

A PROTECTED DEMOCRACY IS A PRACTICED ONE

How children's participation in school can strengthen democracy in the EU



Democracy in the EU : challenges and realities

"The list of challenges faced by European democracy is a long one." The leftovers from the 2008 economic crisis and the covid-19 crisis, growing public discontent over inequalities, the rise of populist and euro-skeptic movements across the EU, an increased power of the far-right in the European Parliament, geopolitical conflicts at its borders and disinformation are just a few challenges the European Democracy now faces. In response, **only 55% of EU citizens are confident about the strength of the EU in the next five years.**¹ To these challenges the EU has responded with the announcement of a European Democracy Shield "to address the most severe risks to democracy in the EU" and promoted democratic knowledge through its Jean Monnet Learning EU initiatives.



We need a preventive approach to democracy

Yet, today, **more than half of EU citizens** (51%) express dissatisfaction about the state of democracy in the EU² and **55% of the new generations** say they don't understand its functioning.³

This is in part due to the reactive approach endorsed by the EU to defend its democracy, managing short-term threats to the detriment of a long-term preventive approach. To be strengthened, democracy needs to be considered in the long-term. **We need to bring back democracy in all spheres of society, starting from school, and invest in education systems protecting democracy in the long-term.**



Democracy in schools across the EU

Today, education systems across the EU do not reflect EU values of democracy, human rights and equality as defined by EU treaties. For most part, children do not have a say on what they learn, how they learn it or evaluate it, which goes against their right to having a say in every matter affecting their life (UN Convention on the rights of the child,⁴ art.12). If children's voices are not accounted for, then the quality of European education is at risk. Indeed, today, **Only 14% of children** believe that what they are learning at school is useful for their future.⁵

If children learn about the EU, or democracy, they do so through passive learning. But democracy is like a muscle, **it must be practised every day.**



Practising democracy at school

Today, **70% of EU children ask for more opportunities to participate** in decision-making, and 44% want to learn how to do so,⁶ including at school. A participative and democratic education has proved itself efficient. In a 2021 Flash Eurobarometer, $\frac{2}{3}$ of the youth involved declared that **actively participating increased their knowledge of the EU**, and over half stated that it made them feel **more positive about the EU**; about their capacity to contribute and influence public debates.⁷ Additionally, research has shown that the active participation of learners in the decision-making of their schools contributes to their overall **well-being and health outcomes**.⁸



Children's participation : a democratic benefit

Children's meaningful participation in decision-making at school, and more broadly in society, also contributes to strengthening European democracy, as children **develop an active citizenship**, reinforced civic behaviours, knowledge and appreciation about their rights and the EU. As shown by the OECD, children's participation in decision-making processes also contributes to society, by establishing a **culture of respect and dialogue**, replicated throughout generations. It also **embeds trust between governments and their citizens**.⁹



THE COST OF DEMOCRACY DEFICITS AT SCHOOL

A political cost

Children growing up in undemocratic schooling systems, where they cannot voice their needs nor participate concretely in the governance of their school, integrate the idea that their voice does not matter.¹⁰ This explains that **less than 40%¹¹ eligible youth voted** in the 2024 EU elections, despite being described in some EU countries as more pro-European.¹² This poses a strong **problem of democratic legitimacy** for the EU, and leaves space for political extremisms to rise.¹³

An environmental & mental health cost

Today, children **do not learn how to develop their agency** or become an active citizen at school. When problems arise, such as climate change or inequalities, they can feel powerless, depriving society from key actors in finding solutions to global and local challenges. In turn, young Europeans' resilience to change suffers, feeding an EU-wide mental health crisis.¹⁴ **Nearly half of children** in the EU say that involving them in finding solutions would help their mental health.¹⁵

A societal cost

In undemocratic school systems, children learn that spaces for power are limited, rather than shared equally between people, leading them to endorse a competitive mindset rather than a cooperative one. Doing so, they **replicate inequalities instead of questioning them**. This later affects cooperation at the EU-level, between decision-makers and with citizens.



