



A Sustainable Democratic School Culture

through the Integration of Needs Orientation,
Participation and Competence Development

Background Knowledge



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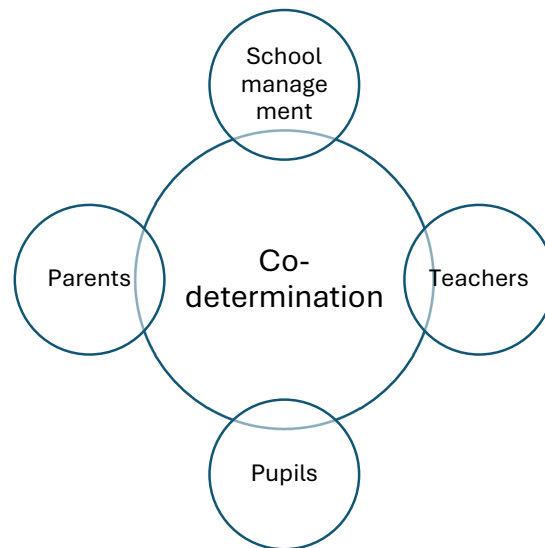
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Table of contents

Introduction: Democracy education as a core task of schools	3
The three cogwheels of a democratic school culture.....	4
<i>Needs orientation according to William Glasser</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>True participation according to Sherry Arnstein</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Competence development according to the RFCDC model.....</i>	<i>7</i>
Interlocking models: the path to a sustainable democratic school culture	10
Practical implementation in the school community: roles and contributions	14
<i>The role of the school management</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>The role of teachers</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>The role of the pupils</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>The role of parents.....</i>	<i>20</i>
How the coACTION project implements this integrative approach	23
Summary.....	24
Bibliography	25

Introduction: Democracy education as a core task of schools

Democracy education in elementary school involves much more than teaching purely factual knowledge about elections or political systems. It is a fundamental task that aims to enable all those involved - pupils, teachers, school administrators and parents - to have a real say in the process.



A central goal of school education is to enable people to competently assess social issues and actively stand up for freedom, democracy and human rights. Schools should therefore not only be places of learning, but rather living democratic spaces of experience in which democratic values and norms are not only taught, but also lived, exemplified and learned.

How can this approach be taken into account in school development?

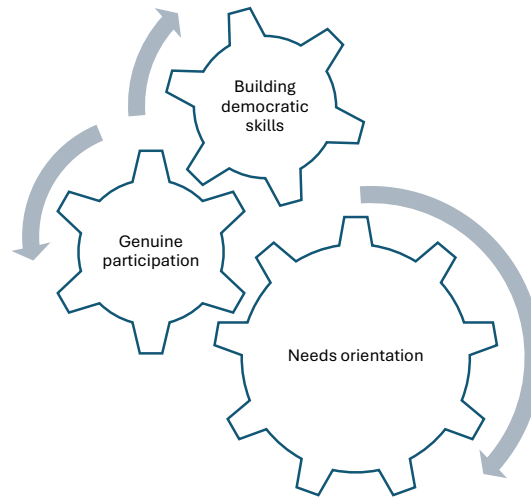
We would like to begin with the following assertion as an answer:

👉 A sustainable democratic school culture can only emerge if schools combine three crucial dimensions: Needs orientation, genuine participation and competence building.

This assertion may seem bold at first glance, but the following explanations will prove it. Specifically, we want to show how William Glasser's basic psychological needs, Sherry Arnstein's ladder of participation and the Council of Europe's Reference Framework for Democratic Competences (RFCDC) interlock. In our opinion, this interplay forms the foundation for developing deeply rooted democratic competencies in schools, enabling people - children and adults alike - to take responsibility, cooperate with others and actively stand up for democratic values.

The three cogwheels of a democratic school culture

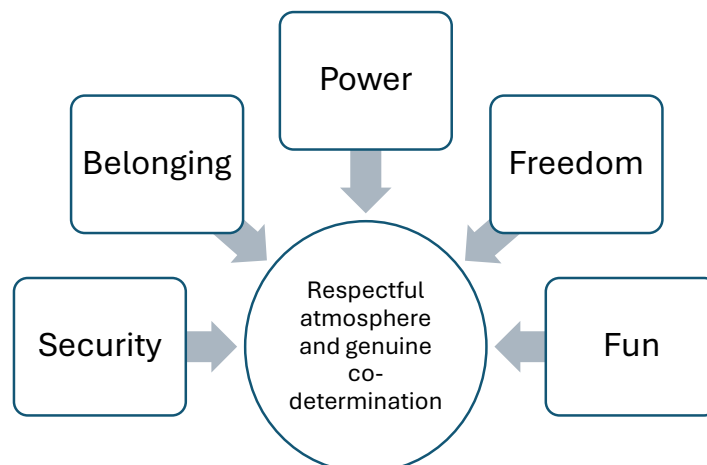
This section sets out the theoretical foundations of the three key concepts that are essential for the development of a sustainable democratic school culture.



Needs orientation according to William Glasser


In his choice theory, William Glasser describes five universal basic psychological needs: Survival/Security, Belonging/Love, Power/Recognition, Freedom and Fun. These needs are the primary motivators of human action; every person constantly strives to fulfill them.

In a democratic school, the fulfillment of these five needs is of central importance for all groups - pupils, teachers, school management and parents. When safety, belonging, recognition, freedom and fun are actually lived in everyday school life, a climate of respect and genuine co-determination is created.



This enables democracy to be perceived not only as an abstract subject in the classroom, but also as a concrete everyday experience. Such an environment promotes not only cognitive but also profound social-emotional learning processes, from which the entire school community benefits.

