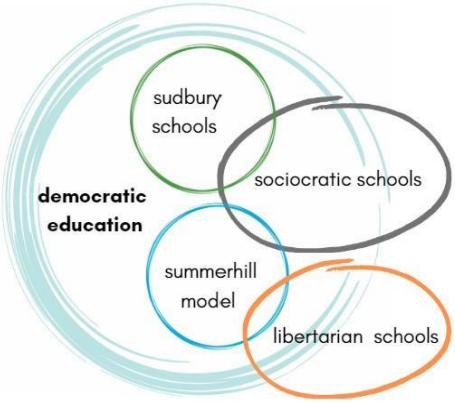
| | |
|---|---|
| Democratic education is a type of formal education that is organized democratically, so that students can manage their own learning and participate in the governance of their school." | https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democratic_education |

## 2.4 Models of Democratic Education

Even though the definition itself of democratic education is large, there are some categories that help to orientate and position a school in the variety of nuances of the democratic education approach.

In the past, the literature tended to bring together these form of education, often calling them libertarian or free approaches, This has been explained by Colin Ward, when pointed out that “The handful of people who have sought to put their ideas of ‘free’ education into practice have always been so beleaguered by the amused hostility of the institutionalised education system on the one hand and by the popular press in the other [...] that they have tended to close ranks and minimise their differences. (Ward 1990: 15)”

However, in the Democratic Education movement there are different tendencies and interpretations that produce quite different school settings.
In the figure below, you can see an attempt to grasp some of the major approaches of democratic education in Europe.




One of the most known ones is the distinction used to describe two tendencies of interpretation of this approach according to the two old and famous schools representing two different models.

The first model is the **Summerhill Model**. Summerhill was created by A. S. Neill in 1921, as a school that followed his educational principle of giving freedom to the children and staff through democratic governance. Summerhill is is a boarding and day school serving primary and secondary education in England. The school is based on Neill's dictum of "freedom, not licence": "A free school is not a place where

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you can run roughshod over other people. It's a place that minimises the authoritarian elements and maximises the development of community and really caring about the other people. Doing this is a tricky business" (Bull, 1970)

As in most of the democratic schools, lessons are optional, and pupils are free to choose what to do with their time. In addition to taking control of their own time, pupils can participate in the self-governing community of the school. School meetings are held twice a week, where pupils and staff alike have an equal voice in the decisions that affect their day-to-day lives, discussing issues and creating or changing school laws

Classes are voluntary at Summerhill, and children can therefore choose if attending or not without adults. Although most students attend, depending on their age and reasons, children choose whether to go of their own accord and without adult compulsion (see Richard, 2013).

In Summerhill all children have the freedom to choose what to do, but adult staff - when discussing all new children- might propose and vote on interventions, if needed, during staff meetings. The intervention goal is to help those children that may have issues that interfere with their freedom to choose (e.g., fear of classrooms, shyness to learn in front of others, lack of confidence). Interventions are based on "good teaching, using multi-sensory approaches and individualised to the needs of the child" as the main ways to assist children to overcome learning problems, with the child negotiating their learning (Summerhill, 2019).

The staff meet at least twice a week to discuss issues; those relevant to the community will be brought to a community meeting. Children can attend these meetings when they ask, but are asked to leave when individual students are discussed, to maintain the privacy of the student.

Although Neill was more concerned with the social development of children than their academic development, Summerhill nevertheless has some important differences in its approach to teaching. Children are not divided by age, rather, they are grouping according to their interest or level of understanding in a given subject. It is not uncommon, therefore, that pupils of widely varying ages attend the same course. This structure reflects a belief that children should progress at their own pace, rather than having to meet a set standard by a certain age.

What is sensibly different from the Summerhill method to other approaches are two characteristics:

1. At Summerhill classes were quite traditional and they are a quite fixed set of classed offered to students. Neill did not show outward interest in classroom pedagogy, and was mainly interested in pupil happiness, and thus there were no distinctive Summerhillian classroom methods. In recent years this has

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changed, placing more importance on the quality of courses and the profile of teachers, but what it remains is that there is still a pre-established offer of courses and activities by the staff that students can attend. This, as we will see, is an opposed approach compared to the Sudbury Model.

2. At Summerhill there is a majority of students that are boarding students. This is not only for practical reasons (so to accommodate international children) but also for Neill's belief that children can be freely themselves if separated from the anxiety and projections of parents. This is therefore a stand that differs sensibly from other democratic school communities that are mainly run by parents.

The second model that is interesting mentioning in contrast, is the **Sudbury Model**. Here there is no pre-established planning by the staff, and activities and lessons are organised and planned in a co-construction process together parting from the student's initiative.

The Sudbury school model originates from the Sudbury Valley School, founded in 1968 in Framingham, Massachusetts. Though there is no formal or regulated definition of a Sudbury Model school, there are now more than 60 schools that identify themselves with Sudbury around the world, operating as independent entities. In Sudbury schools, students -usually for the K-12 age range- have complete responsibility for their own education, and the school is run by a direct democracy in which students and staff are equal citizens.

What is very different in Sudbury schools is that students use their time however they wish, and learn as a by-product of ordinary experience rather than through coursework. There is no predetermined educational syllabus, prescriptive curriculum or standardized instruction. There are no classes proposed to students, unless their requires that an adult staff prepares for them a lesson. According to the model the presence and guidance of a teacher is not necessary. The free exchange of ideas and free conversation and interplay between people provides broad exposure to areas that may prove relevant and interesting to students.

Implicitly and explicitly, students are given responsibility for their own education: The only person designing what a student will learn is the student. Exceptions are when a student asks for a particular class or arranges an apprenticeship. Sudbury schools do not compare or rank students—the school requires no tests, evaluations, or transcripts. The older students learn from younger students and vice versa. The presence of older students provides role models, both positive and negative, for younger students.

Being the Sudbury model the most radical one if we like, it has also been the subject on most criticisms.

The first criticism is the one about its highly individualistic standpoint. Wilson in particular has point out in more articles (2016 and 2017) that the Sudbury school model is deeply imbued with neoliberal discourses of self-motivation, entrepreneurship, and individualistic notions of success with dangerous individualistic

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consequences for some children' socialization and difficulty to promote a collective sense of social responsibility (ibid, 2016). The same author, in an ethnographic study of 2017 considered that despites practitioners positioned themselves in opposition to the neoliberal policies and practices of public schools, at the micro-level of routine interaction in school, neoliberalism presented itself through discourses of meritocracy and choice, individual autonomy and education as a private good.

These accounts are however in tension with the researches undertaken by Gray and others scholars on the graduated of Sudbury school. According to their findings, "graduates reported that for higher education and careers, the school benefited them by allowing them to develop their own interests and by fostering such traits as personal responsibility, initiative, curiosity, ability to communicate well with people regardless of status, and continued appreciation and practice of democratic values." (Gray & Chanoff, 1986).

Secondly, it is also criticised by those who consider that this model does not allow students to exit from their comfort zone, and does not offer enough quantity of stimuli to them. The proponents of this criticism come from traditional schools' approaches as well as democratic education. These last ones are the ones who are more inclined to practise the Summerhill model. The pedagogical discussion between the two models, associated with two different streams of thought is directed to the question if children need direct offerings from adults, or if that way we already condition their creativity, initiative and responsibility, getting them used to that someone will always be offering something to do to them.
These are the categories often used nowadays in educational discussions, even not having clearly defined criteria, and being the distinction inside the Democratic Education/Self Directed Learning category into two tendencies mostly only used by experienced insiders in conversations among each other.

There is also a very diverse range among Democratic Schools in their ways to organise their structures and legal systems, varying at concepts and tools like: Direct or representative democracy, with upcoming models like Sociocracy. General assemblies in combination of different structures of commissions and sub-circles.

A category here which is increasingly popular is the **sociocratic model.** Sociocracy is a form of governance that offers effective ways to share power. The goal of sociocracy is to provide a framework for including all voices in and organisation in decision-making, in order to "respect the equal value of people," (Buck & Villines, 2007 p. 29) and to ensure that "no one is ignored" (Rau & Gonzales, 2018, p. 3).
When we speak of Sociocracy we mean the SCM (Sociocratic Circle-organisation Method), which was originated in De Werkplaats Kindergemeenschap, a Quaker-inspired school founded in 1926 by Kees Boeke and Beatrice Cadbury in the Netherlands. Since then, it spread out from the Netherlands world-wide.
SCM is properly working in an organisation, when the following four principles are met: direct democracy

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based on consent organised in thematic circles, two circles are linked together by a double link and distribution of tasks and functions is done by sociocratic "open" elections.

Sociocracy is currently used in dozens of democratic schools worldwide with joint student, teacher, and staff participation in decision-making (Osorio & Shread, 2021), and in other informal education settings. It is also used in children's parliaments in India with representatives aged 6-18 in thousands of federated groups from neighbourhood, city, state, and national levels (John, 2021; Ravi, 2020).

It is to be noticed that, despites many democratic schools adopting a sociocratic decision making system, not all sociocratic schools are democratic schools. This is because some sociocratic schools apply sociocracy only among the teacher's circle, the parent's circles and the administration circle, but not in the children's circle. Some schools do not start with implementing sociocracy with children, because they think that it is a long process that starts firstly with adults. Once the adults have a strong understanding of dynamic governance, then they can open up this method to children. Some sociocractic schools include children in the sociocratic structure, but their decision sphere (domain) is limited to practical and marginal decisions (where to go on a school trip for instance) but cannot be extended to learning. Therefore, some sociocratic schools do not apply self-directed learning and cannot be defined democratic.

Finally, another category that is, with exception of Italy and Spain, widely forgotten is the **Libertarian Schools model**. The libertarian model is one of the oldest existing, anchored in the anarchist traditions of thoughts and in the historical radical school experiments of La Ruche in France and the Modern School of Ferrer in Spain and in the US. The libertarian schools are concerned in encouraging independence and self-reliance within a radical political approach.

Although many writers, including Smith (1983), Shotton (1993) and Spring (1975) included democratic education and anarchist education under the broader umbrella of 'libertarian education', there is a significant difference between the two. As already pointed out by Suissa (2006) in her brilliant analysis of anarchist education, the difference needs to be found not as much in terms of their pedagogical practice but in terms of the substantive ideas and motivations behind them. There is a significant difference between the philosophical and political outlook behind these two streams of thoughts.

Firstly, Anarchist pedagogists are mostly commitment to undermining the state by creating alternative forms of social organisation and relationships, believing that schools, and education in general, are a valuable aspect of the project for social change. Democratic schools, on the contrary, are concerned about social improvements, but do not wish to radically change the political system.

Secondly, and derived from the first one, democratic schools tend to be politically neutral, and not to pass any substantial principle to children. Democratic schools consider themselves a neutral space where

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everything is debatable and everyone can form its own ideas. On the other way, libertarian schools support the need for an ongoing process of moral education alongside the educative function of social institutions run on anarchist principles, therefore on the importance of passing on to children a political education. As Suissa noticed (2006) anarchists in schools were "theoretically vague on the question of the role of education in bringing about the transition to the anarchist society" and were not really putting strong emphasis on this point. By an analysis of the practices of Italian Libertarians schools in Italy (that will be analysed in detail in the next chapter) we could say the same. However, we could notice that on a spectrum from personal freedom to community, some of the democratic school experiments (like the Sudbury one) tend to be strongly placed in the respect of the individual, whereas libertarian schools are always very much cautious about building social relationships and a "community spirit".

Definitely, the Libertarian approach has the most point in common with what has been considered the critical pedagogy, in its emancipatory approach. Emerging from the Marxist-orientated Frankfurt school, the writings of Antonio Gramsci and Paulo Freire -among others- are all devoted to pursue equality and social transformation, being concerned with the deficits of aggregative and liberal systems as they reproduce inequality and existing power relations. Critical pedagogists, as well as libertarian educators consider school as a place for social transformation. Education is therefore not conceived as neutral, but rather it is committed to the value of equality that underpins critical democratic educators' ethical demands. The final objective of critical pedagogy might vary slightly from the final political object, the first committed firstly to dismantle social classes, the second more to dismantle state and authority in general, but aim to achieve personal and collective emancipation of students and the transformation of their social reality (Brant Edwards, 2010). Similarly, both sees schools and education as potentially marginalised social groups and emancipation and solidarity among these groups is conceived as a requirement to materialise social transformation (Sibbett, 2016; Stevenson, 2010).

As Sant (2019) pointed out, concerns have been raised from liberals scholars about the perils and legitimacy of democratic educators who "enter the classroom with preformulated political objectives" whose goal "is not to bring out students' independent thoughts ( . . . ) but to alter students' ways of thinking to conform with a preconceived notion of what constitutes critical thought" (Freedman, 2007, p. 444). Drawing on poststructuralist analysis, agonistic and participatory scholars have challenged the universalist and rationalist assumptions underneath the critical democratic education discourse (Hantzopoulos, 2015; Pearl & Knight, 2010). Pearl and Knight (2010) write, "[c]ritical pedagogues claim a truth; after having defined it, they then impose it on others. In a democracy, truth is determined through open and thorough debate of opposing views" (p. 246).

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## 2.5. Typical features of Democratic Education

### The assemblies and conflict resolutions circles

Democratic schools want to provide with a framework that guarantees the physical, psychological and emotional safety of each person that is part of the school (students and adults).
Two bodies are normally at the heart of the democratic functioning of schools and to ensure the well-being and respect of all members of the school society: The Assembly (often called the school School Council, meeting/assembly etc..) and Conflict Resolution Circles (also called Mediation Committees, Judicial Committee, Mediation Circle, Conflict resolution circles, Restorative Circle according to their different functions).

These bodies are open to any member of the school, adult or child, and their participation is normally encouraged, sometimes compulsory, other time optional.

The Assembly is the authority of the school, making decisions concerning the school community. It brings together all the children and accompanying adults and makes decisions by consensus (in sociocratic or libertarian schools) or by majority (in Summerhill and Sudbury school models).

Normally this body meets every week in a spirit of research and co-construction of solutions that best meet the needs of the group.

The Assembly defines the rules of the school and the regulation of rule infractions. It defines the limits set by the collective in order to respect the "school-society" as well as each of its members. Its purpose is to guarantee an of freedom, respect, justice and trust. Some schools, following the Sudbury Model have the "rule book" that contains all the rules decided and eventual sanctions. Having every school their own culture of agreements, rules and laws, varying from a few basic agreements to law books with hundreds of pages.

During each Assembly, children and accompanying adults can for instance propose new rules, activities or purchases.
Some schools have a minimum age requirement to access the Assembly, others (like Summerhill) have adults facilitating the adaptation of the smaller children. Other schools have two or three different assemblies according to student age. Other school just set a minimum of requirements to attend the assemblies (ie. Being able to attend without perturbing the meeting) and then it is up to the children to understand if he/she is ready to take such responsibility.

