

Schools as Spaces of Democracy: How Participation Contributes to a Democratic School Culture

Participation is a cornerstone of democratic education. However, not every participation process automatically fosters democratic learning or contributes to a democratic school culture. Using the example of the program "Your Vision Schule NRW", this article explores the conditions necessary for participation processes to strengthen democratic school cultures and contribute to political education.

The Participation Program: Your Vision Schule NRW

"How do students envision school as a good place to live, learn and participate? ". This question is being addressed by the Ministry of Schools and Education in North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany) and the German Children and Youth Foundation (DKJS) in the participatory program "Your Vision Schule NRW - Young Participation for the School of Tomorrow". In a comprehensive participation process throughout North Rhine-Westphalia, students in secondary schools develop and express their perspectives, ideas, and visions for the school of tomorrow.

Participating schools receive **creative materials and interactive exercises** that help students explore their schools, develop and discuss new ideas, and formulate their own visions. The methods used are diverse and adaptable to different school contexts. Throughout the participation process, **teachers support and accompany the students**.

Additionally, **25 selected schools receive in-depth workshops and project budgets** of €1,000, enabling students to implement their own initiatives. The topics of these workshops and projects are tailored to the interests and needs of the students. Through these projects, students experience self-efficacy, take on responsibility, and engage with topics they find meaningful. This hands-on approach helps them develop key democratic competencies such as self-organization, cooperative project development, and problem-solving. Project-based learning creates a direct link between participation and democratic education.

The program also includes **online formats that facilitate exchange and knowledge-sharing across schools, providing impulses** for promoting participation and democratic education.

A highlight of the program is a **major dialogue event in the NRW state parliament**, where up to 200 students discuss their ideas and perspectives with decision-makers in education administration. This event provides a platform for relevant decision-makers to listen to students and engage with them as experts. The results of these discussions are carefully documented, processed and publicly communicated.

On this basis, the program offers **transfer formats at school, regional, and state levels**, helping to identify possible approaches of action.

Participation as a Catalyst for a Democratic School Culture

The various measures within "Your Vision Schule NRW" aim to strengthen participation structures in schools across NRW and contribute to a democratic school culture.

Participation is a fundamental experience through which children and young people learn to express their opinions, negotiate different perspectives, handle conflicts, and develop a sense of agency. In this sense, participation is a democratic practice that transforms schools into spaces where democracy is actively experienced.

Schools, as "spaces of democracy," have the potential to make democratic principles, negotiation processes, and decision-making tangible for students. If students experience that their voices are heard and taken seriously, they can develop trust in democratic structures.

For participation processes to genuinely contribute to a democratic school culture, the following aspects are crucial:

- **Systematic and Binding Integration:** Beyond one-time projects and everyday participation opportunities, democratic school culture requires systematic and binding integration of participation into school decision-making processes. Existing forms of student co-determination should be strengthened, ensuring their effectiveness and impact.
- **Negotiation and Plurality:** Participation processes should include negotiation, compromise, and the consideration of diverse perspectives, interests, and values. A democratic school culture requires a safe, trust-based exchange where different viewpoints are acknowledged and constructively addressed.
- **Transparency and Commitment:** Students must be informed from the outset about the goals of the participation process. They need clarity on what they can influence, the limits of their influence, and timely feedback on how their ideas are being considered. They should also understand why certain ideas could not or only partially be implemented, as this too is valuable information for their learning and engagement.
- **Resources and Support:** Effective participation requires reliable conditions such as time, knowledge, financial resources, and structured support. Additionally, facilitators play a key role in creating a conducive environment for participation, helping students develop necessary competencies, express their opinions, and connect with existing participation structures.
- **A Participatory Mindset and Power-Sharing:** Teachers, school administrators, and educational professionals must be willing to reflect on their own power and share power and responsibility with students. Participation requires openness to new perspectives, as well as courage and a willingness to relinquish control. Successful participation projects have the potential to strengthen trust in participation processes and reinforce a participatory mindset.
- **Inclusion and a Critical Awareness of Discrimination:** A democratic school must acknowledge and address inequalities, ensuring equal access for all students, regardless of factors such as background, gender, disability, or socio-economic status. Participation structures and methods should be designed to remove barriers and prevent exclusion.

These key aspects can be intentionally reflected upon in the implementation of participation projects to consciously foster their contribution to a democratic school culture.

In a time of increasing inequalities and calls for democratic resilience, schools play a crucial role in fostering democratic values and practices. Participation programs like "Your Vision School NRW" can serve as a catalyst for strengthening a democratic school culture - one in which democracy and its values are not only taught but actively lived.

About the German Children and Youth Foundation

The German Children and Youth Foundation (Deutsche Kinder- und Jugendstiftung, DKJS) is dedicated to promoting education and equal opportunities for young people in Germany. The DKJS advocates for a diverse and inclusive society where all young people have the opportunity to reach their full potential. With its programs and projects, the DKJS initiates change processes together with partners from education, science, politics and civil society.

Website: www.dkjs.de

More about "Your Vision Schule NRW":

www.yourvision-nrw.de

Contact

Laura Sahm

Your Vision Schule NRW – Junge Beteiligung für die Schule von morgen

Deutsche Kinder- und Jugendstiftung GmbH

yourvision.nrw@dkjs.de

#participation #democratic school culture #education for democracy

#yourvisionschulenrw #dkjs