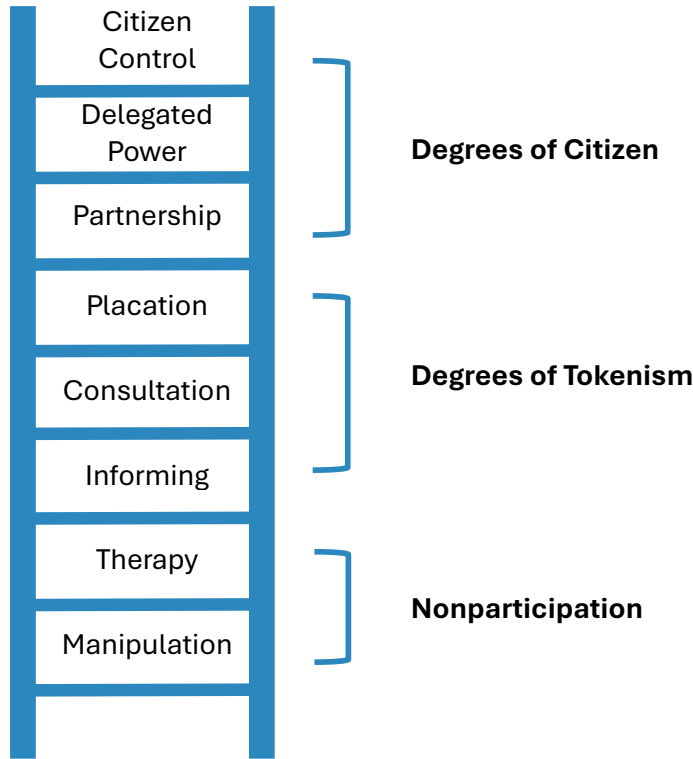
Basic psychological needs form the foundation for emotional access to democratic values, attitudes, skills and critical knowledge. If these basic needs remain unmet, especially in terms of safety or belonging, people are limited in their ability to engage in higher cognitive or social learning processes. Democracy education can then remain merely superficial, as it can be taught in theory but not deeply internalized.

 **The fulfillment of these needs is therefore a necessary prerequisite for democratic education to go beyond pure knowledge and lead to an emotional attachment to democratic principles.**

True participation according to Sherry Arnstein

As early as 1969, Sherry Arnstein developed her pioneering model “A Ladder of Citizen Participation” , which draws a clear distinction between genuine participation in decision-making and merely symbolic participation. Her model divides participation into three main areas: Non-participation, Bogus Participation (Tokenism) and Genuine Participation. The higher the level on this ladder, the greater the actual influence of those affected.

The participation ladder can serve as an important diagnostic tool for your school to assess the authenticity of participation processes. It illustrates that a sustainable democratic culture cannot emerge without a conscious effort to transfer power and shift institutional power dynamics.




In the school context, Arnstein's stages can be described as follows:

The participation ladder according to Sherry Arnstein and school examples

Participation level		Description of the level	Practical example from school
Nonparticipation	1. Manipulation	Decisions are made from above; those involved are supposed to agree or be "educated".	An "advisory body" is set up that has no real decision-making power.
	2. Therapy	Participation is feigned, in reality it is about conformity or control.	Information events are used for PR, not for co-determination; problems of the school community are treated as individual "deficits".
Tokenism	3. Informing	One-sided dissemination of information without feedback or consultation.	School management informs about new school rules without the school community having any influence on their design.

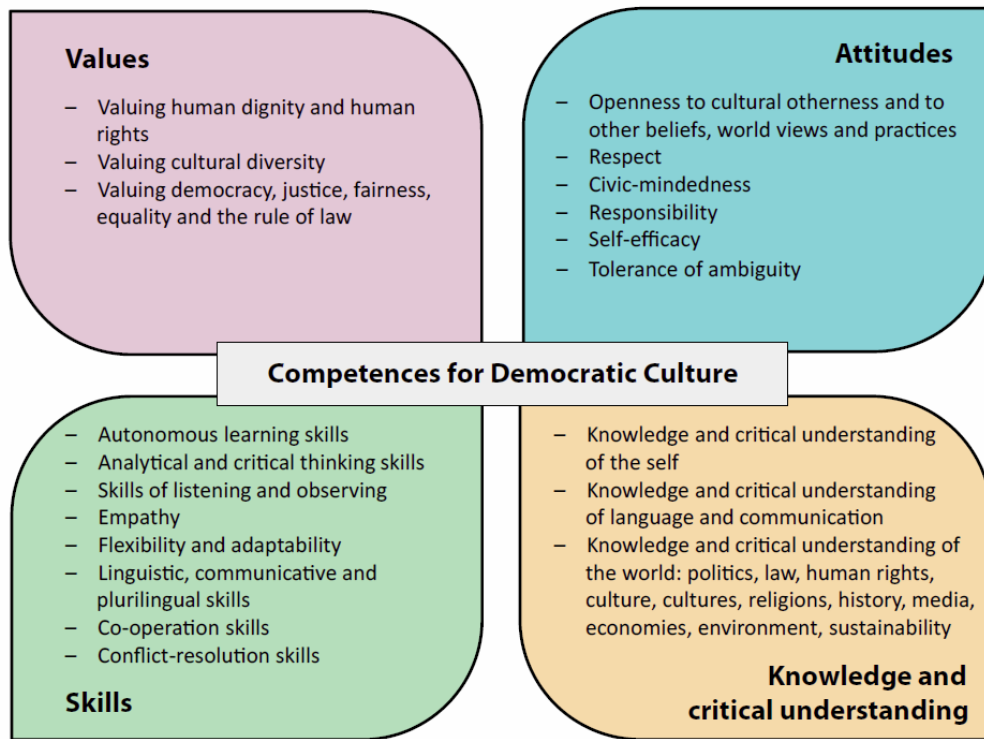
	4. Consultation	Surveys or opinion polls with no effect on decisions.	Survey of pupils on new break rules - but the school management decides alone.
	5. Placation	Representatives of those affected are on committees but have no real voting rights.	Some "representative" parents or teachers sit on committees and are allowed to advise, but the final decision remains with the school management.
Citizen Participation	6. Partnership	Decision-making processes are designed jointly; genuine negotiation at eye level.	A school development team made up of parents, teachers and pupils makes joint decisions on learning projects, room design and the school profile.
	7. Delegated Power	Committees of stakeholders have decision-making powers.	Responsibility for sub-areas (e.g. budget allocation or room design) is handed over to committees with equal representation.
	8. Citizen Control	Decision-making power lies entirely with those affected, e.g. for specific projects or programs.	Parent or pupil initiatives independently manage projects such as all-day programs or school projects; the school community manages programs entirely on its own.