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Conflict Resolution Circles are the forums where solving conflicts among the school community (children and adults). They can take the shape of Mediation Committees, where conflicts tend to be solved through peaceful and constructive dialogue or the shape of a sort of tribunal (the case of the Judicial Committee in the Sudbury schools) where there is a structured group of persons (adults and children) that discuss about the situation that broke a rule and the correlated sanctions.

Normally Conflict Resolution Circles take place when a member of the school requests it, or there can be a fixed day in the week when this forum takes place. Whatever shape this body takes, it helps to resolve a conflict or to remedy a transgression of the 'rule book'. The aim is to consolidate a safe framework for living together while protecting the freedom of each individual. Every conflict resolution forum allows everyone to express their emotions and feelings, to identify transgressions and possibly decide on remedial solutions.

**The role of teachers as guides**

In his most recent publications, the renowned pedagogist and academic Gert Biesta openly criticises the emphasis placed by education economists and the OECD on the “measurement of learning and the transfiguration of the teacher's role from guide for the critical formation of the student as a subject, in dialogue with him, to technician of the student's education, assisted by machines that help him learn but make him the object of learning.” Biesta, using the term “learnification” express that the goal of teachers is not the construction of a 'well-filled head' rather than a 'well-made head' (Biesta, 2006). A head whose performance can be standardised and evaluated in quantitative terms, according to the convenience of those who hold the power: to define fundamental knowledge and skills, to set standards, to measure (rather than evaluate) students' performance on a planetary scale.

Similarly, as Biesta, also Meirieu and Rancière, argue that the role of the teacher would be not to instruct students (technologies can and increasingly will do this) as to educate them becoming a free subject: education must be "emancipatory" (Biesta, 2017).

In democratic education, the role of the teacher might vary sensibly from one model to another, but in all its nuances, it definitely conserves this emancipatory character.

As argued before, in libertarian education the role of the teacher is irreplaceable because -as pointed also out by Rancière and Derrida – the teacher is the adult invested with the function to help pupils discover and exercise their subjectivity through dialogue, to dissent and to form their moral ethic.

In Summerhill models, despite an initial phase where Neill felt that charismatic teachers taught with persuasion that weakened child autonomy (Baley, 2013), in more recent times the school peer-reviews its teachers, and has policies and systems in place to ensure the quality of teaching: they have built their

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teaching methods, they provide ongoing review and development of methods of teaching, assessment and record-keeping.
On the contrary, Sudbury school places very little emphasis on the teacher's academic skills, looking more at the fact that teachers- called mostly facilitators or adult staff- are personally and socially well balanced and grounded persons, that have all the trust in children and that are able not to impose learning, and to have more an observing posture in their learning journey, being there to support if needed.

What we can say in general is that adults who work in democratic schools have a "facilitator" and "accompanying" role, rather than the one of teacher (and they indeed never use the word teacher).
This means that they are there to help the children to be who they are, without imposing them a learning curriculum, neither to forge students to become something else. The adults working in the school let the child explore and discover the world around and are there to relaunch the passions and interests of students.

The pedagogical team of a democratic school therefore fulfils two essential functions. The first is to guarantee security and peace so that every student can have the freedom to learn, to be listened to and respected.
The second is to facilitate the activities of the children, responding to the expectations and needs they express. Children can call upon the support staff according to their needs and the team is available and attentive to these requests. In some schools, teaching staff propose more classical courses (see Summerhill style, but also Sociocratic and Libertarian models) whereas in other schools, they are just there to help if solicited (Sudbury style).

**Free play**

An important place for free play is placed in all democratic schools. "Play is the child's work" (P. Kergomard) and "the highest form of research" (A. Einstein) seems to be overheard slogans, but in democratic education they are actually put into practice.
Following the most recent studies on neuroscience and psychology we know that free play provides the necessary ground for independent exploration. Free play, without instructions, self-managed, spontaneous, neither organised nor structured, and whose only aim is to have fun, is a way of understanding and discovering the world and oneself.
In free play, the child is the master of his or her own choices and of the decisions to be taken in the direction of the game. Through play, children make surprising experiences and discoveries about the world, real and imaginary world that surrounds them.

**The multi-age environment**

A multi-age environment is a powerful amplifier of formal and informal learning. It allows greater autonomy for the youngest children: knowledge no longer comes only from adults but they can observe, imitate,

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question and discuss with other older children to meet their needs. The older children also learn to take care of the younger ones. This creates an important process of empowerment. The mix of ages is also a key factor in fostering cooperation. Indeed, living with people of all ages reduces the need for competition and increases the desire to have a good time together. This encourages compromise and adaptation to each other's abilities.

**Schools as open systems**

Democratic education implies that students are in contact with different territorial actors and real-life challenges. In this sense, democratic education seems to not have boundaries between the school and the real world, sponsoring an approach where purposeful collaborations are built between schools and their wider communities. Families, experts and other stakeholders collaborate with adult staff and students to pursue students' interest, and enrich their learning journey. Students are much more immerse in the external real life, able to see relevant local challenges, contribute to community development, and promote an active global citizenship attitude. This openness – that in the most recent educational policy papers goes under the name of "open schooling" offers students the opportunity to learn together in the real world, and widens their horizons to learn from people other than the adult staff of their school.

**The "school culture"**

It has been repeated several times so far that every democratic school is different from another. The set of pedagogical choices, policies, procedures, organisational governance, values and internal rules that make these differences could be called the "culture" of that school. It is often seen that democratic schools struggle in the first years since the creation, until the school culture is strongly instilled within the school community. This process can take years (5 to 7 years for some schools) at it is shorter as the founders have a very clear idea of the features of the school, and as there is a stable and supportive group of staff, students and parents. It is widely noticed that for small children it is really easy to adapt to the school culture, whereas for students of elder age, coming from a more traditional school setting, it might be hard to adapt, as their internal motivation has often been cemented under years of reward/punishment system. For these students a very long period of adaptation is required, as it sometimes needs years. The books written by democratic school founders (ie. Greenberger, 1995) are full of examples of children who, coming from classical schools, needed a long time to "do nothing" before they actually started to enter in the school culture more actively, and they found the motivation to take active part in the school. For the reason that is more difficult to adapt to a democratic school culture for older children, Summerhill school has an age limit: 11 years old at present, so children who would be over 11 at the start of the term would not, normally, be eligible.

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# 3. DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION IN THE EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORK

## 3.1. The ONU vision on Democratic Education

Unicef, in its latest works proposes a rights-based and transformative vision of education, reimagining education beyond the utilitarian economic realm. This vision is framed primarily in terms of its positive impact on human development (Tawil and Cougoureux, 2013). Quality learning, supported and achieved through life skills and citizenship education, is promoted to address the challenges faced by children, youth and all learners in an environment marked by 21st-century requirements (UNICEFF, 2017.)

This understanding is based on a four-dimensional model of learning already developed by UNESCO in a 1996 reference document: "Learning: The Treasure Within, a 1996 report to UNESCO by the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century". In this document, that has been the a key reference document for the conceptualization of education and learning worldwide (Tawil and Cougoureux, 2013) there is an integrated vision of education that goes beyond effectiveness and performance at school or at work, and emphasises the humanistic role of education towards human development as a whole. In particular, it furthers a vision of the lifelong learning paradigm by defining the essential functions of learning through what it calls the "four pillars of learning", these are:

- Learning to Know/the Cognitive Dimension: Relates to the cognitive and meta-cognitive tools required to better comprehend the world and its complexities as well as an appropriate and adequate foundation for future learning.
- Learning to Do/the Instrumental Dimension: Relates to the skills enabling individuals to participate effectively in the economy and society.
- Learning to Be/the Individual Dimension: Relates to the personal and social skills to enable individuals develop to their fullest potential in order for them to become all-round complete persons.
- Learning to Live Together/the Social Dimension: Relates to the values implicit within human rights, democratic principles, intercultural understanding and respect, and the promotion of peace at all levels of society, that an individual is exposed to and develops.

The aim of the pillars is to enhance the dignity, capacity and welfare of individuals in relation to others and to their environment. What is fundamental revolutionary in this approach, is that it finally proposes a

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paradigmatic shift from the learning notions to the “learning to learn” (a definition that has been often used by the EU since the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning) , in other words, teachers should not be as much focused on the quantity of information that give to children, rather on providing them the personal and social tools to be able to acquire these competences.

In this line, the UNESCO’s Futures of Education initiative (2021) aimed to rethink education and shape the future, by catalysing a global debate on how knowledge, education and learning need to be reimagined in a world of increasing complexity, uncertainty, and precarity. In the post-pandemic setting, the report “Reimagining our futures together” from the International Commission on The Futures of Education (2021) acknowledges the power of education to bring about profound change, repair injustices while transforming the future. This report has a new strong regenerative standpoint that arises from a postcolonial perspective and sees that today’ inequalities in education are based on yesterday’s exclusions and oppressions. It also calls for a pedagogy of solidarity and cooperation. The reports seem therefore concerned for the development of a child-centred pedagogy, and also concerned for the innate curiosity of children to be sustained. We can read passages as: “*Unfortunately, in too many schools and societies, the natural curiosity and inquisitive tendencies of early childhood become less and less encouraged as children advance to higher grades and have fewer opportunities to play, explore, collaborate, and connect. […] arguably, too much time dedicated to isolated individual work at the primary level limits key opportunities for co-construction, cooperation, and problem-solving.”(UNESCO, 2021)*

As part of the public debate before the publishing of the Report, a delegation of experts from EUDEC (European Democratic Education Community) wrote an open letter to congratulates on certain aspects contained in the report, but also to express reservations on specific items and assumptions made in this report, that considered could seriously jeopardise the UN agenda 2030 to lead to a regenerative education by 2050 for more just and sustainable futures. In particular, this was concerned with the fact that the progressive pedagogical approach shown in the report was however in contradiction with the general denial about the role of self-directed learning and the most recent research on “how the brain learns”. According to the expert group of EUDEC, the Report was also not translating the assertion about democratising education into a real action plan to suggest how to implement democracy in school so that children can have a voice.

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## 3.2. The EU vision on democratic education

The need for change in education has been widely recognised in recent years by the European Union.
To align the member state to the 21st centuries skills needed for students to become active and fulfilled persons, the EU has adopted in May 2018 the Recommendation on eight key competences for lifelong learning that updates the 2006 Recommendation, taking into account the requirements of the world we live in today, and gives guidance and good practice examples. The updated Recommendation defines eight key competences for lifelong learning: Literacy, Multilingual, Mathematical competence and competence in science, technology and engineering, Digital, Personal, Social, and Learning to Learn Citizenship, Entrepreneurship, and Cultural awareness and expression.

On the same line, the European policy cooperation framework ET2020 emphasises that education and training have a crucial role to play in meeting the many socio-economic, demographic, environmental and technological challenges facing Europe and its citizens today and, in the years, ahead. This is in line with the vision of education developed by the Council of Europe (in Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)6), that includes four major purposes of education:

1. Developing a broad knowledge base,
2. Preparing for the labour market,
3. Preparing for life as active citizens and,
4. Personal development

The first two areas are largely the ones state schools focus on. Yet, if we take a look at the 21st Century Skills, we can easily understand that they are exclusively derived from the second two points. Increasingly, EU recommendations, framework, and documents are giving more and more attention to the last two points.

It is worth noting that the Council of Europe's Manifesto: Education for Change - Change for Education (2014) highlights the importance of rethinking education: "The models of schooling we inherited from the past tend to be elitist, hierarchical and exclusive; features which have perhaps softened over the years, but which have not really been challenged by the democratisation of the secondary and tertiary education that many countries have experienced in recent decades" (Council of Europe, 2014, p. 21). The Manifesto points this out very clearly: "In order to change behaviours and favour the integration of new concepts and values, learners would benefit from experiential learning within a socio-constructivist approach, allowing them to observe, reflect, compare, research, experiment – all activities that are not often integrated sufficiently into

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traditional choices such as “learning by heart” and frontal approaches where there is one “educator who knows and talks” and a “learner who does not know and listens” (Council of Europe, 2014, p. 20).
In the next paragraphs the analysis will point out what the EU has done on the two-last purpose of education that were enlisted: preparing for life as active citizen and personal development.

### 3.2.1. Citizenship framework in EU prescriptions

The Council of Europe Recommendation (2012) on ensuring quality education stated that two of the definitions of quality education are:
d. an education that promotes democracy, respect for human rights and social justice in a learning environment which recognises everyone’s learning and social needs;
e. an education that enables pupils and students to develop appropriate competences, self-confidence and critical thinking to help them become responsible citizens

Seeing the democratic gap in most of the members state school, the Council of Europe in 2013 launched a four years project, at the end of which it adopted a Reference Framework of Competences for a Democratic Culture (2017), developing non prescriptive guidelines that national authorities and education stakeholders can use and adapt as they see fit. The framework provides a comprehensive model of the competences that learners need to acquire if they are to participate effectively in a culture of democracy, with descriptors and guidelines for implementation. In order for their learners to develop these skills, the role of teachers needs to evolve. “Teachers as facilitators of learning in an interconnected world will be encouraged to develop particular transversal competences in themselves on top of the competences specific to their academic subject” (Council of Europe, 2014, p. 24). This has become all the more important since the Global Competence Framework (OECD-PISA, 2018) was launched. According to the OECD-PISA website “Global competence is the capacity to examine local, global and intercultural issues, to understand and appreciate the perspectives and worldviews of others, to engage in open, appropriate and effective interactions with people from different cultures, and to act for collective well-being and sustainable development” (2018). With these developments the question arises how we can best support teachers to develop these competences in themselves and their learners so they can learn to change and change to learn (Licht, Massini et al, 2019)

The Framework offers a systematic approach to designing the teaching, learning and assessment of competences for democratic culture and introducing them into education systems in ways which are coherent, comprehensive and transparent for all concerned.
The heart of the Framework is a model of the competences that need to be acquired by learners if they are to participate effectively in a culture of democracy and live peacefully together with others in culturally

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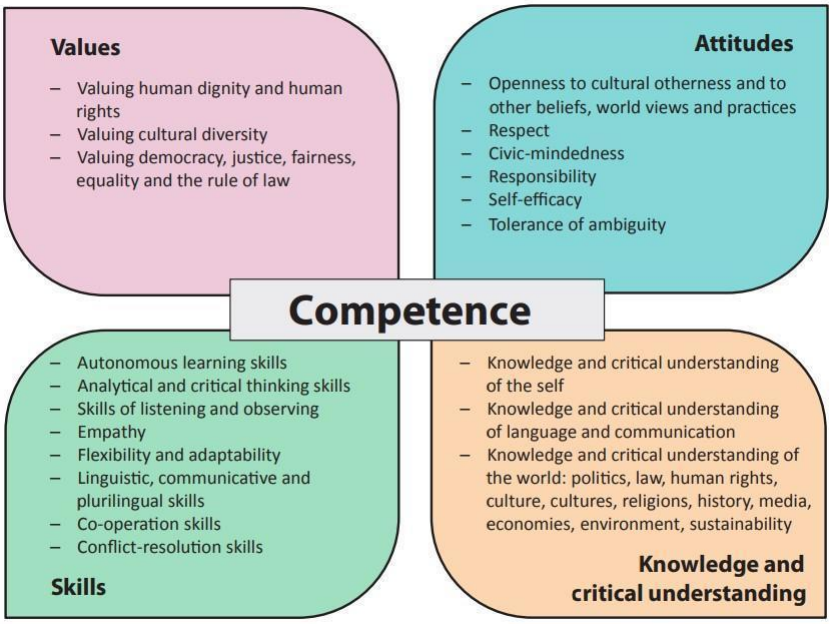
diverse democratic societies. The Framework also contains descriptors for all of the competences in the model.