Dissonance between policies in the EU and children's needs

The lack of children's participation goes beyond the school level. Children's needs are not considered transversally throughout national and EU policies, as reveals the lack of child-sensitive policy assessments, the insufficient data on children or the divisions of national priorities and budget. **Education and Mental health, seen by children as the key priorities**¹⁶ that should be addressed by the EU, are often subject to cuts on budgets that are already insufficient. Indeed, The average government expenditure in the EU for pre-primary, primary and secondary education lies at only **3.3% of GDP**¹⁷



Democratic education : a solution

The Democratic Education Philosophy can serve as a powerful tool to strengthen democracy in the long-term. By involving children in democratic community processes and self-directed learning, in which they contribute on an equal footing with teachers, to the governance of their school and their learning pathways, the democratic education philosophy fosters children's agency as well as the adoption of citizenship skills. Children learn to actively listen, cooperate, voice their needs and practise their rights on a daily basis. Doing so, they grow with the idea that in the classroom, and beyond, both their voice and engagement matter.

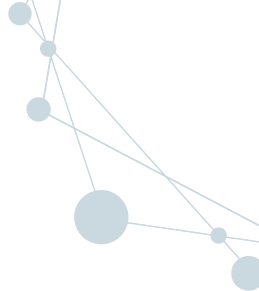
Allowing children to practise democracy daily can thus allow them to develop a strong attachment to EU values and the protection of democracy in the EU. This starts at the school level, and can be established in any educational context by adopting this set of practices.



1. [Flash Eurobarometer 550 "Challenges and priorities in the EU"](#).
2. [Eurobarometer Survey on Democracy December 2023](#)
3. [Flash Eurobarometer European Parliament Youth Survey](#).
4. [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)
5. [Our right our future, The Europe we want report](#)
6. [Our right our future, The Europe we want report](#)
7. [Flash Eurobarometer European Parliament Youth Survey](#).
8. John-Akinola, Y.O., Nic-Gabhainn, S. Children's participation in school: a cross-sectional study of the relationship between school environments, participation and health and well-being outcomes. BMC Public Health 14, 964 (2014)
9. Gottschalk, F. et H. Borhan (2023), « Child participation in decision making : Implications for education and beyond », Documents de travail de l'OCDE sur l'éducation, n° 301, Éditions OCDE, Paris
10. [The Europe Kids Want Report 2019](#)
11. [Youth turnout in the 2024 European elections: a closer look at the under-25 vote](#), Foundation for European Progressive Studies
12. [The Youth Vote How Young Europeans could Shape Europe's Future](#), GlobalEurope.eu
13. [Youth and the populist wave](#), Philosophy and Social Criticism, 2019, Vol. 45(9-10), 1013-24
14. [Alarming' surge in mental ill health among young people in face of 'unprecedented' challenges, experts warn](#), The Guardian, August 2024
15. [Our right our future, The Europe we want report](#)
16. [Our right our future, The Europe we want report](#)
17. [Government expenditure on education](#), Eurostat



RECOMMENDATIONS



What can you do at the EU level?

- Advocate for a preventive approach to protecting democracy, with education at its core
- Ensure that the European Democracy Shield starts from children's participation at school
- Transform Jean Monnet Learning EU initiatives to include more children participation and self-directed learning
- Promote the Democratic Education Philosophy across the EU
- Spread the 50 practices of democratic education in public education systems
- Train elected representatives to children's rights
- Promote child-sensitive assessments for all European policies
- Follow and spread children's recommendations as listed in the Our right our future, The Europe we want report
- Support and fund schools proposing an education based on the democratic education philosophy

What can you do at the national level?

- Gather national resources to establish democracy at school
- Promote the Democratic Education Philosophy across your national education systems
- Spread the 50 practices of democratic education in public education systems
- Follow and spread children's recommendations as listed in the Our right our future, The Europe we want report
- Spread the link between education and democracy in the public discourse
- Promote child-sensitive assessments for national policies
- Train elected representatives to children's rights
- Support and fund schools proposing an education based on the democratic education philosophy



QUALITY EDUCATION IN EUROPE
FOR SUSTAINABLE SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION