



The Whole School Approach as the Foundation of a Democratic School Culture in Primary Schools

Background Knowledge



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Introduction

In a democratic school, every vote counts - and it counts every day!

Children don't just learn about democracy in politics lessons - they experience it through participation in everyday life. For this to succeed, it takes more than good intentions: It requires a sustainable concept that permeates your entire school - from the playground to the classroom, from the educational conference to the parents' evening. The Whole School Approach (WSA) offers you precisely this framework.

It is not about additional projects, but about a basic attitude: your school becomes a place where everyone - children, teachers, school management and parents - can get involved and be heard. Democracy thus becomes part of everyday life.

The Whole School Approach therefore not only changes the children's everyday school life - it has an impact on everyone involved. By shaping the school together, teachers, school management and parents experience how democratic processes work in practice: how decisions are made, how compromises are reached, how different opinions are dealt with and how responsibility is taken on together.

In this way, democracy is not only taught, but lived and learnt - by everyone, for everyone. This shared experience not only forms a democratic school culture, but also strengthens the democratic competence of each individual. As a result, the school becomes a real 'training ground for democracy' where children, adults and institutions grow together.

What does “Whole School Approach” mean in concrete terms?

The WSA sees school as a communal living space. It is not enough to cover democratic content in the curriculum - the decisive factor is how everyday school life is organised. Children need spaces in which they experience that their opinions count. Teachers need support to make participation possible. And school leaders must be prepared to share power.


→ Practical example: In a primary school, a multi-professional school development team consisting of teachers, parents and children jointly decide on the use of the new digital equipment. This not only strengthens technical development - it also creates genuine participation at eye level.

The three “cogwheels” of democratic school development: needs - participation - competences

As described in the module **democratic school culture: the integration of needs-orientation, participation and competence building**, three central factors interlock like cogwheels:

- **Glasser's basic psychological needs:**
Safety, belonging, power, freedom, fun
- **Sherry Arnstein's ladder of participation:**
From sham participation to citizen control
- **Democratic competences according to the Council of Europe (RFCDC):**
z. e.g. empathy, judgement, dialogue skills, responsibility

These three levels are interdependent: children and adults can only participate if they feel safe and that they belong. Democratic competences can only develop if participation is genuine. And only when skills grow can participation be organised in a meaningful way.

 **Your task as a school leader or teacher is to create a framework in which these three areas mutually reinforce each other.**

Basic psychological needs (Glasser) - put into practice

Security, belonging, power, freedom and fun are not just individual desires - they are the basis for democratic behaviour.

Group	Practical example
School management	A transparent communication culture is established: Decisions made by the school council are explained in letters to parents, on notices in the school building and in a child-friendly manner in the class council. This increases safety and orientation for everyone.
Teachers	Children choose their own tasks or topics within the weekly timetable. They can decide with whom and how they want to work. This fulfils the need for freedom - and increases motivation.
Pupils	A ‘compliments chair’ is introduced in the classroom every week: Each child receives positive feedback from the group. This strengthens recognition and a sense of belonging.
Parents	At parents' evenings, there is an “appreciation round” : each family can say a sentence about what they like about school life.

Parents also need recognition and a sense of belonging in order to play an active role.

Participation (Arnstein) - enabling genuine co-determination

Participation is not an all-or-nothing process, but a development path. Each step on Arnstein's ladder is an invitation to reflect: How much power do I give up - and how seriously do I take participation?

Group	Practical example
School management	When planning a new school profile, the school management sets up a steering group in which teachers, parents and pupils are equally represented - level 6 (partnership).
Teachers	In the class council, children are not only allowed to discuss but also decide, e.g. on new class services or the organisation of the birthday ritual - Level 7 (Delegated Power).
Pupils	A working group of fourth graders organises its own school newspaper. Topics, design and content are entirely in the hands of the pupils - Level 8 (Citizen Control). A teacher only provides support when needed.
Parents	A parents' initiative proposes a new elective subject on the topic of "Cooking from around the world" and organises it itself. The school provides the space and materials - an example for level 8.