In the model there are 20 competences in the model in total. These competences are subdivided into values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge and critical understanding. The 20 competences are summarised diagrammatically in the following figure.




In addition, the descriptors provide a means of operationalising the competences for use by educationists for the purposes of curriculum planning, teaching and learning, and assessment. The hope of this model was also to enable education systems to empower learners as autonomous social agents who are capable of choosing and pursuing their own goals in life

However, the competences enlisted in this Framework for democratic culture are only intended to be developed either across all curriculum subjects and areas of study or through a single subject, such as citizenship education or social sciences or social studies.

What is interesting therefore is that the Framework does not suggest at all to practise democracy in school, but only to abstractly learn about democracy. And it gives examples about that, suggesting that the way to learn democracy should be “Educational activities can include simulations of elections, possibly accompanied by the simulation of a political campaign, mock parliaments, mock trials, defining and using fair procedures for making decisions to choose between various options, role-plays and simulations including testing positions of authority (a day as mayor), the right to free speech (simulation of the work of journalists), etc.”. This means that, besides the innovative approach to democratic participation, the translation of this model in the practice is only abstract. Children can only make “role play” games about democracy or pretending to

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be in adult situation, but they are not granted any right to make any decision democratically within their school, for subjects that would matter to them, in their real life.

### 3.2.2. The life competences framework

After having released the Competences Framework of 2018, the Joint Research Center of the EU released a LifeComp framework to establish a shared understanding, and a common language on the "Personal, Social and Learning to Learn" competences. LifeComp is made up of three intertwined competence areas: 'Personal', 'Social', and 'Learning to Learn'. Each area includes three competences: Self-regulation, Flexibility, Wellbeing (Personal Area), Empathy, Communication, Collaboration (Social Area), Growth mindset, Critical thinking, and Managing learning (Learning to learn Area). Each competence has, in turn, three descriptors which generally correspond to the 'awareness, understanding, action' model. These are not to be understood as a hierarchy of different levels of relevance, whereby some are prerequisites for others. Rather, all of them are to be considered complementary and necessary. LifeComp regards "Personal, Social, and Learning to Learn" competences as ones which apply to all spheres of life, and which can be acquired through formal, informal, and non-formal education. The "leitmotif" of the JRC was to identify competences that are teachable.

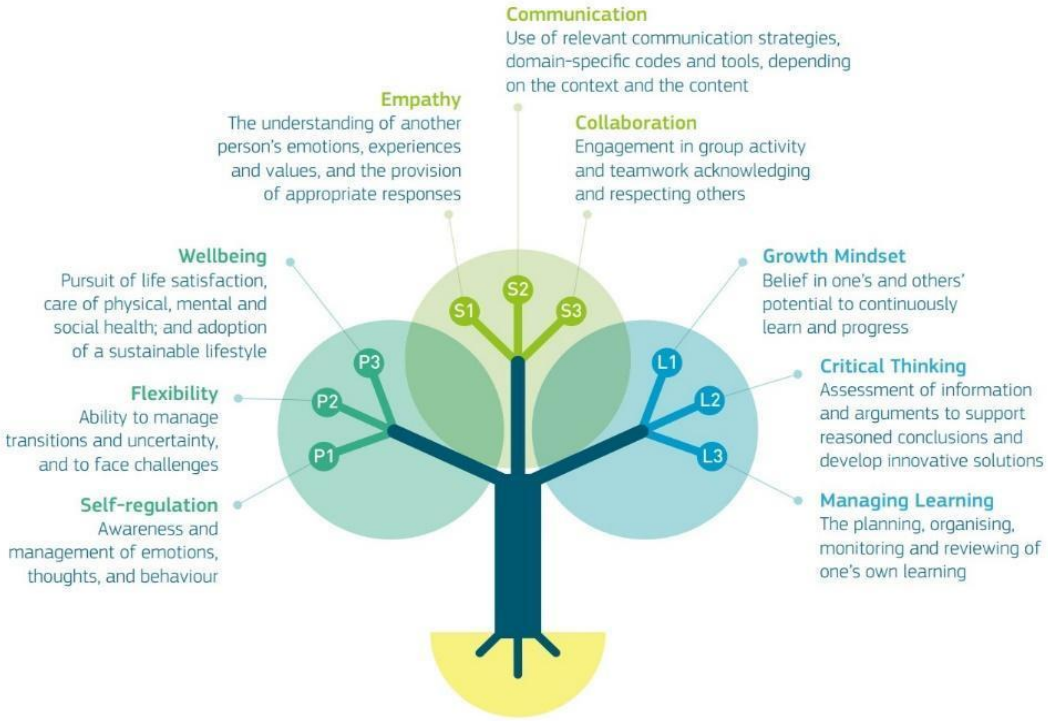


FIGURE 1. LIFECOMP AT A GLANCE

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The JRC notices that this key competence has close links with two others: “Cultural Awareness and Expression”, and “Citizenship” (as stated in the Staff Working Document accompanying the 2018 Council Recommendation).

The skills identified in this key competence include the ability to identify one’s capacities, focus, deal with complexity, critically reflect and make decisions. This includes the ability to learn and work both collaboratively and autonomously and to organise and persevere with one’s learning, evaluate and share it, seek support when appropriate and effectively manage one’s career and social interactions. Individuals should be resilient and able to cope with uncertainty and stress. They should be able to communicate constructively in different environments, collaborate in teams and negotiate. This includes showing tolerance, expressing and understanding different viewpoints, as well as the ability to create confidence and feel empathy. The competence is based on a positive attitude toward one’s personal, social and physical wellbeing and learning throughout one’s life. It is based on an attitude of collaboration, assertiveness and integrity. This includes respecting diversity of others and their needs and being prepared both to overcome prejudices and to compromise. Individuals should be able to identify and set goals, motivate themselves, and develop resilience and confidence to pursue and succeed at learning throughout their lives. A problem-solving attitude supports both the learning process and the individual’s ability to handle obstacles and change. It includes the desire to apply prior learning and life experiences and the curiosity to look for opportunities to learn and develop in a variety of life contexts. (see Sala, A., Punie, Y., Garkov, V. and Cabrera Giraldez, M, 2020)

## 3.3 A democratic education analysis of the EU framework

While praising the continuous efforts of the EU to try to make education adequate to rapid changes of our society, from a democratic education perspective two considerations could be advanced:

1. in the 8 key competences have all the same importance and therefore are set in a non-hierarchic structure. According to democratic education, however, social and personal skills are a precondition to all other forms of cognitive learning. In other words, democratic schools provide an environment will full trust and support of child, and they follow the development of students personal and social skills, they help identify one’s capacities, focus, deal with complexity, critically reflect and make decisions. The self-directed learning environment allow students to learn how to work autonomously, organise themselves and learn what they love to do, whereas the democratic community aspect allow student to learn to be collaborative, have quality social interactions, expressing themselves and understanding different viewpoints. According to democratic

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education, from the acquisition of these fundamental sets of soft skills, all the other more cognitive skills will follow.

2. Besides the theory developed by the EU is very innovative in the willingness to put in place “learning to learn” competences, soft skills that can be thought, and translate the 21st century competences into EU systemised set of skills, on the practical levels, the tools and methods it develops are extremely inadequate and somehow contradictory. The two examples of citizenship competences and lifecomp can be an easy example for that. As noticed, the citizenship skills advocate for children's rights to be respected, for students to learn how to practise democracy, but at the same time they only wish democracy to be passively and abstractly learnt, not to allow students to practise democracy at all in their classes.
Similarly, Lifecomp means teaching students important life skills such as the ability to identify one’s capacities, critically reflect and make decisions, assertiveness and integrity, motivate themselves, and develop resilience and confidence to pursue and succeed at learning throughout their lives. It includes the desire to apply prior learning and life experiences and the curiosity to look for opportunities to learn and develop in a variety of life contexts. Despite such skills are the core of every development path for a child/young, it could be misleading and somehow schizophrenic to teach such competences, and then forcing students to learn a curriculum in which they cannot have a saying, in which there is no internal motivation but only external rewards/punishment system and where the possibility of making a decision in the learning path is not an option on the table. That is probably the reason why the JRC documents terminates saying that “innovative pedagogical experiences with transversal and subject-based approaches are to be envisaged, so that we understand better how to teach LifeComp competences and how these can be embedded in the curriculum whether on a cross-curricular basis or in particular subjects, but also in lifelong learning and lifelong guidance. There is a clear need to share examples of policy in this area and to providing examples of innovative educational practices and tools that teachers and lifelong learners can use.” (:75)

Once it has expressed how the international and European policies are touching on subjects that are proper of democratic education, now the reflection move to the analysis of the national level, so that the empirical analysis can be revealed.

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# 4. THE NATIONAL LEVEL. DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION IN STATE SCHOOLS

## 4.1. Democratic Education in State schools: oxymoron or possibility?

Despite the European framework seems to pave the road for inclusion of personal, social skills, and democratic participation, and repeatedly announces that the current school system of most of the European countries is not equipped to allow students to face 21st century challenges, at the national level, the process of change seems still very low. Hierarchical relationships in schools, traditional frontal methods of teaching and compartmentalised school subjects are unlikely to develop 21st century skills and qualities sufficiently in learners.

Democratic Education could offer in this sense a very meaningful alternative to overcome the traditional education setting. However, as most of the critiques of this pedagogical approach pointed out, it is also a major challenge to imagine how democratic education could work into a public system, so that to let someone assert that “it is impractical and illogical to apply [its] principles *en masse* to the public education system” (Peramas, 2007).

The major critiques of democratic education tend to point out that the very nature of this pedagogy is not compatible with the state system.
Some proponents of democratic education would say that it is not possible to apply it in state school systems, for the very way in which democratic education is well rooted for a small group of students. Some democratic schools following the libertarian model would arguably be against the spreading of democratic education in state schools, as the political instance they stand for is the overcoming of the state-system, looking more for a type of “public school” that is community funded and supported.

In disagreement with the above stances, the DESC project strongly believed that in order to make democratic education truly widespread, it cannot remain within a small circle of cultural elite schools. It has to reach those children who do not have the privilege to live in families that are aware of democratic education, and has to be affordable for all.

In this sense, we should stop considering a dichotomy between private democratic school and state school and, but rather think that the two should coexist, reinforcing one to the other and being complementary. It is indeed thanks to the flexibility and independence of the “private arena” that new pedagogies are

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experimented and new practices are put in place without constraints. In this sense, the state school system could take inspiration from these realities, and therefore also help the private schools as they can contribute to bring vanguardist approaches into a more traditional educational setting.

Definitely, this process needs mediation and time. Mediation because we cannot expect that a state school could implement from scratch a completely self-directed environment. Time because it takes a long way to enhance a cultural change in headmasters and teachers to be interested in applying this methodology.

#### 4.1.2. The 20% campaign

Derry Hannam, is one of the most renowned defenders of democratic education in the state school system. He applied democratic education principles in a state school in the UK during his professional career as a teacher, and he is convinced that "if you are attracted to the ideas of self-directed learning and democratic education then whatever your situation it is always possible to do something of a more playful, participative and democratic nature" (Hannam, 2020)

To stimulate democratic education in state schools, he proposed a model of 20% . For this model, in all state-funded schools, both primary and secondary, students and teachers should democratically negotiate 20% of school curriculum time around what interests them.

Time for individual or collaborative self-directed education with the teachers being available as facilitators or 'experts' if their services were requested by the students. Every school should be free to organise the use of this time in its own way – it could be half a day per week plus 20% of some lessons, or two half-days, or one day per week, or 20% of all lessons. And, of course, if it was found that as students became more motivated the compulsory directed curriculum could be managed in a reducing amount of time then the 20% could grow.

Sometimes the students themselves might be facilitators for other students – or even teachers.

Derry Hannam, who had experiences himself bringing democratic education in the state school system in the UK, predicts if the 20% model would be applied, the negotiation process itself would be educational, the motivation and morale of all would rise and the new engagement which will result would more than compensate for any feared loss of learning from reduction in formal subject teaching time. He considers that in such a situation standards will rise, results will improve, students will learn how to take responsibility for at least part of their learning and learn how to manage at least part of their own time. Talking about his experience in a democratic class in a state school, he explained that his work managed "to restore their lost confidence, creativity, and the sense of authenticity of their existing feelings and knowledge. To restore their right to speak from the heart and not just to say what was believed to be expected by authority. All set in a context of as much freedom as was possible within the limitations of a state school". (Hannam, 2020)

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### 4.1.3 The LAP

Inspired by the practitioners and theoreticians of institutional pedagogy and new education, such as Jean Piaget, Alexander Neill and Célestin Freinet, as well as by the parallel school of Marly and the experimental school of Oslo, the *Lycée autogéré de Paris* opened its doors in September 1982, under the Minister of Education Alain Savary. From its first school year in the cellars of the François Villon high school to its current location in the historical buildings of the 15th arrondissement of Paris, this school is a symbol of the possibility to have a public school that is at the same time alternative to the traditional education system. (see Collectif d'éleves et de professeurs, 2012)

The LAP students in a condition of autonomy, they self-manage the school together with the teachers and they are the only responsible for their attendance of classes.
The organisation of the LAP is in a way divided into two parts.

One part corresponds to the "classic" acquisition of knowledge, and is called the pedagogical structure. It has known and still knows variations, it corresponds to the pedagogical groups, workshops, projects, themes and other courses. What is interesting in this aspect is that. Students are free to attend classes. For some, this is inspired by the 'cooperative' ideology (voluntary membership), for others it refers to a 'consumerist' attitude, and for others it is the necessity of 'desire'.

The other part corresponds to the political organisation - in the broadest sense - and is called the management structure, which is considered to have also a pedagogical role as the first. Teachers and students reunite in groups, commissions, general management meetings and the general assembly so that the life within its premises is decided and/or carried out 'as much as possible' by all members of the community. For each teacher, who is a national education employee, participation in various tasks (co-management of the school) besides the “teaching” activity, is imperative. The participation of each student is encouraged, but not mandatory

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## 4.2 Country Analysis

## 4.2.1 - The educational system In Belgium (Flemish language community)

The educational system in Belgium is divided into 3 levels: primary, secondary, and higher education.

