

What is Democratic Education?

In a society based on **participation, empowerment, and democracy**, shouldn't education be **participatory, empowering, and democratic**?

The United States of America is founded on democracy and the democratic values of meaningful participation, personal initiative, and equality and justice for all.

Democratic education infuses the learning process with these fundamental values of our society. Democratic education sees young people not as passive recipients of knowledge, but rather as active co-creators of their own learning. They are not the products of an education system, but rather valued participants in a vibrant learning community.

Democratic education begins with the premise that everyone is unique, so each of us learns in a different way. By supporting the individual development of each young person within a caring community, democratic education helps young people learn about themselves, engage with the world around them, and become positive and contributing members of society.

Uniting democratic values with the educational process is not a new idea. Over the last 120 years, leading thinkers from John Dewey to Marian Wright Edelman and Margaret Mead to Paulo Freire have articulated the basic hypothesis that:

If living in democratic societies committed to human rights creates well-being,
AND
If people learn primarily based on the people and environment that surrounds them,
AND
If culture is transmitted from one generation to another,
THEN
We need to create environments where people of all ages, especially youth, are immersed in the values, practices, and beliefs of democratic societies and human rights.

What Does Democratic Education Look Like?

Guided by this vision, democratic education can take countless forms, each shaped by the adults and young people in a community or educational setting. Here are a few ways in which democratic education is practiced by teachers, young people, schools, programs, and communities (follow the links for specific examples):

- Teachers creatively engaging students. They may work within more conventional school settings, but still provide students with a chance to have choice in their learning. These teachers go beyond the conventional curriculum to build a more relevant and [engaging experience](#) that connects to the lives of young people.
- Schools implementing democratic education on a day-to-day basis. They may employ practices like self-directing learning, shared decision-making, individualized project-based work, and student-chosen internships in the community. This includes schools that use the label "[democratic schools](#)" and others that [practice](#) these [values](#) and use other terminology.
- Meaningful youth voice forums providing students with the opportunity to be part of educational planning and decision-making such as through student councils and student-teacher-administrator committees.
- Young people leading [reform efforts](#) in their schools and [communities](#).

- Cities and school districts undertaking broad educational reform efforts to personalize learning, break out of the conventional structures and curriculum, and build an [“education city”](#).
- Non-profit and [after-school programs](#) empowering young people to explore their personal interests and connect to the outside community.
- College and university [programs](#) engaging young adults in the development of their own learning plans and in community decision-making. Also, teacher education programs focusing on preparing teachers for [democratic](#) and progressive education.
- Parents and youth learning out of school through empowering [learning centers](#) and youth centers.
- Policy groups such as youth advisory councils that are involving young people in policy discussions with legislators, governors, and mayors.

What’s the common denominator in all these examples?

The commitment to go outside the box of standardized one-size-fits-all education, so that young people are enthusiastic, active learners.

Democratic education is both a means and an end in itself. In the long-term, it helps develop well-informed citizens who work toward creating a democratic, vibrant, and just society. In the immediate term, it nurtures self-determined and caring individuals who enjoy learning for the sake of it.

Learning in an engaging and participatory environment is not just for the privileged few. Because equality and justice are at its core, democratic education must be available to all young people and their families. In addition, the educational process itself ought to in-still young people with the skills and critical thinking they need to build a more equitable and socially just society.

Why Democratic Education?

While it sounds like common sense for a democratic society to base its educational approach on democratic values, a great deal of research lends further support to democratic education.

Studies show that educational environments engaging young people as active participants in their own learning are linked with higher student attendance and student achievement, greater creativity and conceptual learning, and increased intrinsic motivation and determination in learning. Moreover, recent brain and cognitive research points to the value of the democratic education learning environment, including key elements such as collaborative projects, age mixing, learning through active experiences, and the importance of a caring community.

Yet democratic education is important not only for the benefit to the young people who experience such a learning environment. Democratic education also carries the potential for a broader societal impact, as the self-determined and caring individuals who experience democratic education will be the leaders in building a more democratic, vibrant, and just society.

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**See, for example:*

- Caine, R. N. et al (2008). *12 Brain/Mind learning principles in action: Developing executive functions of the human brain*. California: Corwin Press.
- Gray, P. & Feldman, J. (2004). Playing in the Zone of Proximal Development: Qualities of self-directed age mixing between adolescents and young children at a democratic school. *American Journal of Education*, 108-145.
- Self-Determination Theory (<http://www.psych.rochester.edu/SDT>), for example, Ryan, R. M. & Deci, E. L. (2000); Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: Classic definitions and new directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25: 54-67.
- Kohn, A. (1993). Choices for children: Why and how to let students decide. *Phi Delta Kappan*. (see text for specific references to research studies).