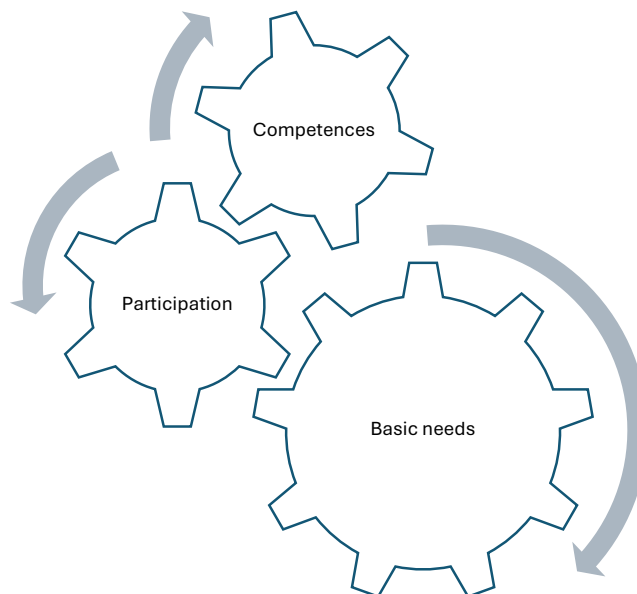
Democratic competences (RFCDC) - Democracy is learnt

Empathy, discernment, the ability to engage in dialogue and conflict resolution are not products of chance. They arise from real-life situations in which people take on responsibility, adopt different perspectives and are allowed to help shape them.

Group	Practical example
School management	The school management organises a school-wide theme week on 'Children's Rights'. All groups - including the SL - present how they experience rights and responsibility in everyday life.
Teachers	In German lessons, a debate is held on an everyday dilemma (e.g. 'Mobile phones at break time - yes or no?'). Children argue, question and weigh things up. The focus is on forming judgements and argumentation skills.

Pupils	Two pupils are trained as class council moderators. They learn how to lead discussions, allocate speaking rights and find compromises - direct training in dialogue and conflict skills.
Parents	In a workshop with parents on school development, the participants reflect on how they themselves give - and receive - feedback. Parents also learn how to conduct democratic dialogue.

Interplay of cogwheels: How schools become democracies



These three elements - **basic needs, genuine participation and competences** - work like cogwheels:

- When **basic needs** are met, people are **willing** to participate.
- When **participation** is genuine, people experience that they can have an **impact**.
- When **competences** grow, they can help shape things **responsibly**.

When one cogwheel stands still, the others turn more slowly. That's why all three need **care, attention and structure** - at all levels of the school.

Developing democracy is a joint task

Democracy in schools does not succeed through isolated projects or well-intentioned class discussions. It succeeds when all groups in the system - school management, teachers, children, parents - experience spaces in which they can help shape, develop and take responsibility.

The Whole School Approach provides the supporting framework for this.

What this means in concrete terms for your role

In the following, we take a closer look at the individual stakeholders of the Whole School Approach.

For the school management: you set the tone

A democratic culture starts with your attitude. **Are decision-making processes transparent?** Are teachers or parents allowed to say ‘no’ - and is this respected?

Question to yourself:

Does your school have a real say in lesson planning, the organisation of project days or the development of school rules?

Concrete examples:

- **Timetable as a joint project:** At a primary school in Schleswig-Holstein, the educational priorities are discussed each year together with the teaching staff and parents' representatives. The school management sets the organisational framework, but the distribution of working groups, remedial lessons or break times is determined by agreement.
- **Project weeks are organised democratically:** A school management enables the theme of the project week to be determined annually by a joint vote of pupils, teachers and parents in the school forum.
- **Transparent decisions:** Decisions of the school conference are published in a monthly ‘information notice board’ with child-friendly language in the school building. This means that even younger children understand what has been decided - and by whom.