 **With Arnstein's participation ladder, you have a framework for action for your school in which basic psychological needs can be met and democratic skills can be developed. Without real opportunities to exert influence, opportunities for participation remain merely "empty rituals" .**

Competence development according to the RFCDC model

The RFCDC (Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture) is a model developed by the Council of Europe that describes the competences that young people need to be able to actively participate in a democratic, diverse and peaceful society. It is not a rigid curriculum, but a competency framework that supports schools in putting democratic education into practice in everyday life. Its

particular suitability for elementary school lies in the fact that it is not based on abstract knowledge, but on lived experience.



Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture

The RFCDC comprises 20 sub-competencies, which are divided into four overarching areas:

Values - What I consider important and right:

Values are general beliefs, e.g. respect for human dignity or justice, that serve as guiding principles.

Attitudes - How I feel about the world and other people:

Attitudes describe the inner attitude, such as respect or openness, with which one encounters democracy.

Skills - What I can do practically:

Skills include abilities such as listening, arguing or conflict resolution.

Knowledge & critical understanding - What I know and how I reflect on it:

Knowledge and critical understanding means, for example, knowledge of democratic processes and the ability to critically question and reflect on them.

In practice, this means:

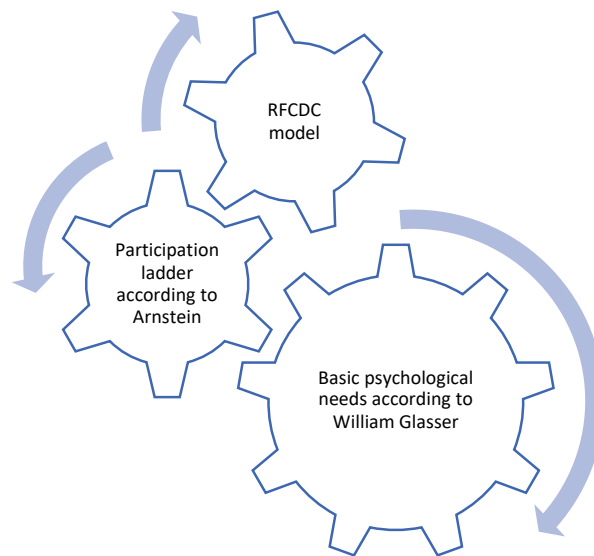
You as school management and teachers, together with your pupils and parents, shape the RFCDC model as the heart of your democratic school culture: the focus on “lived experience” is crucial here. It implies that purely cognitive approaches to civic education are insufficient to develop authentic democratic competencies.



Use these findings to develop new formats and projects together. In this way, you can link the RFCDC objectives with participation at all levels and permanently anchor democratic skills in your school culture.