The federal government manages the overall educational structures while each of the Belgian language communities (Flemish, French, and German) have the responsibility to organise and implement the different education systems. The curriculum is also determined by the individual regions. THe below description is therefore intended for the Flemish language community.

**EDUCATIONAL LEVELS AND FORMS**

Traditionally there are three levels of education: primary education, secondary education and higher education. In addition to these levels of education, there is lifelong learning, which is mainly aimed at adults.

### 1.1 Primary education

#### 1.1.1 Structure and organisation

Primary education includes pre-primary education and primary education.

Pre-primary education and primary education are provided in a primary school. Although pre-primary school and primary education are structurally separate from each other, efforts are being made to achieve a smooth transition between the two. That is why new schools for mainstream education must provide both pre-school and primary education.

Since September 1th 2003, primary education has had a new structure, namely the school community. This is a partnership between several schools in the same region so that they can benefit from scale advantages. School communities lead to an administrative increase in scale in primary education. The schools of one community together have at least 900 pupils. This structural reform contributes to a more efficient management of resources and to increasing the support of the individual schools.

Pre-primary education is open to children aged 2.5 to 6 years. In regular pre-primary education, children between the ages of 2.5 and 3 can only start at seven times during the school year: on the first school day after each holiday period, on the first school day in February or on the first school day after Ascension Day. Once a toddler is 3 years old, he/she can join at any time during the school year. In mainstream pre-primary

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education, children who are not yet ready to transfer to primary education at the age of 6 can continue in kindergarten for another year.

1.1.2 Content

Although only the last year of pre-primary education is compulsory, it is followed by almost all children in Flanders. The fact that toddlers can go to school very early in Flanders, compared to other countries, is especially an incentive for children from underprivileged backgrounds. Since 1 September 2001, the pre-primary teacher can be assisted by child care support for a number of hours per week. In pre- primary education, work is done on the versatile education of the children and the spontaneous growth towards maturity for primary school is stimulated. The child is taught skills such as language acquisition, motor skills development, social skills, etc. and the first world-exploring contents. Primary education builds on this.

The following learning areas are covered at a minimum:

- physical education
- musical education
- Dutch
- world orientation
- mathematical initiation
- French.

Where possible, cohesion between the different areas of learning is sought. Since 1 September 1998, the developmental goals for mainstream pre-primary education have been in effect.

In primary education, the same areas of learning are used as in pre-primary education, also in conjunction where possible. Mathematical initiation has been replaced by mathematics. There is also attention for cross-curricular themes such as 'learning to learn' and 'social skills'. Since 1 September 1998, the attainment targets for primary education have been in effect.

Development goals apply to special primary education.

At the end of primary education, pupils who have achieved the objectives of the curriculum receive a certificate of primary education.

**1.2 Secondary education**

Secondary education is intended for young people aged 12 to 18 years and is organized in three grades. Since 1989, full-time secondary education has been organized according to the unitary structure. This includes

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degrees, forms of education and courses of study. The definitive choice of study is postponed to the second grade so that the pupils can first become acquainted with as many subjects as possible.

From the second grade, we distinguish four different forms of education. Within one of these forms of education, the pupil chooses a specific field of study. A number of study options only start in the third or even the fourth grade.

General secondary education (ASO) emphasizes a broad general education that mainly offers a solid basis for higher education. In technical secondary education (TSO), the focus is mainly on general and technical-theoretical subjects. After TSO, the young person can practice a profession or transfer to higher education. This training also includes practical lessons. Art secondary education (KSO) links a general, broad education to an active artistic practice. After KSO, the young person can practice a profession or transfer to higher education. Vocational secondary education (BSO) is a practice-oriented form of education in which young people learn a specific profession in addition to general training.

In the second and third grades there is a common and an optional part. In the optional part, the basic education is supplemented with a wide range of study options. In the third stage, the specific training can be further refined with a view to the ultimate choice of profession or possible study plans in higher education.

A pupil obtains the secondary education diploma after successfully completing six years of ASO, TSO or KSO or seven years of BSO. With a diploma of secondary education, obtained in any school, form of education or field of study, the young person has unlimited access to higher education.

## ORGANISATION OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

### 2.1 Compulsory education for all children aged five to eighteen

The Belgian constitution stipulates that everyone has the right to education, with respect for fundamental rights and freedoms. To guarantee this right to education for all children, education is compulsory.

Compulsory education starts on 1 September of the year in which a child turns five and, in principle, lasts twelve full school years. A pupil is obliged to attend full-time education until the age of fifteen or sixteen. Afterwards, only part-time compulsory education applies (= a combination of part-time learning and working). However, most young people continue to attend full-time secondary education.

Compulsory education ends on the eighteenth birthday or on 30 June of the calendar year in which the young person turns eighteen. Effectively retiring on the eighteenth birthday and not completing the current school year does mean that he/she is not entitled to a study certificate or diploma for the specialization followed.

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Compulsory education also ends at that time for young people who obtain their secondary education diploma before the age of eighteen.

Compulsory education applies to all children residing in Belgium, including children with a foreign nationality. From the sixtieth day after their registration in the municipality, these children must be registered in a school and regularly attend classes. Schools may not use (the lack of) a residence permit to refuse students access to the school. From the moment of registration, these children can be subsidized by the government in the ordinary basic financing and in any additional financing of the schools. Students who successfully complete a course receive a diploma.

To safeguard the right to education, the Flemish region made agreements with the Federal Ministry of domestic affairs and the Federal police about arresting illegal refugee children. A federal circular confirms that it is not allowed to pick up school aged children of illegal immigrants from school during school hours.

Compulsory education in Belgium is not the same as compulsory schooling. Children do not necessarily have to go to school to learn. Home schooling is also possible. Parents who opt for this (in practice there are few) must inform the Education Department. The government checks whether all pupils of compulsory education are being taught effectively. If this schooling check shows that this is not the case, a court can punish parents for this.

Children who are unable to follow education because of a severe disability can be exempted from compulsory education.

## 2.2. Freedom of education

Freedom of education is also a constitutional right in Belgium. This means that every natural or legal person has the right to organize education and to set up institutions for this purpose. The government may not take preventive measures to prohibit the establishment of free schools. Finally, the government is constitutionally obliged to organize neutral education.

The concept of organizing body (or school board) is a key concept in the organization of education in Flanders. The organizing body is responsible for one or more schools. It can be compared to a board of directors in a company. The organizing body can take the form of a government, a natural person or a legal person(s). The organizing bodies have broad autonomy. For example, they are free to choose their teaching methods and can base their teaching on a particular philosophy of life or pedagogical conception. They can also define their own curricula and timetables and appoint their own staff. Schools that want to be recognized or financially supported by the government must meet the attainment targets, be sufficiently equipped and

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have sufficient didactic materials. They must be located in buildings that are habitable, safe and sufficiently clean, etc.

The constitution also guarantees the freedom of choice of the parents. Parents and children must have access to a school of their choice at a reasonable distance from their place of residence. Recent legislation further explains and protects this freedom of choice. Schools are not allowed to refuse students, with the exception of a number of well-defined cases.

The educational networks, as a representative association of organizing bodies, often take over certain responsibilities from the organizing body; they draw up their own curricula and timetables. As a result, the organizing bodies involved cede part of their autonomy.

Traditionally, three educational networks are distinguished:

• Community education (GO) is organized by the public institution on behalf of the Flemish Community. Community education is required by the constitution to be neutral. This means that the religious, philosophical or ideological beliefs of the parents and the students must become comparable.

• subsidized official education (OGO) comprises municipal education, organized by the municipal authorities, and provincial education, organized by the provincial authorities. The organizing bodies of this education are united in two umbrella organisations, the Education Secretariat of the Cities and Municipalities of the Flemish Community (OVSG) and the Provincial Education Flanders (POV).

• subsidized private education (VGO) is organized by a private person or private organisation. The organizing body is often a non-profit association (v.z.w.). Private education consists of separate schools. They are united in the umbrella Flemish Secretariat of Catholic Education (VSKO). In addition, there are also Protestant, Jewish, Orthodox, Islamic, ... schools. In addition to these denominational schools, there are also schools that are not linked to a religion. Examples are the method schools (based on the structure of Freinet, Montessori or Steiner) that apply specific pedagogical methods.

A small number of schools in Flanders are not recognized by the government. These so-called private schools are neither financed nor subsidized by the government.

The education that is organized for and by the government (community education and municipal and provincial education) is called official education. Recognized education from private initiative is called free education.

This text is based on the publication “Education in Flanders, a broad view of the Flemish educational landscape”, edition 2005.

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**Democratic education in Belgium:**

In Belgium we have about 7 democratic schools. There was a Sudbury school in Gent that closed. Some of the democratic schools are completely self-directed with no activity proposed to the children (this is the case of Orvita that follows the Sudbury model). Some other schools follow a more structured weekly calendar that has been agreed in the assemblies (it is the case of BOS school, Arbre de Possible for instance). All schools have an emphasis on the importance of nature, and most of the schools spend lots of time in nature.

**ITALY**

**Democratic Education in Italy:**

In Italy, the constitutional principle of freedom of education is implemented throughout the country through state and non-state schools.

The Italian education and training system is divided into:

. state schools

. parified schools (law 62 of 10 March 2000)

. non-parified schools /private

. foreign schools (decree 389 of 18 April 1994).

Article 30 of the constitution recognises the duties and rights of the family unit to maintain educate and educate their children.

Therefore, for non-state and non-parity education, parental education is required.

In the legal framework of education, only state and parified schools are recognised by the national education system, with the right to proceed to student examination and to issue qualification.

The schools defined as non-parified schools/private, (including the democratic school projects), assolve the fulfilment of the educational obligation by providing the request for home-schooling (Legislative Decree 25 April 2005, no. 76 art.1 paragraph 4); as the Italian Constitution recognises the choice of the family to decide where and how educate the children and not the obligation to attend school.

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The main reform that is now featuring the Italian Educational System dates back from 1999 (Law n° 275/99 – named “Autonomia Scolastica” - henceforth AS). The AS cancels in a definitive way the Central Educational System, centered on the National program, and it allows every schools to draft a specific curriculum based on the peculiar needs of the community and the society in which the school is located.

Despite the AS, in 2012, the National Guidelines for the curriculum were drawn up, in order to define the common tasks and skills for all the Italian Students of primary and lower secondary school. Moreover, in 2015, the Law n. 107/15 (named Buona Scuola) enhances the AS and promote a more innovative school opened to educational challenges, thanks to several reforms such as a massive use of ICT in didactic, the compulsory training for teachers, and the upgrading of the number of teachers per school.

Today, it is possible to have a good degree of flexibility in school curricola, but it is rather difficult to realize it as the Institutes have to face several problems, in particular in organization and administration fields. Anyway each school can define his own curricula; can plan different projects and activities, can draw up the rules of behavior at school, can choose the evaluation criteria and so on...

The head teacher has a lot of autonomy in his choices, but all the pedagogic features have to be shared, discussed and approved by the whole teacher team. Furthermore, the head teacher has to face a lot of issues such as the financial management of the school, the safety of pupils and workers, the relationship with parents and families, the dealing with the municipality, the fundraising activity etc...

The teaching staff of each school can choose their own pedagogical line, besides the introduction of didactic and methodological experiments at school is free and open and it is decided by the whole team of teachers. However, to give unity to the teaching action of then single school, every year a Plan of the Educational Offer (henceforth PTOF) is drawn up and it is designed and voted by the teaching team; PTOF is inspired by the act of principles of the School Leader. Istituto Carducci, e.g., adopts a school model called “Senza Zaino” which considers the school a democratic system where the cooperative learning is the most common methodology, where the pupils can take decision with the teachers and so on....basically it is a centered student system, and for this reason each teacher can determinate the rhythm, the approach, the methodology that is appropriate to the class. Motivation, challenges, opportunities and communication are the most important factors to realize a flexible and innovative school, but sometimes all these crucial principles of the pedagogical thought clash with the rigidity of rules, laws and decrees of the State that guides the schools.

Parents of pupils attending non-parified schools apply for homeschooling or home education in which the family's choice is to provide directly for the education of their children.

Article 33 of the constitution allows entities and private individuals to establish schools and educational institutions, however non-parified schools (like democratic schools) cannot issue qualifications/degrees.

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In order to guarantee the fulfilment of the duty of lower education imparted for at least the first 8 years (constitution art. 34) the child is obliged to sit an exam during all the school years.

In the case of parental education, the parents of the pupil are required to notify annually the declaration of homeschooling to the public school of residence.

Pupils attending non-parified schools (and therefore under the homeschooling legal system) have to undertake examination every year for the passage to the next class, as external candidates at a state or parity school until the completion of the lower compulsory education (16 years of age) (Decree Law no. 62 of 13 April 2017, Art. 23).

The democratic schools in Italy mostly connected to the Libertarian model, and are grouped into the REL ( Italian libertarian education network) of which libertarian and outdoor educational experiences in nature have been active for several years. In Italy there are various groups on the territory formed by people committed to cultivating libertarian educational practices and to making a libertarian educational experience arise in their area. Each group is independent, forms itself autonomously, is self-organised and freely connects to other members/groups in the network About 14 experiences mature enough to be considered schools fall into this section. Most of these schools apply shared decision making with children, have an emphasis on social equality and anti- authoritarian approach. Some of the schools are not completely self-directed, with a negotiated curriculum with children

**BULGARIA**

Educational law in Bulgaria is very restrictive. Every child is obligated to go to school. School can be called only a place that follows the national curriculum and the Requirements and Standards of Ministry of Education. The national curriculum and standards tell what every kid has to learn by the end of every year – so there is no flexibility at all in relation to different pace of learning or different abilities. They also tell how every kid has to learn it – no flexibility around different styles of learning. They also tell when and what every teacher has to teach at any given moment. They also explain how every teacher has to teach it – there are two types of textbooks for every subject that the Ministry of Education approves. If you want to be a school – the teachers have to teach by those textbooks and teach what is written in the Standards for every single hour and lesson. There is no room for different philosophy of school, different organisation of the learning processes, different methodologies.

There is one Waldorf school in the country and one Montessori school – they call themselves like this, but they also have to follow the national curriculum and Standards. There is one licensed school that calls itself ‘’democratic”, but they follow the national curriculum and Standards.

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So, there are two types of schools in Bulgaria – state schools – funded by the government, and private schools – not funded by the government, but they both do the same thing – following the national curriculum – same curriculum, same textbooks, same lessons, same plans. Just private schools are paid by the parents and have more modern buildings and parents can demand more (because they pay).

In the last change of the law in 2015, the term “innovative school” appeared in the law. It is a change, suggested by several nongovernment organizations and associations, regarding the idea to establish schools with different approach and philosophy. The Ministry accepted the proposal but created its own interpretation of what innovation means and innovative schools are again required to follow the national plan and curriculum, so innovation is understood as combining two lessons into one or interdisciplinary lessons, or making a lesson outdoor. There is no path to focus and develop your strengths, talents and interests, there is no place and way to explore your own passions and questions.

Everything that is outside the national curriculum is not important. Regarding participation of the students in the decision-making process in the school and governance in the school – the situation is even worse – there is zero understanding of the importance of their participation. There is a very strong power-over structure in Bulgarian schools, a strong hierarchical structure of power and the voice of the students doesn’t matter. They don’t practice democracy in any way, there is only discipline and obedience.

In the last change of the law in 2015, another proposal by several non governmental organisations and associations was the existence of non- attendance form in school, which is – the child is signed in the state school, but does not attend and learn in different ways. The idea behind this proposal was to create an opportunity for learning in different ways and validate their knowledge when they are ready or at the end of schooling period – 18 years old. The Ministry, again, accepted the proposal, but again tied it to the national curriculum and Standards, stating that every child has to validate their knowledge at the end of every year and has to show that has learnt the same things.

For obvious reasons stated above, there are no legal democratic schools in the country. There is one, running as an educational learning center. It is not recognized and the state is not helping in any way. What is most common as an educational approach is learning happening by students’ discovery and respecting learning rhythms. Project-based learning and working with individuals or in small groups are also the preferred practices. They don’t use evaluation system and use systematic observations to track children’s development

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**ESTONIA**

**Democratic Education in Estonia**

Estonia has a curriculum that is enforced by law, so there are not many democratic schools (only two). Leiutajate Kulakool is a small school in the countryside which tries to adapt within the system. The other school, Suvemäe-TKG , is a school in Tallinn that operates as a democratic branch within a public school. Suvemäe-TKG is a democratic school within a state school, an example of "negotiated integrated curriculum", helping the interests of children relate to the state curriculum through research projects and individualization of learning in both cases the national curriculum is followed at least partly, but there is much more emphasis on project based learning and social decision making. The research will focus more on the Suvemäe-TKG experience in the next chapter, when we will use this school as case study for the research on how to apply democratic education in a public-school context.

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# 5. EMPIRICAL EVIDENCES FROM THE FIELD: BENEFITS, NEEDS AND CHALLENGES OF DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

After having proceeded in clarifying the theoretical and the methodological approach of the research, and having provided the legal and policy context in which democratic education operates, in this chapter the empirical findings of the research will unfold. There will be presented the results from each of the methods used, and then a final joint analysis will be provided. It has to be considered that the evidence obtained are all connected with the four countries analysed as case study: Belgium, Bulgaria, Estonia and Italy.

## 5.1 Results of The Questionnaires

### 5.1.2. The questionnaires from democratic schools

In this section, the results from the questionnaires obtained from democratic schools are presented. As explained in the methodological chapter, the table below shows the number of replies we obtained, and we compared the number with the total number of democratic schools in the country. As indicated, we obtained a total of 14 replies, that is half of the total number of democratic schools existing in the four countries analysed.

| COUNTRY | NUMBER OF DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL THAT RESPONDED TO THE QUESITONNAIRE | TOTAL NUMBER OF DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL IN THE COUNTRY |
|---|---|---|
| BELGIUM | 7 | 4 |
| BULGARIA | 2 | 2 |
| ESTONIA | 2 | 2 |
| ITALY | 17 | 6 |
| TOTAL | 28 | 14 |

**General datas**

- 8 private school, 5 parental schools
- only one public school Suvemae (Tallin)

- All are primary schools + kindergarten
- more of the half also secondary school

- Average numeber of kids is 32 per school (with a minimum of 5 and max of 72)

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If we take a close look at the general features of these schools, we could see that most of them, except one, are private schools. Of these, more than one third is run by parents (5/14).

Most of the schools are primary school and kindergarten, whereas only half has secondary school (and none of these secondary schools are in Italy).

When looking at the total number of children, it is easy to identify that these are all small schools, having an average number of children of 32, with the only exception of the only state school which has 72 students.

The results obtained have been categorised into the following main topics: general school features, difference, similarities and relationship with state schools, benefit of democratic education, major challenges and training needs.

**General schools' features**

Awareness of the meaning of democratic education: All the democratic schools that responded to the questionnaire had a full and shared understanding of what democratic education is. All schools identified the two fundamental components of democratic education that have been exposed in the second chapter as the basis of democratic education: self-directed learning and co-management of the school.

Assembly: All schools showed a strong consensus on the use of assembly as a fundamental dynamic in the routine of the school. Despite all the schools reuniting in assemblies and using the assembly as the major moment of decision in the school, the way in which the assembly is organised varies considerably: some schools have only a morning circle where everything is decided, others have a weekly meeting, others have meetings twice a week. The decision-making method also change according to the different schools (some use sociocracy, other majority) and the area of decision of the assembly also is very different from one school to another (in some schools inspired by Sudbury the Assembly decides everything and includes children, whereas in other school, the assembly has only an emotional role/sharing circle, and the decisions are delegated to small committees).

Student participation: The schools who responded showed a strong consensus on the fact that students are the protagonists of the teaching and learning process and on the fact that adult staff should encourage and guide students in the competence of self-management of their learning. Students' co-participation in the school life and students' decisions about their learning journey is therefore of pivotal importance.

Adult Staff (teachers): There is a unanimous agreement that adult staff should encourage the development of activities contextualised in the school's physical and social environment, that collaboration between adult staff of different levels is essential for democratic education, and that adult staff should promote students' diversity and guide educational practices under the principles of inclusivity.

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Training: When addressing the need of training for the school staff, a divergence of opinions emerged in the replies: whereas 2/3 of the responders highlighted the importance of training, 1/3 declared that school staff should not be specifically trained to work in democratic schools. This reply is linked to the explanation that some democratic schools do not seem useful for school staff (school facilitators, what is commonly called "teachers" in classic education settings) to have a degree in education. On the contrary, some schools believe that pedagogist or teachers that have received a BA or MA in education, tend to be less open to democratic education, as they have received a "mainstream" training, therefore they have to go through a process of "unlearning".

Inclusion: All schools except one answered that they provide inclusion of special needs children and 2/3 declared the same level of integration of children with special needs in the school. This result is particularly relevant for the debate about whether a democratic school could be inclusive. On the one hand, democratic school express often that they provide education for children that "do not fit" in the traditional school setting, though having an high level of students with special needs (see Farhangi, 2018) , on the other hand, some critiques highlights that democratic schools do not have a specific inclusion policy, which at the end tend to exclude those children that do not fit in the standard selection process. (Peramas, 2007 and Wilson, 2016).

Family participation: There is a consent in the fact that staff encourages and stimulates direct and regular communication and involvement with families, but there are different opinions about the participation of families in the activities of the school life (ie. proposing and developing educational activities). As anticipated, one third of the schools is a parental school run by parents, who in these cases tend to have a saying also in the pedagogy. For the other cases, family involvement is encouraged but not in the pedagogical decisions.

Outdoor: Outdoor activities are strongly promoted in all the schools who responded to the questionnaire, with the exception of one school, where children decided not to go out as often as the previous year. In some schools the outdoor aspect is fundamental and stated in the school constitution or school basic rules, therefore children cannot decide if spending the day outside or inside (i.e. some schools go to the forest two full days a week, or other schools do not have an indoor place but rather they meet at the beach every day), whereas in other schools children can decide to move freely indoor or outdoor.

Management: There is almost unanimity in considering that the organisational and management structure of democratic schools is characterised by a horizontal system where the voices and actions of teachers and students have equal value and responsibility. In some schools, families also are involved in the management and, therefore, have the same decision power as adult school staff and students.

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**Difference, similarities and relationship with state schools**

Practices or distinguishing features of democratic schools that are not present in other schools:

The democratic schools who responded to the questionnaire had a very clear analysis of the differences between democratic education and other forms of education. We could group the responses according to the two pillars of democratic education: self-directed learning and co-management of the school.

The responders firstly and foremost mentioned the difference in the learning environment, and therefore the use of self-directed learning, as the prominent difference. They enumerated that the shift towards self-directed learning had numerous aspects that differentiate democratic education from progressive or traditional schools, in particular: not imposing a program/curriculum, not giving marks, not giving homework, allowing free play, considering that all learning is equal, age mixed environments. Most of the schools considered that this is linked to an increased awareness of the learning process in children by the adult staff and school creator, and that the consequences of applying self-directed learning would also lead to a difference in the outcomes, considering for instance: more student's interest in their learning, individualization of learning, real freedom to express their talent, passions, and to follow them, more support and mentoring for the children.

The second aspect that has been mentioned to almost everyone is the shared decisions which is considered a distinguishing figure that is not present in other schools: taking decisions together, listening to everyone and granting children the right to decide about aspects of their life. The preconditions to allow shared decision are features that are hardly present in other schools for instance: no judgement, no authority, punishment is replaced by conversation and reparation. Schools responders agreed also on the fact that co-management would bring to different outcomes: activate youth participation, activate soft skills, empathic comprehension, awareness, trusting and equal relationship between students and staff/facilitators, understanding one' freedom and responsibility towards the others, allowing children to have the basic human right of participation and to be author of their life.

Competences of adult staff that differ from other schools. When asking what are the competences that adult staff in democratic school should have, compared to the skills that teachers should have in more classic learning environments, all responders pointed out on the importance of soft skills, and they enumerated the following: non-violent communication skills, independence in planning the learning process, capability to question oneself and assuming his/her own responsibilities, authentic listening, welcoming difference, flexibility, empathetic understanding, openness to the understanding of the special needs of each student, flexible mind and adaptability.

Regulatory and financial support: There is a full consensus on the fact that democratic schools need financial support from the state or from private donors, as finances is one of the major challenges of these schools.

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There is a disagreement among the responders on the need to have a regulatory support of the democratic schools, meaning that some of them considers that would be ideal to be included in the state system and regulated, whereas other schools consider that a regulation of democratic school would be an obstacle to the freedom of children, and therefore wish to remain autonomous, private entities. There are also libertarian schools that, as has been pointed out in the second chapter, do not wish to be included in the state system for a political belief: they wish to create an alternative to the state.

Sharing knowledge with state schools: All the schools showed consent on the fact that it would be ideal if staff of democratic schools could share their experiences with other teachers to help integrate democratic values into other schools' models. There is an almost generalised consensus that if applied, democratic education can help promote the motivation of state school teachers, increase the quality of students' learning by increasing motivation and decreasing early drop-out rates, and that it would foster creativity and innovation in teaching.

Country context: The respondents of the questionnaire showed disagreement to what extent democratic education would be possible in state schools. This difference of reply is justified by the different country setting that has been described in the previous chapter. Most people replied that implementing a full democratic school in the public system would not be possible, and the majority of respondents agreed that the state would rather tolerate democratic schools, but not legalise them or regulate them.

**Benefits in applying democratic education**

While interviewed about the major benefits of democratic education, the democratic schools were really optimistic and positive, writing a long list of points that they felt were beneficial in this educational approach. For analytical and comprehension sake, these benefits have been grouped in three major categories: personal skills, social skills and learning.

Developing personal skills: Schools highlighted that there is a great benefit of democratic education in the development of personal skills in students. This is particularly noticed in high level of self-awareness, critical thinking and self-regulation, in the ability to choose and know what students want, in a very developed curiosity, in an active learning attitudes, in the capacity of developing open mind, knowing yourself, your strengths, your limitations, developing emotional intelligence, responsibility, ability to make decisions, independence, knowing how to deal with not-knowing, being able to cope with uncertainty, manage persona freedom and responsibility, ability of self-reflection and self-questioning, a strong trust that every student build that they can handle their own life.

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Developing interpersonal skills: Similarly, schools highlighted that there is a great benefit in the development of interpersonal skills in students. This is particularly noticed in high level connection to others, in the ability of students to be able to realise individual and group goals, in the ability of students to live in complex society, in the easy and free interaction of students with with people of different ages, in the ability of taking decisions together in democracy, in the democratic awareness that drives decisions that are not only self-interested, but that look at the common goal.

Learning: Respondent also indicated a series of benefits that democratic education brings to the learning environment (respect of the rhythm of each person, work with creativity and will, time and space to discover the path they want to follow in life, students are really trusted and respected as full human beings, possibility to developing students potential, interest, talents, opportunity to learning things from intrinsic motivation goes a lot faster and integrates the learning more deeply, do not overstep in kids decisions, learn to observe more than act, no punishment, no abuse of " power", respecting the child as a person). The more beneficial learning environment has been considered to have as consequences, also benefits for students learning, in particular the greater possibility to learn to learn, the enthusiasm to learn and the trust that students can always learn what they need.

**Challenges in applying democratic education**

Regarding the major limits and difficulties in applying democratic education, practitioners of this approach pointed out two series of challenges, one connected with the external factors, and one connected more with internal factors.

External factors: The external factors enumerated by the democratic schools answering the questionnaire were mainly connected with the socio-cultural context in which the school is inscribed.
From a legal/structural point of view, most of the responders indicated that the non-recognition of democratic education by the state generates a set of serious limits. These are connected with the fact that children attending democratic schools in most of the countries have to undertake external exams by a jury or by a public school, sometimes at the end of every academic year, other times every two years. This external control interferes with the principles of democratic education, and creates somehow a contradiction for the children: on the one hand they can follow self-directed learning but on the other they have to prepare for state exams. Similarly, in other countries democratic schools are obliged to follow a curriculum, therefore self-directed learning can be practised only partially, with great difficulties for the adult staff involved and for the students. Exams or inspections by the public education authorities are also a challenge itself, as the assessment of children and school is based on standardised criteria of classic education. In other words, the

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competences that children in democratic education acquire are very difficult to measure with standardised tests which only covers a very limited set of cognitive skills (typically: maths, language, science, English).

From a more socio/cultural point of view, there are challenges connected with the expectations of the social cultural/environment (society, family, friends) towards children. Due to the diffuse lack of trust in children's abilities, and the general educational system that is rather authoritarian and based on a reward/punishment system, adults tend not to understand the democratic education approach. Some respondents clearly pointed out a gap between the "regular" education system and democratic education which is too big at the moment, and may generate a real culture clash. Several schools experienced that children going to democratic schools tend to be judged by the surrounding circles and being tested by parents, friends etc, which wants to be reassured that children will not "miss out" important knowledge acquisition. Some respondent considers that this is connected with the fact that parents and families of children enrolled in democratic schools not always have a sound understanding of this pedagogy, and they have not "deconstructed" their own learning journey or they are still "trapped in the fear" of letting their children take control of their learning and decisions. At the opposite of this, some respondents also indicated the challenge of "romanticisation" of what democratic education is, considering only the freedom but not the responsibilities, the commitments, the rules that are supporting democratic education initiatives.

Internal challenges: Regarding the internal challenges, these are connected with the main actors involved. For the adult staff (teachers), most respondents asserted that it is difficult to find adult staff with the appropriate understanding, pedagogical awareness, and curiosity in many fields to be able to inspire children. Some responders also pointed out the difficulties to stimulate children, in particular to do "things" that children have to do without choice (exams for instance). There is also a widespread awareness that democratic schools have to often adapt to special needs children who do not find other places where they are welcome, and this created a challenge for many adult staff that might not have the appropriate training to assist children with special needs.

Also, due to the difficulties of managing an experiential project with very limited resources, there is a risk of burn out of the main actors involved -both teachers and parents- as they tend to overwork and perform many tasks.

Regarding parents, the major problem is the parental involvement itself. It seems that it is difficult for schools to start up without parent's support, however, there is the tendency for parents to not to respect their parent role and to "invade" the pedagogical sphere. Moreover, some respondents suggested that one big problem is the fact that some parents do not understand democratic education and this led to a general fear of parents, on the other hand to parents that would like an excess of freedom without functional limits to their children.

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Finally, there are structural internal problems. First and foremost, all schools pointed out the big financial insecurity that they face and that has serious consequences on the stability of the project. Secondly, there is also mentioned the issue connected with the complexity of a horizontal non-hierarchical organisation system, and the time and energy it takes to implement an non-hierarchical organisation.

**Factors that could facilitate the diffusion of democratic education**

There are several ideas shared by the persons from democratic schools that responded to the questionnaire about how to facilitate the diffusion of democratic education in state schools.

These first important steps that all the respondents from four countries highlighted is the importance of research, spreading knowledge, awareness and information not only on democratic education, but more broadly about neuroscience and development psychology study on how children's brains function and how pedagogy can help children develop in a healthy way. Some respondents suggested the need to have more research done to show the benefits of democratic education to be able to legitimise even more the work that democratic schools are doing. At the same time, many responders considered it important to spread the values of democratic education and make them familiar and close to more and more people through training teachers in democratic values and practices, so that there would be more people prepared to work in democratic schools. Some schools suggest that the key is to collaborate directly with state schools from their local area, in order to share their experience with other teachers to help integrate democratic values into other schools.

Some pointed out that the steps taken (towards change) have to be small enough to be understood by all participants - students, parents, teachers and the education ministry.

A second set of ideas about how to facilitate the integration of democratic education has more to do with the structural level. In this sense, recognition of democratic education from States and receiving public support is seen as a fundamental step by many. In order to achieve this, some respondents suggested that state laws and standards should change in many European countries in order to be more flexible as to what, when and how to learn a subject and what, when and how to validate students' knowledge and get a diploma. IN order to achieve this, more cooperation has to be made on a higher level (lobby groups amongst decision makers).

**Learning needs**

Most of the respondents stated that they already know abundantly about democratic education, so they would not need to study the pedagogy of democratic education. However, they would be very interested to learn the following topics:

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Exchange of best practices: Most of the schools wish to know different experiences and practices in Europe, visit other democratic schools and understand what are the best practices and successful stories of other schools around Europe. There is overall curiosity about the international overview of democratic schools in the world (history, different approaches).

Educational practices: There is a need to gain more tools and expertise in order to deal with students that are not motivated, in order to spark curiosity in children that – mostly coming after a long period of compulsory/forced education, are not interested in pursuing any learning.

Management: There is the need to know how to implement democratic education in large schools, and to receive more training about governance (knowing more about sociocracy practice and knowing the system of governance of other schools). Finally, there is a need to know how to build a financially stable long term organisation that can support the school.

Research: There is underlined the exigence of getting more knowledge about the academic research on self-directed learning

Finally, most of the schools showed enthusiasm in participating in an online training on democratic education. However, some showed concerns about the online medium and the fact that the topics might be already known from most of them.

### 5.1.3. Analysis form State schools' questionnaires

In this section, the results from the questionnaires obtained from state school are presented. As explained in the methodological chapter, the table below shows the number of replies obtained, divided per country. A total number of 63 replies has been obtained among Belgium, Bulgaria, Estonia and Italy.

| **COUNTRY** | **NUMBER OF STATE SCHOOLS THAT RESPONDED TO THE QUESITONNAIRE** |
|---|---|
| BELGIUM | 9 |
| BULGARIA | 18 |
| ESTONIA | 13 |
| ITALY | 22 |
| **TOTAL** | **63** |

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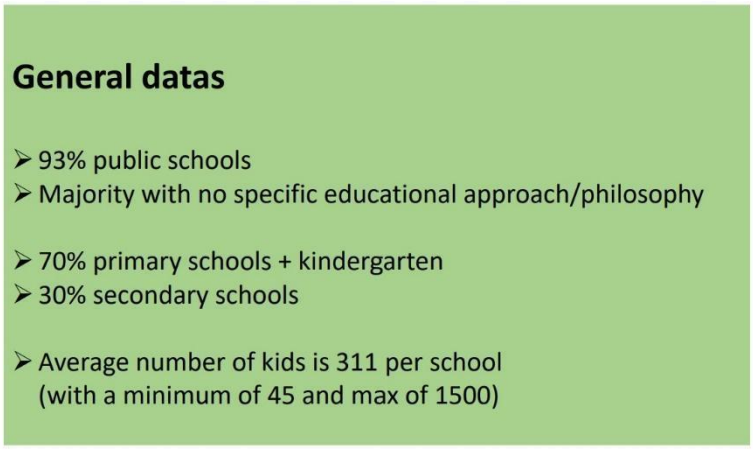


If we take a close look at the general features of these schools, we could see that most of them do not have a specific educational philosophical approach, except a few Montessori, Freinet and Waldorf. Of these schools, the 70% is composed of primary schools and kindergarten, with the remaining 30% which is composed of schools that are also secondary schools.

When looking at the total number of children, it is easy to identify that these are all big institutes, having an average number of children of 311 students per school, with a minimum of 45 students enrolled and a maximum of 1500 pupils.

The results obtained have been categorised into the following main topics: general school features, knowledge of democratic education, diffusion and awareness of democratic education in state school, democratic schools, benefit of including democratic education, major challenges in including democratic education, how to integrate democratic education practices and training needs.

**General schools' features**

Student Participation: 60% of the schools who responded declared that students do not participate in the design of learning activities, there is a 30% of schools that declared that that students are not the protagonists of teaching and learning processes and only 10% declares student active involvement in participation (these are Montessori and Freinet schools mainly).

Teachers: There is a strong agreement that collaboration between teachers is essential for democratic education, 75% of teachers encourage and guide students to self-management their learning, whereas 25% discourage completely such path and the same portion do not encourage the design and development of activities contextualised in the school's physical and social environment.

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Teaching style: half of the schools declare that they teach in large groups, they mainly use textbooks, digital learning materials, paper worksheets, self-made materials. All of the schools, except one practice examination to assess students' learning.

Family participation: According to the results obtained, there are different opinions about the participation of families proposing and developing educational activities and in stimulating direct and regular communication and involvement with families. The 30% of schools do not encourage family participation at all, the 40% encourage modest family participation and the remaining 30% stimulate families for a high participation.

Outdoor: 65% of the schools seem to promote outdoor activities, with different levels of engagement, whereas the 35% is not promoting any outdoor activity. However, when analysing in the details what they mean for outdoors, it is interesting to notice that the understanding of outdoors is different from the one practised in democratic education. In state schools, the promotion of outdoor activities is linked to sporadic visits to parks, or exceptionally organised study trips, or school break in the courtyard. Differently, for democratic education responders, outdoor is linked in the systemic exposure of children to the outdoor/natural setting as a learning environment.

Inclusion: Very different replies on inclusion of special needs children and different levels of integration

Assembly: The 30% of the responder believe that the assembly is an important dynamic in the routine of the school, the rest considers it extremely marginal. When describing the assembly, the totality of the responders, however, considered that more as a "welcoming morning circle", rather than a decisional moment.

**Knowledge of democratic education**

The first questions addressed to state schools were aimed at understanding the level of knowledge of democratic education. With this regard, around 50% of respondents said they have a good knowledge of democratic education, however, when reading the answers of the same persons, a great deal of confusion emerged (ie. saying that Steiner or Montessori schools are democratic, or considering that democratic education is teaching citizenship competences). This data is extremely valuable as it explains that there is still a large public that is not aware of what democratic education is, and that there is also a communication barrier. Not only the name "democratic education" is interpreted for something different, but also other names such as "assembly" have a different meaning in the state school than in the democratic education "arena".

When asking which features of democratic education were unique, and not present in other schools, half of the responders indicated the two major components of democratic education: self-directed learning and co-management of the school. About self-directed learning, responders focused on the different learning style:

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they indicated the self-directed learning, the possibility for everyone to make their own daily program, mixed age groups, they recognised the role of mentors instead of teachers, they pointed out at the possibility of involving different specialists, not only pedagogues, finally others underlined the possibility to having less stress and more joy to learn not involving grades or performance). Regarding the co-management of the schools, some respondents indicated that the unicity of democratic education practice is in giving real voice to children, allowing shared decision-making, community organisation, Inclusion of parents in the decisions and having a clear decision-making process (as the sociocractic model).

For the other half of respondents, some were unclear and a minority declared that democratic schools just teach civic values and there is no difference between a democratic school and a state school that is well managed.

While breaking down these results into a country analysis it is possible to see the following trends:

**Belgium:** The results of the survey indicate that most of the survey takers do not have much knowledge of democratic schools in Belgium. This lack of familiarity may suggest that democratic education is not as widely practised or recognized as other educational approaches. However, among the schools involved in the project, some familiarity with democratic education was noted, as they were aware of the BOS school. Additionally, some survey participants have a basic understanding of the principles and practices of democratic education. Overall, the results suggest that while democratic education may not be widely known among survey participants, there may still be some level of awareness and understanding among those in education leadership positions. Belgian state schools do not operate under the same model of democratic education as it is practised in democratic schools. However, they do apply democratic principles in some ways. For example, the education system in Belgium is built on the values of democracy, equality and respect for individual rights, and these values are reflected in the curriculum and in school policies. Additionally, teachers and administrators in Belgian state schools strive to create a positive and inclusive learning environment where all students are valued and respected. There is a growing interest and willingness to apply democratic education principles in the education system, particularly if they have been shown to increase motivation and self-regulated learning.
Many educators and school principals are already exploring ways to incorporate democratic education principles into their practices, even within the most traditional Belgian state schools. Whether through student-led decision-making, project-based learning, or other approaches, the goal is to create a more student-centred, empowering, and engaging educational experience.

**Bulgaria.** Most schools, teachers and principals don’t have knowledge and understanding about democratic education and its core elements. Even teachers who claim they do, can't explain the main characteristics of

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it. They don't know what main characteristics democratic schools have and are not present in other schools. Some of them connect it with democracy, but are not sure what the similarity is. Some of them think that a main characteristic is that it is financed by the parents and run by parents. So far, there is no state school in the country that applies democratic education. Some teachers try to have an assembly as part of their classroom routine, but the choices they actually can make within that routine are very limited. Some teachers try to discuss with students about the learning process and to include and engage them more, but it is also limited.

**Estonia**

10 representatives out of 12 have said they know at least one democratic school. Main characteristics of democratic schools are freedom to choose what to learn and when to learn, relaxed atmosphere, and less stress. However, 3 schools out of 12 have said they do not see notable differences between state and democratic school, or have no idea.

In state schools, some elements of democratic education have been adopted. Students have been involved in decision-making processes by student governments /councils (in 6 schools out of 12, the scores were 6-10), this is supported by official regulations.

One school has clearly mentioned that everyone in the community who can see 'how to make school better' can participate. One school claim that there are no big differences between well-organised state schools and democratic schools, meaning by that, values - based education which their school practices. There is the example of Suvemäe-TKG , as democratic school in the state school system (negotiated curriculum)

**Italy**

The state schools surveyed do not have knowledge about democratic schooling and therefore cannot apply it to their daily work with children and students. The questionnaires reveal a desire to learn about the principles of democratic schooling and apply them, as far as possible, in class.

**Benefit of including democratic education practices in state schools**

The benefits recognised by state school respondents are very similar to the benefits shown by democratic schools' respondents. They can therefore be grouped in benefits for personal development, interpersonal development, and learning.

Regarding personal development, many responders highlighted that applying democratic education practices in state schools would help students get more life skills, emotional awareness, self- awareness and responsibility, and a general increased well-being for students.

Regarding interpersonal development, responders suggested that applying democratic education practices in state schools would help students learn democratic values, non-violent communication, shared responsibilities, and social skills.

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Regarding the learning sphere, the most common answer is that democratic education would help in motivating students, above all teenagers, developing personal interests and preferences and getting other competences that are not the academic ones, for instance stimulating the spirit of entrepreneurship

Besides these replies that had a clear parallelism with the answers obtained by democratic schools, some respondent here also suggested that applying elements of democratic education in state schools could bring to more focus on the specific needs of students, that would allow teacher to be able to teach their passion to students, more active involvement of parents in educational activities, the possibilities of having more community events, new models for organising the spaces.

One respondent out of 63 stated that there are no benefits at all in applying democratic education in the context of state school.

**Challenges of including democratic education practices in state schools**

Two schools out of 63 declared that there would be no difficulty in incorporating democratic educational practices, and it would only require the desire of teachers to do so. The other 61 responders, on the contrary, were extremely clear in naming all the possible challenges that could be faced in introducing democratic education practices in state schools. These challenges are presented here as grouped according to the main actors of school: teachers, students, parents, school managers. Finally, some challenges are also connected to external factors.

Teachers: In some countries more than others, it emerges a reluctance and fear of change, a certain inertia and not readiness of teachers to embark in a new pedagogical approach. There is, at the same time, the awareness that some teachers are inspired and interested in innovative and progressive pedagogy, but these need to have training. These training needs time and energy to be implemented but the responders highlighted that there are not enough teachers ready to spend their time and energies to discuss and put in practices democratic education in their classes. Even once trained, there is a widespread fear of the difficulty to share decision making with children and organise community meetings with children. Another challenge that emerges is the difficulty for teachers to evaluate students and reach targets imposed by the curricula if following democratic approach. This can be especially difficult when implementing democratic education practices that require more student-teacher interaction and collaboration.

Also, in at least two countries there is a shortage of teachers, which can make it difficult to provide adequate staffing and support for the implementation of some democratic education practices. This can result in a lack of resources and support for students, making it more difficult for them to take an active role in their education. Finally, another relevant challenge derives from imagining applying democratic education on a

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big scale. In many state schools there are a large number of students, which can make it challenging to provide a high level of individualised attention and support.

Students: There is a concern that students that have not attended democratic schools before students - and therefore used to a system of punishment/reward - will only learn if asked to, therefore the challenges of allowing students from state schools to approach democratic education is recognised. Many respondents highlighted that pupils are too dependent on someone else telling them what to do and when, therefore it would be difficult for them to choose their subjects according to their interests. Others pointed out the challenge of self-control and responsibility for students, who might just take advantage of the freedom.

Parents: Some respondent concluded that parents do not trust children, therefore they would not appreciate democratic education approach. In the same way, some other declared that parents choose a school by the measurement of the results and not by the processes and the children wellness. Even for the parents that are more sensitive to pedagogical aspects, there is lack of sufficient free time for parents to be actively involved in the school process. This last declaration, has been quite frequent and it explains that some of the responders consider that democratic schools only happen if supported actively and managed by parents – which is not the case for all schools. This is therefore another indication of the misunderstanding about democratic education.

School managers: some persons identified the lack of sufficient awareness among the school managers about the opportunities that democratic education provides, whereas other pointed out that there is too much bureaucracy to deal with to put in practice democratic education. Finally, others considered that there will be several logistic aspects that school managers should solve, such as the problem of changing all the classrooms' design.

External factors: Not only internal challenges have been portrayed. Some respondents analysed that there are several external challenges that could make the application of democratic education in stare schools. These are connected with cultural and social values (bringing the example of the difference between democratic education and the majority of people 'belief, or the example of a strict religious tradition in some countries which is at odds with democratic education), other considered that the economic context of the country can also influence this choice, whereas others pointed at the educational politics (law that enforce curriculum, compulsory examinations, lack of real decentralisation of education system)

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### Current challenges of state schools

For the scope of this research, it has been considered helpful to also provide a collection of the main challenges that schools face per se, as emerged from the questionnaires. What follows is a list of the main problems that the 63 schools' interviews exposed:

- Lack of student's motivation is the most relevant
- Not being able to teach soft skills/21st century competencies
- Lack of training of teachers
- Parents: family's involvement in the school values and vision, communication with parents
- Building a more active relationship between teachers, students and parents
- Shortage of teachers
- Selection and inclusion of quality, motivated specialists
- Inclusion of children with special needs
- Poor and inadequate infrastructures
- Money and time
- Language diversity
- Balancing freedom and responsibility
- Decreasing number of students
- Lack of psychological and technological support

### How to facilitate the adoption of democratic education in public schools

After having understood what are the major benefits and challenges in the application of democratic education practices in state schools, in this following part it will be exposed what could be the strategies to facilitate the inclusion of democratic education in every of the countries analysed.

Belgium: The survey takers would likely be interested in information about studies that demonstrate the advantages of applying democratic education as it is organised in democratic schools and that it is possible to organise it even with a high student-teacher ratio.

Bulgaria:

- decentralisation of Bulgarian education system and a change in the government policies/ state laws and regulations about the education process. If teachers are not obliged to follow so strictly a curriculum and the state educational standard about when to learn, they will have more space and freedom to attend to every child's need and organise with him a learning process that suits him best.
- new education and training for future teachers that will teach them about how learning happens, democratic education and how to support children in their own learning process.
- assessment methods – rethinking the way we assess students and applying new methods.

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- more knowledge and trainings about management and self-government, as well as in general building school communities with active and engaged members – students, teachers, parents, who make decisions together
- education for parents and society as well, regarding the way education is seen, changing old beliefs and prejudices and building confidence in new ways education and learning can happen, changing the way people think about freedom in education

Estonia: Extra time and money for requalification because today teachers are so overbooked and burnout already. Also, extra time for embedding changes gradually.

Italy: Italian state schools surveyed are not familiar with the principles and methodologies adopted in democratic schooling and would like to learn it through group training, workshop, learning activities, concrete experiences and visit the schools.

**Learning needs**

The state schools responded to the questionnaire that they would need to broaden their knowledge on the following aspects that are connected with democratic education:

- Visits of democratic schools
- Understanding of best practices
- Practical examples in the everyday school life
- History, features of democratic education and its differences from other education systems
- Which skills and training teachers should have
- How to include democratic education in state school/ mediate with required curriculum
- Sociocratic method of decision making
- The participation of society in the school process
- Legal framework

90% of the schools want to participate in the training.

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### 5.1.4. Conclusions

The questionnaire showed a great degree of participation both in state schools and in democratic schools. The questionnaire shed light on crucial aspects, patterns and beliefs.

Firstly, there has to be notice that there is a difference of lexicon, and different meaning for worlds as it is perceived by democratic education practitioners and state school practitioners (ie: assembly, family participation, outdoor). The same concept of democratic education is only understood by half of the responders. This lack of familiarity may suggest that democratic education is not as widely practised or recognized as other educational approaches. Overall, the results suggest that while democratic education may not be widely known among survey participants, there may still be some level of awareness and understanding among those in education leadership positions.

The second relevant aspect that emerged is that all schools (democratic and non-democratic) considered that there are great benefits of democratic education, and there is a similarity of benefits expressed by both democratic schools and state schools. In particular, state schools expressed the pressing challenge of lack of motivation in their students, and identified with democratic education a possibility to overcome this problem.

There is an overall openness from teachers and headmaster and overall understanding of the benefits. Fears remain and the challenges are clearly highlighted.

Taking into consideration the suggestions to facilitate the implementation of democratic education in state schools, the best approach would be to have a slow transition, step by step, so that little changes can be made. At the same time, more and more research needs to be done and shared on the benefit of democratic education on children development, so as to reassure policy makers and school directors.

Finally, it is important to showcase examples of democratic schools with numerous students, as well as examples of democratic state schools.

More bridges have to be made in the communities where democratic schools are in order to reach out state schools and start collaborations.

This mutual understanding would be beneficial for state schools that could learn more respectful and inclusive practices, as well as for democratic schools that could gain legitimacy and visibility, with the ultimate goal of being recognised and supported by the state system.

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# 5.2 Results of The Focus Group

Once collected all the information from the questionnaires, and having revised the results that emerged, the partnership of the DESC project organised two focus groups during the Transnational Project Meeting in Tenerife, on the 30th of October 2023. The two-focus group, as mentioned in the first chapter, had the aim to revise the date obtained by the questionnaires and enact discussions by experts in the field in order to elaborate on key questions linked to the application of democratic education in state schools. Following, the outcomes of the two questionnaires will be reported.

## 5.2.1. Democratic schools focus group

Most of the participant were quite pessimistic about the possibility to have democratic education in state schools, some of them come from countries where new educational laws have been applied (Spain) whereas other come from countries were the law is still very rigid (Bulgaria and Italy), and other comes from a country where it is quite possible to implement democratic education (Estonia) but there is still a curriculum to follow. The main challenges, mirroring the replies obtained in the questionnaires, have been identified in the lack of readiness of all the actors that should be involved (teachers, parents, school managers), the lack of training or information about democratic education, and the difficulties of being recognised in the legal system of the country.

Participants considered that it would be interesting to design a gradual transition process, where different areas of possible decision making are established and that increase in impact, and the schools could roll out this process step by step, and in dialogue with the students about the reasons for these steps, the overall vision, the conditions to progress the next step of the process, etc.

The challenge in this transition process is that I would lead to compromises and not challenge the core problems that affect education in the present time: the non-respect of the children's human right of self-determination, “watering” the democratic concept down. To apply democratic education, we need a paradigm shift that will allow children to profess their human right of self-determination. Therefore, if a process of transition has to be envisaged, it is important at the same time to keep the final objective clear and steady.

In this transition process, some participants suggested that it would be easier to start introducing democratic education in kindergarten first, because there is no pressure about curricula. After that, it is possible to think of starting a process of introducing democratic education also in primary schools that are not used to this approach.

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There is some hope for the future generation of teachers, with more flexible mindset and curiosity about more respectful education methods.

Whereas some participants underlined the need to be patient and wait until the next generations will be more sensitive to children rights, other participants pointed out that there is a systematic abuse of children that are not respected in their rights, and they are not offered an healthy development, and therefore there is need to take immediate action and do not wait until the external world would change mind.

Everyone agreed that there is a need to confront and train parents, teachers, professionals and families, and this training should be not expensive and easy to access. There is the importance of creating a bridge, making people curious about democratic education and providing experience and expertise. It is important to raise awareness about children's rights: before children's rights were only about physical abuse, but since some years we have finally included a prescription about psychology, and the right of participation.

Another important aspect should be the collaboration of educational organisations to promote law reforms that could change the evaluation system and allow more flexibility in the application of the curriculum. This needs to be done also through decentralisation and dialogue, however, democratic schools are already so busy so they don't have the resources to do that, therefore some people should group and focus their efforts and attention on this. There should be a collective demand at the human rights courts, hire a lawyer in Brussels and take legal actions.

Also, the need to conduct more research on democratic education is reinforced in the discussion. Everyone agreed that if policy makers would understand that there are studies that prove that this approach leads to more happy, successful, fulfilled human being than what society is having right now, this could be a great incentive for change.

There is the need to work on as many channels as possible: Making movies, capturing, producing videos and materials, raising more awareness about this through different channels. Not just writing an article, but creating something visual, to attract attention.

Some shared considerations about the democratic education movement as a nonviolent movement that is a force and not forceful. Participants agree that the transition should not be forceful but there is to be a clear awareness rising on the fact that whereas children are forced into coercive systems (separation of genders in some schools, school corporal punishment legal in most all US and many other countries in the world) democratic education receives more and more attacks (in France, for instance, democratic schools are systematically being closed down)

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### 5.2.2 State schools' focus group

Some schools consider that they are already implementing some democratic practices, but they can only take a small part of that, find best practices and translate them into their setting. They agree that they can take something from democratic school in a state school, and change a little bit the process.

The participants agreed with the results of the questionnaires, that there is a need to understand more the concept of democratic education, and explain it more. They also understand that there are different concepts behind the name assembly, or outdoors.

What some schools are already doing that resemble democratic education practices in Belgium:

- Taking children in the process of education in their own hands
- Children can bring their life in the class,
- Put more time in the group
- kindergarten parliament, were children can bring ideas, budget they learn to find consensus, decisions together
- There are lots of outdoor activities, very small playground but we manage to put an outdoor jungle where they can play.
- Assemblies in kindergarten every day, in the fifth year of primary school, and first year. These assemblies are group moments where, sharing interests, teachers can adapt their teaching to what children bring. Form where children express themselves, created problem-solutions. It depends on the teachers; not all the teachers feel comfortable to do that. The creation of assemblies in all grades could be a target for us.
- Possibility to choose in some subjects, like "word education" in primary school

What some schools are already doing that resemble democratic education practices in Italy:

- Schools without backpack
- one pupil is representative of class (election).
- Children take care of an animal
- a lot of outdoor activities. Teachers attended an Erasmus courses in outdoor
- Cooperative learning
- In some classes, they can decide how to learn a subject and what to learn within a topic
- No marks but only evaluation of competences

Some participants pointed out that even if these activities might seem innovative or interesting, they are still chosen by teachers and democratic education only happens if co-decided by children.

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Estonian representatives pointed out that even though in their schools there are several interesting activities, they are not chosen by students. However, in every school there is little student government, where one student from every class gathers once a month and has the possibility to make some decisions.

When discussing the challenges of applying democratic education, they realised that it is more difficult to apply it in secondary schools, and there is a need to change the mentality of some teachers. Finally, parents are not prepared, families have many expectations about children, they aren't prepared to these changes

Important to have a great collaboration with the headmaster and teachers.

When reflecting on possible democratic practices to be implemented, some participants said they need to know better how it works. Others pointed out the following: learn from the democratic school practices how to achieve more student-led education and how to have students that are more engaged in their learning projects. Learning how not to test or grade, and substitute this with observation or other systems of evaluations.

The discussion moved on a general awareness of lack of motivation in students but teachers can make the difference in this sense, more motivation in primary schools than in secondary schools, where teaching style is more frontal and old style, teacher is the leader in secondary school, if the teacher is boring, the motivation goes down.

There is an agreement that a good way to go would be to do research and show that children in democratic schools can achieve the same goals as children in other systems.

About what should be thought to new teachers (before they become one):
To accept the child for who she he is, let him/her be, more flexibility, listen to the children, and the questions that children have. find themselves the answers, patience, make many mistakes, and you will learn more from failures than success, teachers they have the competences that they can show failure, it is important to fail as well, not only to succeed.

## 5.3. The Case Study

### 5.3.3. The context

In December 2022, the team from QUEST travelled to visit Suvemäe-TKG  schools. The team stayed three days, full time in the school. The first day was spent observing, and the second and third days was spent making interviews to all people interested to be filmed. The outcome of these interviews is a 30 minutes

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documentary about the Suvemäe-TKG school, as well as the following section that explains the features, the unicity, the positive sides and the challenges individuated in the analysis of this school.

### 5.3.4. Description of the Suvemäe-TKG school

General information

Suvemäe is located in Tallinn, Estonia, and was opened in 2019, as a primary and gymnasium school. The school is a school functioning as a department of a bigger state school that is located very close by. All students enrolled in Suvemäe-TKG are also enrolled in the bigger school. Suvemäe-TKG was created from the common interest of educational leaders and families to create an alternative based on democratic education in the state school system. The vision of the founders is to develop as a pioneer and promote a pilot experience that could support public and private schools both in Estonia and abroad.

Negotiated curriculum

Suvemäe-TKG follows the principles of democratic education and creates a learning environment for children that takes into account the individual characteristics of each child. This allows children to direct their own learning processes and activities and gives them greater freedom of choice. Thanks to this, professors' notices children's greater motivation and self-confidence.

The goal of Suvemäe is to support students in finding their inner balance, enjoying freedom in research and creative work and taking responsibility for their academic success and behaviour;

Students study in groups that correspond to their level of education, the learning process and methodology take into account the student's individual interests. Every week, the student meets with his teacher (coach) to analyse the results and plan further learning activities.

The school does not have regular classrooms. The classes take place in different activity centres (science, art, languages, etc.), in specific age groups. (1-2 grade, 3-4 grade, 5-6 grade, 7 grade, 8-9 grade).

The daily schedule of Suvemäe students is versatile, allowing them to participate either in regular classes or to engage in independent work. The students of Suvemäe can prepare together with the students of the Tallinn Art Gymnasium in the prescribed classes for level assignments and exams, if health restrictions do not prevent it.

Suvemäe students have three different study arrangements.

- The first group of school subjects takes place through semi-structured lessons of mathematics, Estonian language and natural sciences, where student participation is mandatory. Suvemäe 7th, 8th and 9th grade students attend mandatory biology, physics and chemistry classes. The form of education consists mainly of workshops conducted by both students and teachers, outdoor learning,

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job shadowing, lessons following the curriculum, personal agreements with the teacher for projects, etc..

- The second group of school subjects takes place through various topics of independent study projects, where students receive sufficient support and guidance in practicing and improving their study skills. Starting from the 5th grade, students develop research projects on different topics. . At the beginning of each year, students participate in a self-management master class, where individual learning methods are agreed upon and prepared with coaches.
- The third group of school subjects includes students' individual interests and is based on their voluntary participation in clubs and workshops. Students can choose workshops and projects on topics suggested by them, our *coaches* and parents. Suvemäe has provided students with, for example, the following workshops and clubs: media, English, programming, robotics, financial knowledge, philosophy.

Shared decisions

Suvemäe-TKG is based on democratic principles, which means that children and teachers make agreements together on the conduct of lessons, appropriate behaviour in the community, conflict resolution, etc.
The Suvemäe-TKG mission is to develop a pedagogical balance that aims to support the holistic development of a person, bearing in mind that every child is unique when they become part of the community.
In this sense, Suvemäe-TKG teachers and staff believe that emotional well-being and social skills are as important and relevant as academic learning.
This belief motivates adult staff to involve young people in joint decision-making mechanisms, promote learning environments for different ages and find alternative and creative ways of learning.

Students have the opportunity to participate in school life. For example, disagreements are solved and discussed together in discussion circles (mediation circle), finding the best solutions for joint cooperation and a better learning environment. They also make suggestions for events in their age group (small circle) and participate in a meeting that affects the entire school community (Suvemäe Ring), where everyone has their voice and the right to speak.
Together with the teachers, the students participate in the weekly school assembly, where the learning process, content and method are discussed and decided together (self-directed and personalised learning); Agreements are discussed and decisions are taken at the weekly general meeting. Despite free decision-making rights and elections, in 2019 the students and supervisors of Suvemäe-TKG established a set of rules that will not be changed without a very good reason. These are mainly agreements about behaviour and communication that are needed to ensure a safe and reliable learning environment.

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Adult staff can prove with their experiences that when students are involved in agreement making and decision making, they take responsibility for their behaviour and the consequences. Only by being involved do young people better understand the necessity of rules and are ready to follow them.

Assessments

Although the teaching and learning methodology of Suvemäe-TKG differs from that applied in ordinary schools, we still operate based on the national curriculum.

Numerical assessment is not applied at Suvemäe-TKG school. Evaluation is based on regular conversations between students and coaches and based on the student's individual skills and learning outcomes.

First, the student evaluates his own achievements and then sends his summary to the coach. If the student initially has difficulties in clarifying his interests, the instructors offer him various opportunities to develop his learning. However, the student still has the obligation to engage in learning-based activities and ask for help if necessary. The ultimate goal is to reach a self-directed student who can set learning goals, seek help and support, justify his learning strategies and the volume and necessity of the learning content.

During the academic year, the student's various learning assignments are gathered into a study folder, and at the end of the academic year, a so-called thesis is submitted based on the study folder. The portfolio can contain the child's works, projects and their descriptions and is developed in cooperation with subject teachers and a personal coach.

Parents are informed about the child's development regularly (at least once per trimester), either through e-school or personal conversations. Suvemäe students take several mock exams during the school year. Their purpose is to help the student understand what knowledge he has acquired and what still needs practice. It also gives tutors an idea of where the student might need additional help.

At the end of the 3rd, 4th, 6th, 7th and 9th grades, Suvemäe students take state-mandatory tests and exams.

Leaving school:

If a student leaves Suvemäe-TKG school for another school, the student's qualitative evaluations will be converted to numerical grades if the other school requires it. When moving from Suvemäe-TKG school to Tallinn Art Gymnasium regular school system, it is not necessary to submit additional documents.

### 5.3.5 Outcome of the interviews and participant observation

During the three days of participant observation and interviews, it has been possible to notice a friendly and relaxed learning environment where children and young persons were generally very happy and satisfied about their experience in the school. Every student interviewed was enthusiastic about the school, and loved to wake up in the morning to join Suvemäe-TKG . All students showed great degree of self-awareness, of respect towards the others, of understanding of their limits and about how to improve. Most of the students

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come from a very difficult previous school experience, and were very clear in making a balance about the positive aspects that were found in Suvemäe-TKG . There was a general sense of “healing” that has been confirmed by the Headmaster. When interviewed she confirmed that several students that were “broken inside” decided to go to the democratic branch. After one year, they would feel much better, and they could decide if going back to the traditional school or not. The headmaster also clarified that for those students that decided to go back to the traditional school, it was not difficult at all to catch up with the other learning levels.

The sense of belonging was highly perceived from all students and teachers, and the effort in developing soft skills by the teaching staff could be noticed in the social and personal competences of the students interviewed.

At the same time, it was possible to notice that such an experience is extremely fragile as it relies only on the commitment of two main people (the head of study who founded the school and the headmaster of the state school who gave the agreement in opening the democratic public branch). If one of the two persons would change jobs, there would be high chances that the institute would not survive.

At the same time, the school is highly understaffed and this deficit is particularly problematic as there is a large part of students who have some special needs and require more individualised follow up from the adult staff. Teachers are therefore under some pressure and, although they seem to enjoy the experience in the school, they would need to be assisted by a psychologist or/and by a social worker.

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# 7. FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION: TRANSLATING RESULTS INTO TEACHER TRAINING

Based on the result of the research, and on the study of the training offer and needs, the DESC partnership was able to draft a preliminary syllabus for the training modules that will be created, in order to design a teacher training on democratic education. This training will be online and free, accessible to everyone through a platform that will offer the training as well as learning materials and a forum to offer exchanges among practitioners and everyone that is interested in putting democratic education in practice.

The table below represents a preliminary proposal of the modules that will be developed, with a link to the DESC methodology set up in three levels (learning level, school level, community level). Every module has also been also mapped out against the LifeComp and the Citizenship competences developed by the EU, in order to show an immediate correspondence between the training and the application of skills required by the European Framework.

| Module title | Learning need addressed | Level |
|---|---|---|
| Brain development and Learning as a process - learning mechanism on a neurological level - studies, experience, scientific research) | more knowledge of the most recent researches on brain development, child learning etc.. | Learner Level |
| Multiple intelligence theory and different learning styles | more knowledge of the most recent researches on brain development, child learning etc..<br><br>need to gain more tools and expertise in order to deal with students that are not motivated, in order to sparkly curiosity in children | Learner Level |
| Intrinsic VS External Motivation. Practices for supporting intrinsic motivation | need to gain more tools and expertise in order to deal with students that are not motivated, in order to sparkly curiosity in children | Learner Level |
| Self-directed learning. Definition. Differences with other types of learning. Goal-setting. Practices for supporting self-directed learning. | gain more tools and expertise in order to deal with students that are not motivated, in order to sparkly curiosity in children | Learner Level |
| Democratic Education. Definition. Core philosophy. History of democratic education. | gain more tools and expertise in order to deal with students that are not motivated, in order to sparkly curiosity in children | Learner Level |

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| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Mentoring process. Active learning skills. Empathy. NVC skills. Reflection on the learning process. | Need to know practical examples in the everyday school life on how democratic education works | Learner Level |
| Assessment of Learning. Self-Assessment. Types of evaluations. Grades, evaluation and exams | Need to know how to substitute grading with other forms of assessment | Learner Level |
| Democratic practices in big classes (groups) | need to know how to implement democratic education in large schools | Learner Level |
| Soft skills plus 21st century competencies | more knowledge of the most recent researches on brain development, child learning etc.. | Learner Level |
| Diversity and Inclusion. Developing skills for inclusion | Need to know practical examples in the everyday school life on how democratic education works | Learner Level |
| Long-term experience of democratic education | Need to understand what are the best practices and successful stories of other schools around Europe. | Learner Level |
| Organizational management – self-government of the school | receive more training about governance (knowing more about sociocracy practice and knowing the system of governance of other schools). | School level |
| Decision-making process - different methods | receive more training about governance (knowing more about sociocracy practice and knowing the system of governance of other schools). | School level |
| Sociocracy training | receive more training about governance (knowing more about sociocracy practice and knowing the system of governance of other schools). | School level |
| Dealing with violation of the rules and conflicts. Committees. Restorative practices. Mediation | Need to know practical examples in the everyday school life on how democratic education works | School level |
| Parents – building a culture of partnership and cooperation. Communication. | Need to know practical examples in the everyday school life on how democratic education works | School level |
| Environment as a third teacher. Necessary elements of a rich learning space | Need to know practical examples in the everyday school life on how democratic education works | School level |
| Building a culture of nonviolence. Nonviolent communication | Need to know practical examples in the everyday school life on how democratic education works | School level |
| Implementation of democratic education in traditional education | Need to know practical examples in the everyday school life on how democratic education works | School level |

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| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Building trust with families | improving participation of society in the school process | School level |
| Legal framework - different educational policies | need to know how to build a financial stable long-term organization that can support the school. | Community level |
| Support system for the school. Network of schools. | wises to know different experience and practices in Europe, visiting other democratic schools and understand what are the best practices and successful stories of other schools around Europe. There is overall curiosity about the international overview of democratic schools in the world | Community level |
| Formation of communities for more authentic way of living | improving participation of society in the school process | Community Level |
| Open schooling training | improving participation of society in the school process | Community Level |
| Work with the society | need to know how to build a financial stable long-term organization that can support the school.<br>improving participation of society in the school process | Community Level |
| Work with government | need to know how to build a financial stable long-term organization that can support the school. | Community Level |

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# 8. CONCLUSION

Nowadays, contemporary scientific standards in education, cutting edge studies on neuroscience and children development are reorienting international education standards towards what democratic education has been indicating for more than a century: the need for a more respectful education that is based on a holistic wellbeing of the person, not only on academic achievements.

We can see this change in organisations at different levels: on global (UNESCO, Future of Education Report), continental (EU new Competencies Framework) and national (Germany, Spain, Indonesia, Chile, etc., are approving new educational laws and curriculums).

At the same time, we also witness that, except a few advancing exceptions, conventional educational reality is very slow to change, and the road to achieve a respectful education for children is still long.

This generated a situation in which democratic education is only practised in private schools but is currently inaccessible to the majority of children, excluding some pioneer examples that have been provided in this analysis.

This research wanted to provide a contribution in accelerating this process of educational change, by providing a comprehensive analysis of the features, benefits and challenges of democratic education, and testing its applicability in state schools. With this objective, the research provided a theoretical overview of democratic education and offered an empirical analysis based on literature review, questionnaires, focus groups and case study.

In conclusion, the research can prove that the benefits of self determination that emerge in the most recent literature on children development are fully reported by the empirical findings showcased. Both the democratic schools and the state schools interviewed in the different methodologies confirm that applying democratic education is beneficial for a healthy development of the students, to boost their motivation and to promote their personal and social skills.

At the same time, the challenges faced in the application of democratic education are really high in private schools and in the few public schools that operate within the democratic education principles.

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Similarly, state schools non practising democratic education yet also highlights that they would face a series of problems if introducing democratic practices.

The study suggests that there is a clear path to follow that would be a gradual initiation of state schools to democratic education philosophy and practices, to gradually filling a gap that for the moment is perceived as too big.

Participants considered that it would be interesting to design a gradual transition process, where different areas of possible decision making are established and that increase in impact, and the schools could roll out this process step by step, and in dialogue with the students about the reasons for these steps, the overall vision, the conditions to progress the next step of the process, etc.

The challenge in this transition process is that I would lead to compromises and not challenge the core problems that affect education in the present time: the non-respect of the children's human right of self-determination, “watering” the democratic concept down. Therefore, if a process of transition has to be envisaged, it is important at the same time to keep the final objective clear and steady.

During this transitional phase it is pivotal to enhance stronger cooperation between democratic and state schools. This would allow on the one hand to legitimise more the democratic schools (and therefore decrease the problems connected with external factors) and support state schools in gradually learning more about democratic education (and therefore overcome some of their challenges among which low student’s motivation, lack of sense of belonging, limited number of teachers, etc..).

Finally, a roadmap of actions needs to be configured, including  awareness raising (open up more in the local communities, doing more trainings and showcasing examples)  research (need to provide more evidences of the benefits of democratic education) political advocacy (meeting with key policy makers to have an impact on the inclusion of democratic education in the national framework and in making more flexible the curriculum enforcement provisions) and legal actions (to support children rights of participation and choice on an EU and International level).

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# 9. GLOSSARY

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| Democratic Education | The basis of democratic education is in certain rights of students, which EUDEC defines as follows (based on the 2005 Resolution of the 13th International Democratic Education Conference (IDEC), Berlin, Germany): In any educational institution, students have the right<br>• to make their own choices regarding learning and all other areas of everyday life. In particular, they may individually determine what to do, when, where, how and with whom, so long as their decisions do not infringe on the liberty of others to do the same.<br>• to have an equal share in the decision making as to how their organisations – in particular their schools – are run, and which rules and sanctions, if any, are necessary.<br>Democratic education is defined by this organisation as education conducted in keeping with the above Resolution.<br><br>For more definitions about democratic education, please see chapter one. |
| Sudbury Schools | A Sudbury school is a type of democratic school, where students have complete responsibility for their own education, and the school is run by a direct democracy in which students and staff are equal citizens. Students use their time however they wish, and learn as a by-product of ordinary experience rather than through coursework. There is no predetermined educational syllabus, prescriptive curriculum or standardised instruction. This is a form of democratic education. Daniel Greenberg, one of the founders of the original Sudbury Model school, writes that the two things that distinguish a Sudbury Model school are that everyone is treated equally (adults and children together) and that there is no authority other than that granted by the consent of the governed. |
| Self-Directed Learning | Self-directed learning is a process where individuals take primary charge of planning, continuing and evaluating their learning experiences. In self-directed learning, the responsibility to learn shifts from an external source (teacher, etc.) to the individual. Self-directed education is education that derives from the self-chosen activities and life experiences of the learner; and Self-Directed Education refers to the deliberate practice in which young people are fully free to educate themselves in their own chosen ways rather than by means of a forced curriculum (Alliance for Self-Directed Education, 2021; Gray, 2017). |
| Open Schooling | Open Schooling is an open, curious, welcoming, democratic environment which supports the development of innovative and creative projects and educational activities. It is an environment which will facilitate the process for envisioning, managing and monitoring change in school settings by providing a simple and flexible structure to follow, so school leaders and teachers can innovate in a way that's appropriate for school local needs. |

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| | It provides innovative ways to explore the world: not simply to automate processes but to inspire, to engage, and to connect (Sotitiou & Cherouvis, 2020) |
| Intrinsic motivation | Intrinsic motivation is defined as the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfaction rather than for some separable consequence. When intrinsically motivated, a person is moved to act for the fun or challenge entailed rather than because of external products, pressures, or rewards. |
| Clubs | Also called atelier, workshops or circles, these are activities co-decided by students of democratic schools. These activities have normally a weekly recurrence and can be led by any member of the school (children or adults) or by external interveners. |
| School Meetings | School meeting are often also called assemblies or councils. These are the most important forum in democratic education schools where decisions are taken. The decision-making methods vary, and the areas of decisions also can change from one school to another. |
| Sociocracy | Sociocracy is a theory of governance that seeks to create psychologically safe environments and productive organizations. It draws on the use of consent, rather than majority voting, in discussion and decision-making by people who have a shared goal or work process. In education, sociocracy is used by several democratic schools as a style of internal governance. |

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