For teachers: you are bridge builders

Don't just teach content, but enable real participation: in the **class council**, when **choosing projects**, in **conflict resolution**. Your class is a training ground for democracy.

Practical idea:

In science lessons, the children suggest topics themselves. The class votes democratically, divides into interest groups (e.g. ‘Animals in the forest’, ‘Saving water’, ‘Transport in the past and today’) and develops its own questions. The teacher acts as a facilitator, not as a director.

→ Further examples:

- **Developing class rules together:** Instead of prescribing rules, the children develop a ‘basic class law’ together with symbols, drawings and signatures.
- **Changing roles in projects:** During group work, children take on changing roles such as ‘moderator’, ‘timekeeper’ or ‘minute taker’ - real participation on a small scale.
- **Feedback to the teacher:** After a class project, children can give anonymous feedback: ‘What helped me?’, ‘What was difficult?’ - and the teacher visibly takes this feedback seriously.

For children: Democracy begins on a small scale

Pupils experience their **self-efficacy** when they are allowed to actively participate. Those who realise that their voice counts develop a **sense of responsibility, empathy** and **trust** in democratic processes.

→ Concrete examples:

- **Class representatives with real tasks:** Class representatives take part in monthly ‘corridor parliaments’, where topics such as toilet cleanliness, break equipment or requests for the meal plan are discussed and passed on.
- **Choice of focal points:** During free work or weekly lessons, children decide for themselves which topics or tasks they want to work on first. This strengthens planning skills and personal responsibility.
- **Self-organised break-time clubs:** In a Year 3 class, children independently set up a ‘reading corner club’, took on rules, supervision plans and designed posters for their classmates.

For parents: From parents' evening to co-design

Participation means more than just passing on information. Parents not only contribute expertise and perspectives, but can also take on real responsibility - if the school opens up spaces for this.

→ Concrete examples:

- **Parents as learning guides:** In a school in North Rhine-Westphalia, parents provide support in a weekly 'workshop lesson' on topics such as woodwork, first aid or sewing. They are invited, not obliged.
- **Co-decision-making at school festivals:** Instead of just handing out lists of helpers, parents are already involved in the planning phase: What do we want to organise together? How can children get involved?
- **Feedback as dialogue:** The school offers parent cafés with feedback opportunities on school development topics (e.g. room design, digitalisation). Selected concerns go directly to the school development team.

Democracy thrives on **participation, thinking and decision-making** - in all roles. The Whole School Approach does not mean: everyone participates a little. It means that everyone shapes the school together because **everyone learns from each other** what democratic behaviour really means.

Error culture: Learning also means being allowed to make mistakes - and growing from them

Making mistakes is human - and yet many schools are characterised by a 'zero-error culture' ...

Error culture in the Whole School Approach: What error-friendliness means for everyone involved

For school management: Being a role model also means admitting mistakes

As a school headmaster, you shape the culture of your school more than any vision. When you say in conferences: 'I misjudged that' or 'I've learnt something new here', you are showing strength - not weakness. You are signalling: Mistakes are normal, development is welcome.

What you can do:

- Discuss your own learning processes openly with your colleagues.
- Encourage further training to reflect on mistakes.
- Establish formats such as ‘learning cafés’ or ‘fuck-up conferences’ .
- Make it clear: the focus is on processes, not culprits.

➔ Concrete examples: Fuck-Up- conferences

This term is based on so-called ‘fuck-up events’ . Fuck-up events (also known as ‘Fuckup Nights’) are events where people - often entrepreneurs, founders, managers or creatives - talk openly about their failures and failed projects. The aim is to break the stigma of failure and promote an open culture of error.

Origin:

The first Fuckup Night took place in Mexico City in 2012, initiated by a group of young entrepreneurs who wanted to talk about their failed start-ups. Since then, the format has spread worldwide.

Characteristics of a Fuck-Up conference:

- **Open experience reports:** Speakers talk in a relaxed atmosphere about projects that didn't work out and what they learnt from them.
- **Focus on learning:** It's not about gloating, but about sharing insights.
- **Breaking taboos:** Mistakes and failures are made public - a deliberate contrast to success stories.
- **Networking & exchange:** The events encourage conversations about failure and learning in a supportive community.

Why are they important?

- **Destigmatising mistakes:** Failure is often still seen as a weakness, especially in the world of work (e.g. in start-up and innovation cultures).
- **Promoting innovation:** Those who are not afraid of making mistakes are more willing to try new things.
- **Personal growth:** Listeners can learn from the mistakes of others.

👉 **Fuck-up conferences are an important contribution to a healthy failure culture. They show that failure is a natural part of development and success - both at work and in life.**

For teachers interacting with children: Making mistakes visible as learning bridges

When teachers not only tolerate mistakes, but also systematically incorporate them, the learning atmosphere changes. Children realise: I can dare. This strengthens their self-confidence and resilience.

What you can do:

- Say explicitly: ‘Mistakes are allowed - and welcome!’
- Celebrate shared discoveries through mistakes (‘aha moments’).
- Ask: ‘What have you learnt from your mistake?’
- Work with error analyses instead of pure correction.

For teachers among themselves: collegial openness instead of a perfect façade

The pressure to have everything ‘under control’ quickly arises, especially among colleagues. A positive error culture allows you to ask questions, discuss teaching ideas or work through mistakes together - without judgement.

What you can do:

- Establish peer observation without evaluation.
- Introduce error discussions as part of educational conferences.
- Allow the team to say things like: ‘That didn't work - what would you do differently?’

For teachers interacting with the school management: trust requires fault tolerance

For teachers to deal openly with mistakes, they need a school management that appreciates feedback. When criticism becomes a career trap, silence becomes a strategy.

What you can do (as a school leader):

- Give room for mistakes in dialogue, not just in evaluations.
- Respond to criticism constructively and transparently.
- Say: ‘Thank you for your openness - we'll see together how we can learn from it.’

For children in relation to teachers: When children are allowed to give feedback

Children feel that they are taken seriously when they are allowed to say to teachers: ‘ I didn't understand that ’ or ‘ That hurt me ’ . This strengthens their communication skills, empathy - and their relationship with the teacher.

What you can do (as a teacher):

- Ask for feedback regularly.
- Respond openly, even if the feedback is uncomfortable.
- Make it clear that adults make mistakes too - and that's okay.

For children among themselves: Understanding mistakes as part of the community

Misunderstandings, awkwardness and ill-considered remarks arise particularly in social interaction. When children learn to allow each other to make mistakes, a classroom climate of respect and cohesion is created.

What you can do (as a teacher):

- Practise dialogue formats such as ‘ error consultation ’ .
- Communicate that apologising is a strength.
- Encourage a culture in which it is normal to say: ‘ I didn't make it - who can help me? ’

➔ Concrete examples: error consultation

The ‘ error consultation ’ dialogue format can be implemented in **primary schools** in a child-friendly way - with the aim of helping children to learn:

Mistakes are valuable and help us to become smarter.

In order for primary school children to be able to use this format, it requires **appropriate language, a clear structure, a safe atmosphere** and **support from teachers**. That's how the error consultation can succeed:

Goal for primary school pupils:

Strengthen self-reflection	Understanding, naming and learning from mistakes
Develop resilience	Taking responsibility for your own learning
Reduce fear of failure	Developing the courage to talk about failures
Promote social learning	Strengthening empathy and helpfulness in the classroom

Your role as a teacher:

- **Be a role model** - also share your own small ‘mistakes’
- **Take the lead in discussions** (especially in grades 1-2)
- **Encourage**, not embarrass
- **Give positive feedback** (‘That was a good way to learn!’)