Interlocking models: the path to a sustainable democratic school culture

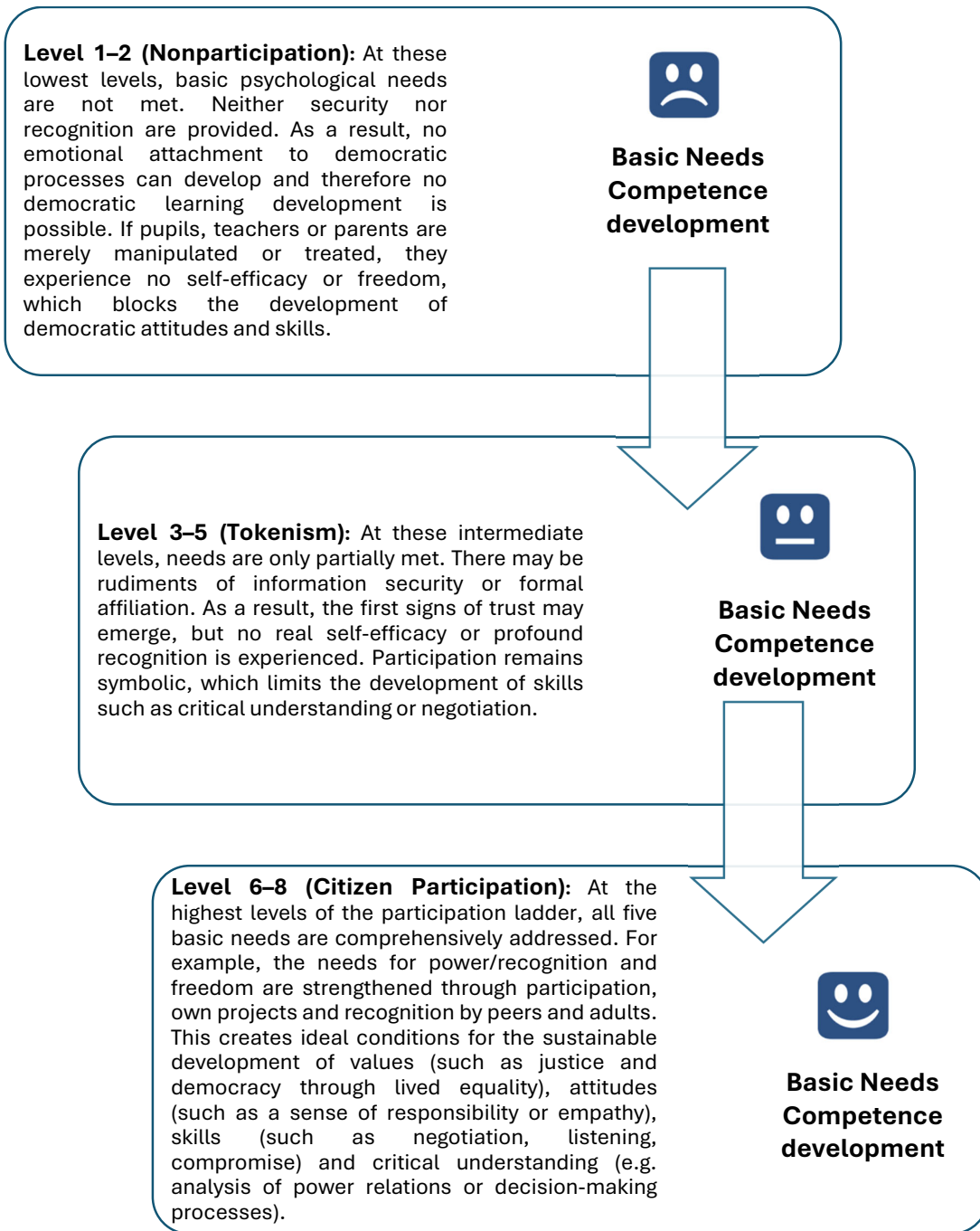
The heart of a sustainable democratic school culture lies in the systemic interplay of the three models presented. The basic psychological needs according to Glasser, the participation ladder according to Arnstein and the RFCDC model interlock like cogwheels.



This interaction is not linear, but characterized by mutual dependence and reinforcement. Progress in one area can drive progress in other areas, while a deficit in one area can hinder the development of others. A holistic, integrated strategy is therefore not merely additive, but multiplies its effect on democratic culture.

The fulfillment of basic psychological needs is the inevitable prerequisite for emotional access to democratic values, attitudes, skills and critical knowledge. Without a sense of security, belonging, recognition, freedom and joy, democratic competencies cannot be deeply internalized; they then remain on the surface and are only theoretically conveyed. For example, if a child feels insecure or does not have a feeling of belonging, they will have difficulties developing empathy or actively participating.

Arnstein's participation ladder describes the pedagogical structures in which these needs can be met and skills can be developed. The level of participation has a direct influence on the satisfaction of needs and the development of skills:



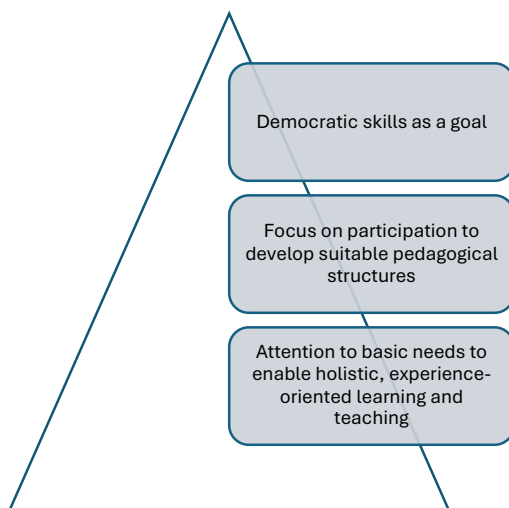
Finally, the RFCDC model describes the target system: a person with deeply rooted democratic skills who takes responsibility, cooperates with others and stands up for democratic values. The realization of this goal is inextricably linked to the satisfaction of basic needs and the facilitation of genuine participation. When needs are met, learners are emotionally accessible to democratic values. When participation is genuine, it provides the concrete structures in which these needs can be met and skills can be built.

Basic need	Significance for school and democratic competence (influence on RFCDC competencies)
Survival/Safety	Emotional stability is a prerequisite for learning ability and openness. A sense of security enables the internalization of responsibility and respect.
Belonging/Love	Promotes empathic attitudes, cooperation and values such as solidarity. A strong sense of togetherness is the basis for collaborative action.
Power/Recognition	Motivates active participation, strengthens self-efficacy and commitment. Those who feel recognized are more likely to develop responsible attitudes and a positive self-image.
Freedom	Creates space for decision-making, a sense of responsibility and innovation. Democratic skills such as critical thinking can only be developed sustainably if there is autonomy and trust.
Fun	Promotes motivation, creative forms of expression and playful, social learning. Enjoying working together supports a positive attitude towards the school community.

This table illustrates the direct causal link between people's psychological well-being and their ability to develop democratic competencies. It shows how the satisfaction of a specific need contributes to a concrete aspect of democratic competence.

This understanding is invaluable for you as educators, as it emphasizes the fundamental importance of emotional and psychological support in democratic education and goes beyond purely didactic approaches.

In a nutshell, this means:



- The **RFCDC model** describes the **target system**: people with deeply rooted democratic skills who take responsibility, cooperate with others and stand up for democratic values.
- **Arnstein's participation ladder** describes the **pedagogical structures** in which these needs can be met and skills built up.
- The fulfillment of **basic psychological needs** is the **prerequisite for emotional access to democratic values, attitudes, skills and critical knowledge**.

How can this be achieved?

In the following, we want to show how these four areas of competence can be developed throughout the school community.

Sherry Arnstein's participation ladder illustrates which forms of participation are really genuine.

Through active participation, William Glasser's five basic needs (safety, belonging, power/recognition, freedom, fun) are also fulfilled. This gradually creates a culture at all levels of the school community in which democratic action is a matter of course.

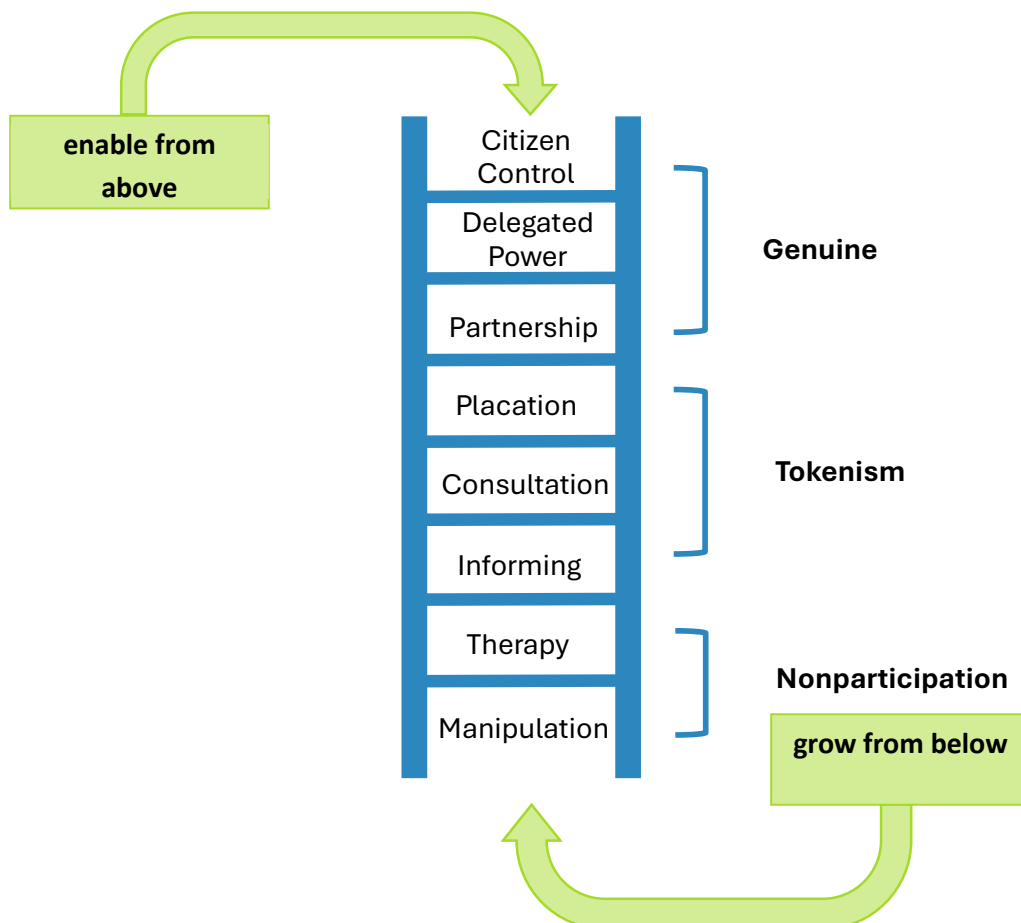
Practical implementation in the school community: roles and contributions

The integration of needs orientation, participation and competence building must be practiced in everyday school life through the active involvement of all groups of actors. Each group makes a specific contribution to climbing the participation ladder and fulfilling Glasser's basic needs.

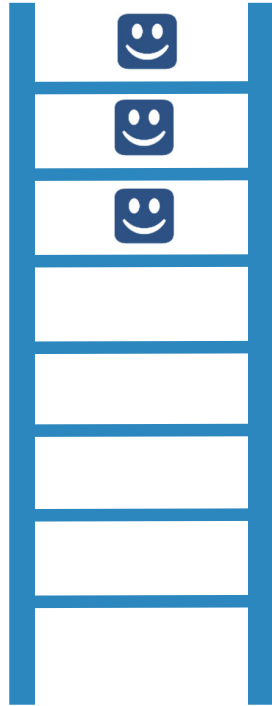
The role of the school management

The school management is the decisive authority for shaping the institutional framework and promoting an open school culture. They play a decisive role in determining the level of participation in the school - whether symbolic or power-sharing. Their willingness to relinquish control and delegate decision-making powers is a direct indicator of how high up Arnstein's ladder the school can climb.

👉 For you as school management, this means that a democratic school culture cannot only grow from the bottom up, but also requires strong commitment and structural facilitation from above.



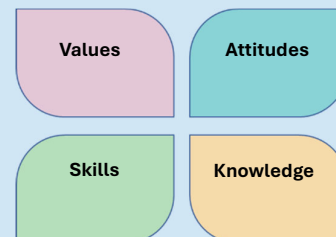
Implementation at Arnstein levels 6-8: The school management can specifically promote structures of genuine co-determination:




- **Partnership (level 6):** This can be done by forming a permanent school development team in which parents, teachers and pupils are equally represented. Decisions are made jointly, for example on timetable structure or project design. A similar example is the establishment of a steering group with representatives from all groups, which meets regularly to make joint decisions on school projects, timetables or break times.
- **Delegated Power (level 7):** Responsibility for sub-areas, such as budget allocation or room design, is handed over to committees with equal representation. This can also mean transferring the majority of decision-making powers for certain areas to committees in which members of the school community make up the majority.
- **Citizen control (level 8):** Parent or pupil initiatives independently manage projects such as all-day programs or school projects. This requires a high degree of trust and the willingness of the school management to transfer the management of a program completely to those involved.

Contribution to competence building

Through these forms of genuine participation, the school management conveys **democratic values** such as **equality**, promotes **attitudes** such as **openness** and **trust** and enables the development of **skills** such as **negotiation** and **teamwork**. At the same time, a **critical understanding** of **school policy processes** and **decisions** is developed. All participants gain **knowledge** about **democratic processes**, such as **school participation laws** or **committee processes**, and learn to critically assess the importance of their voices.




Contribution of the school management to the fulfilment of Glasser's needs	
Basic Need	Contribution of the school management
Security	Clear processes, transparent communication, crisis teams, emergency plans, joint solutions in crises.
Belonging	Joint events, collegial cooperation, regular reflection rounds, promotion of a sense of unity among colleagues.
Power / recognition	Delegation of decision-making power, taking suggestions seriously, acceptance of good ideas, professional development, enabling participation in budget decisions.
Freedom	Autonomy in pedagogical concepts, room for innovation, freedom for elective lessons or pedagogical projects.
Fun	Participatory organization of festivals, project weeks (e.g. motto weeks, colourful school festival) in which everyone is actively involved in planning.

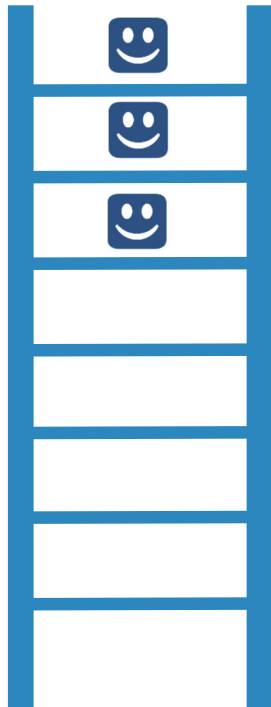
 **A democratic school management is not just administration, but a shaper of culture. It exemplifies trust and relinquishes control, in the knowledge that this is the real strength for sustainable democratic development.**

The role of teachers

Teachers are the daily companions of the pupils and are therefore crucial for the implementation of democratic educational goals. They shape the lessons and thus the children's concrete opportunities for participation. Their pedagogical decisions translate theoretical participation models directly into daily practice in the classroom.

 **For you as a teacher, this means that you must not only have specialist knowledge, but also skills in moderation, conflict resolution and power-sharing in order to truly empower pupils.**

Implementation at Arnstein levels 6-8: Teachers can establish structures of genuine participation in their daily work:



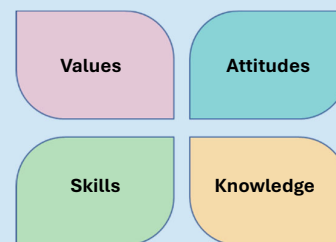
- **Partnership (level 6):** Children work actively in class councils to help shape everyday school life, for example in developing rules, resolving conflicts or choosing topics. A teacher could let the pupils freely choose the topic in science lessons and let the class vote on how they want to research it.
- **Delegated power (level 7):** Pupils themselves decide on project methods or objectives, for example in cross-curricular learning projects. In such projects, pupils present their own solutions and jointly decide on a course of action.
- **Citizen control (level 8):** Pupils' projects such as a pupil company, an environmental council or the organization of a school festival are planned and carried out independently, with teachers merely providing advice.

👉 As a teacher, you act as a moderator: you provide guidance, but leave the decisions to the children and reflect on the results with them.

Teachers also demonstrate democratic processes to each other and to the school management. For example, they can plan further training courses together or make self-determined decisions about new teaching materials in subject teams (level 6-7). By participating in subject conferences or the school conference, they practise communicating on an equal footing. In this way, they assume their own competencies (e.g. planning further training) and strengthen their recognition (power): If an initiative from the teaching staff (such as a new AG offer) appears in the school development, the teachers feel valued.

Contribution to competence building

Teachers who allow genuine participation promote democratic **values** such as **fairness** (every opinion counts) and **respect** (diversity is recognized). They strengthen **attitudes** such as **self-efficacy**, **commitment** and **responsibility**. At the same time, the children develop **skills** such as **listening**, **negotiating**, **voting** and **arguing**. They acquire **knowledge** about **democratic processes** on a small scale (e.g. how voting works) and **content knowledge** from the chosen topics.



Teachers also train **critical understanding** through **class councils** and **discussions**: The children learn to look at proposals in terms of their consequences, analyse connections and critically question compromises.

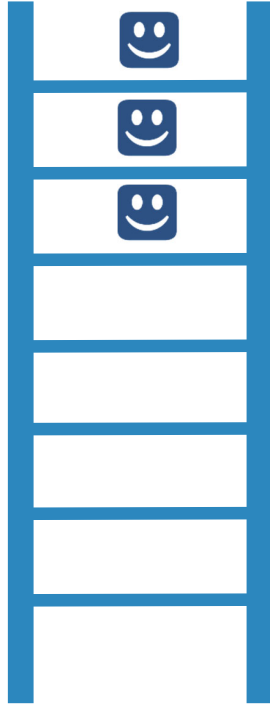
Contribution of teachers to the fulfilment of Glasser's needs	
Basic Need	Contribution by teachers
Security	Reliable rules, orderly daily structure, transparent communication, open error culture, joint problem-solving.
Belonging	Strengthening the class community through rituals, teamwork, co-design, cooperative teaching teams, democratically planned pedagogical days.
Power / recognition	Taking contributions seriously, options, feedback culture, inclusion of suggestions in school decisions, professional development.
Freedom	Open learning formats, elective topics, pupil decisions in lessons, autonomy in subjects or project ideas, introduction of own concepts in committees.
Fun	Creative methods, projects with the children's own handwriting, joint excursions, use of class representative coins or ballot boxes for voting.

 **Teachers who make participation possible not only educate people about democracy - they exemplify it.**

The role of the pupils

Children have a natural need for influence and responsibility. Elementary school offers many opportunities to enable real participation in the sense of Sherry Arnstein - beyond mere sham participation. When pupils are actually allowed to have a say, they experience that their opinion counts and that they can actively help shape their school.

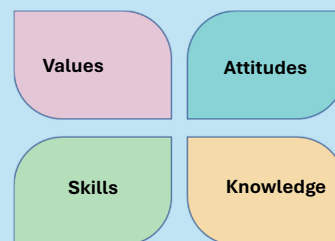
Implementation at Arnstein levels 6-8: Teachers can establish structures of genuine participation in their daily work:



- **Partnership (level 6):** The class council with decision-making powers is a central element in which pupils develop rules, resolve conflicts and help plan activities. This also includes the joint development of classroom rules or voting on excursion dates.
- **Delegated power (level 7):** Responsibility for AGs, learning methods or project design lies with the children, with teachers providing advice. An example of this is when pupils themselves decide on project methods or objectives.
- **Citizen control (level 8):** Children independently set up and run initiatives such as a school magazine, a school garden or a “break time office” for toy loans. One concrete example is the Paul Hindemith elementary school in Freiburg, where there are corridor parliaments and a school parliament in which pupils discuss issues and take responsibility. During a project week, pupils could plan a play independently, with the theme, roles, direction and performance in their own hands. Working groups or project initiatives such as a school company can also be fully or largely initiated by pupils and implemented independently.


Contribution to competence building

Genuine co-determination gives pupils the opportunity to develop key democratic skills: **Values** such as **respect** (every opinion counts), **justice** (everyone has rights) and **solidarity** (you can only move forward together). They develop **attitudes** of **courage**, **responsibility**, **commitment** and **self-confidence** because they feel that their voice counts. In the class council, they practise **skills** such as **moderation**, **teamwork**, **decision-making**, **democratic discussion** and **compromise**. At the same time, they acquire **knowledge** about how **decision-making processes** work and what rights and obligations they have as a class community. Their **critical understanding** grows through



reflection in the class council: they recognize why **rules** are needed, **analyse conflicts** together and learn to **resolve differences of opinion objectively**.

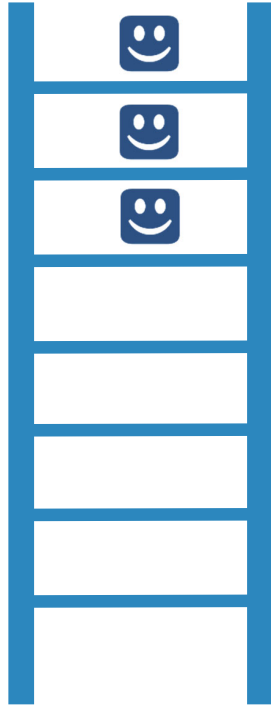
Contribution of pupils to the fulfilment of Glasser's needs	
Basic Need	Contribution through participation
Security	Participation in rules, transparent procedures, participation in safety groups (e.g. suggestions for playground design).
Belonging	Class council, school parliament, common rituals, group rituals (e.g. singing together in the school circle).
Power / recognition	Roles and tasks, suggestions taken seriously, choices in learning, implementing suggestions, taking on tasks (e.g. break supervision).
Freedom	Choice in learning, own projects, choice of topics or focal points in free work phases, self-decision about tidying up the classroom.
Fun	Participation in events, creative organization of everyday life and celebrations, planning of school festivals, theater projects or sporting events.

 **Through genuine participation, children experience directly: "My opinion counts - I help shape my school!"**

The role of parents

Parents are key partners in school life. A school that enables genuine participation opens up spaces in which parents can also assume co-responsibility - not only at information evenings, but also in the active school development process. A good school thrives on the fact that not only pupils and teachers, but also parents can contribute their ideas.

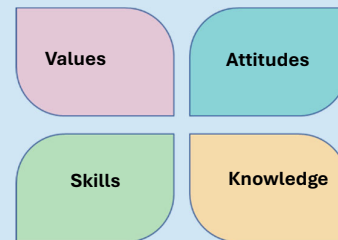
Implementation at Arnstein levels 6-8: The school management can specifically promote structures of genuine co-determination



- **Partnership (level 6):** Parent representatives are equal members of steering groups, working groups or school conferences - with voting rights. In the school conference, the highest body in the school, parents and teachers often sit together with equal rights and decide on school policies, programs or purchases.
- **Delegated power (level 7):** Parents lead working groups (e.g. on media education, school road safety) with their own decision-making mandate. At some schools, for example, working groups on school development planning are initiated by committed parents.
- **Citizen control (level 8):** Parents independently organize projects (e.g. parent café, tutoring initiatives, school festivals) and manage funds for them. An example: A parents' initiative proposes a new elective subject, plans its implementation and designs the content together with teachers - the school provides support.


Contribution to competence building

Parents not only experience school processes through genuine participation, but also learn to act democratically themselves - and at the same time strengthen their children through their example. They learn to formulate their concerns, listen and find compromises. As role models, they learn values such as respect and responsibility, show openness towards the school and promote their own attitude towards cooperation. They acquire communication and cooperation skills (for example in meetings with teachers) as well as knowledge of school law procedures and educational issues. Parents also develop a critical understanding of how school decisions are made by reflecting together with the school on what is important for their children.



Contribution of parents to the fulfilment of Glasser's needs

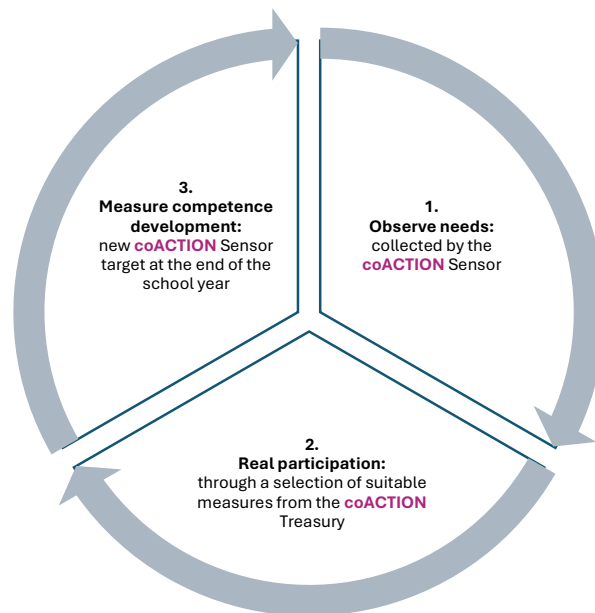
Basic Need	Contribution through participation
Security	Transparent processes, participation in decisions (e.g. school route safety working group or parent mentoring), reduction of uncertainty about education and care.
Belonging	Parents' evenings, participation in festivals, regular exchange formats, informal encounters (e.g. drinking coffee at the school festival), sense of unity through integration into the school community.
Power / recognition	Contributing and implementing own ideas, voting rights in committees (e.g. school conference), appreciation of expertise, implementation of concrete proposals (e.g. new elective subject).
Freedom	Flexible forms of participation (e.g. workshops, collaboration in project groups), taking feedback seriously, own determination in the planning of events.
Fun	Parent-child events, joint celebrations, project work, joint organization of events such as sports festivals or baking days.

 **Parents who experience genuine co-determination not only feel informed, but also like equal partners in the upbringing and education of their children.**

How the coACTION project implements this integrative approach

The **coACTION** project addresses all key school stakeholders: School management, teachers, pupils and parents - and thus pursues a holistic approach, a “whole school approach”. At the beginning of the school year, these stakeholders share their views on how they personally experience democracy at their school. Using the **coACTION** sensor, a questionnaire instrument tailored to the above-mentioned target groups of the whole school approach, a holistic picture of a school emerges that reveals both fields of action in which democratic processes can be further promoted in order to flourish, as well as those areas in which the school is already well on its way towards democracy.

Embedded in school development and quality management, this screening process ultimately serves to jointly define measures with the participation of various school stakeholders (Sherry Arnstein's participation manager!) that satisfy all the components of a sustainable democratic school culture described in this module:



Summary

This analysis has shown that the development of a sustainable democratic school culture requires an integrated and holistic approach. Democratic competencies are not developed through the mere transfer of knowledge, but through active participation at all levels of the school. Sherry Arnstein's participation ladder shows very clearly when participation is actually real and goes beyond symbolic gestures. Experience in many elementary schools proves that effective development of democratic values, attitudes, skills and critical understanding only succeeds when everyone in the school community is involved in decision-making.

According to William Glasser, the fulfillment of basic psychological needs is an essential prerequisite for emotional access to democratic values and skills. Without a feeling of security, belonging, recognition, freedom and joy, democratic principles remain abstract and cannot be deeply internalized. Arnstein's participation ladder provides the necessary framework for action and the pedagogical structures in which these needs can be met and skills systematically developed. Finally, the RFCDC model of the Council of Europe describes the clear target system: a young person who has deeply rooted democratic skills, takes responsibility, works constructively with others and actively advocates democratic values.

A school must be designed in such a way that school management, teachers, pupils and parents can work together on projects and have a say. This active cooperation fulfills Glaser's basic needs and creates a democratic school culture in which everyone involved practices democratic action and experiences it as a natural part of their everyday lives. As a “democratic experience space”, schools must enable pupils to actively live democratic and human rights values. Only through this comprehensive and genuine participation of all stakeholders can authentic democratic thinking and action be developed - a goal that goes far beyond the mere transfer of knowledge and forms the basis for active and responsible citizenship.

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→ Central source outlining the 20 democratic competences. Serves as the competency framework throughout the module.

Arnstein, S. R. (1969). *A Ladder of Citizen Participation*. Journal of the American Institute of Planners, 35(4), 216–224

→ Foundational model for evaluating genuine versus symbolic participation. Applied to describe school participation structures.



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