This is how a child-orientated consultation can work:

1. clarify the framework (together with the class):

- - ‘In our class, you can talk about mistakes.’
- - ‘We **don't laugh** at others.’
- - ‘We listen carefully and support each other.’
- - Visualise the **conversation rules** (e.g. as a poster).

2. Regular time

- - e.g. once a week for 10-15 minutes in the class council or at the end of the week.

3. Procedure (simplified and recurring):

'I tell them about my mistake'

Example: 'I calculated something wrong in the maths test because I read the task too quickly.'

'That's how I felt'

Example: 'I was sad because I could actually do it.'

'That's what I learnt from it'

Example: 'I want to take more time next time.'

(Optional) 'Who knows this too?'

Show of hands or brief reactions from other children

Praise for courage:

The class or teacher says, for example, 'Thanks for sharing!' or 'That was brave!'

Supporting materials:

- 'I thought that ...'
- 'That didn't work because ...'
- 'Next time I'll do ... differently.'

Error cards with sentence starters like:



- 'Mistakes help you learn.'
- 'Everyone makes mistakes - that's okay.'

Mistake posters in the classroom with guiding sentences:



- Where children enter their 'learning moment of the week'

Learning diary page:





Tip: Child-friendly name:

As ‘error consultation’ can sound abstract, child-related terms are helpful, e.g:

‘Courage time’

‘Learning consultation hour’

‘What I have learnt from this...’

‘Tell the oops moment’

‘Error researcher round’

For parents: role models in an encouraging error culture

Parents also benefit from having the confidence to ask questions, address uncertainties or admit mistakes in parenting. This strengthens the trust between home and school.

What you can do (as a school):

- Create protected exchange formats, e.g. parent cafés.
- Offer workshops on the topic of ‘Mistakes as learning opportunities’ .
- Communicate clearly: We don't expect perfect parents, but rather cooperation based on partnership.

👉 A school in which nobody is allowed to make mistakes is not a learning school. But a school in which mistakes are understood as a shared learning space - across all groups - is a place of real development, real encounters and real democracy.

Feedback culture: democratisation through mutual feedback

A school in which feedback is actively practised at all levels creates the basis for development, trust and shared responsibility. Feedback culture is not just a pedagogical tool - it is a democratic practice: those who are heard feel responsible. Those who are allowed to give feedback experience self-efficacy.

For school management: feedback as a management tool

As a school headmaster, you play a key role in shaping your school's communication culture. If you regularly gather feedback from staff, parents or pupils - and work with it visibly - you send a clear signal: participation is desired, not just allowed.

What you can do:

- Carry out regular feedback sessions with the teaching staff.
- Use parent surveys not only for evaluation, but also for further development.
- Give feedback on feedback - make changes visible.

For teachers in relation to children: feedback as a tool for shaping relationships

Constructive feedback is a learning field for respectful communication and personal development for children. It is not only about feedback on performance, but also on behaviour, cooperation and atmosphere.

What you can do:

- Use formative feedback methods such as the five-finger method or feedback cubes.
- Offer regular feedback circles or reflection phases in the classroom.
- Encourage children to give you feedback too.

For teachers among themselves: Collegial feedback as a development opportunity

An open feedback culture among colleagues requires trust, but also clear formats. Giving each other constructive feedback not only promotes the quality of teaching, but also strengthens the shared understanding of educational goals.

What you can do:

- Carry out peer teaching visits with structured feedback.
- Establish ‘critical friends’ groups or peer coaching.
- Use team times for mutual reflection on projects.

For children among themselves: Appreciative feedback as a democratic exercise

When children learn to give each other feedback - honestly, respectfully and constructively - they practise a key democratic skill. They learn: Communication can hurt or empower - and they can deal with it responsibly.

What you can do:


- Introduce rituals in which feedback becomes part of everyday life.
- Model respectful feedback yourself.
- Discuss together: What is good feedback? What hurts? What helps?

For parents: Feedback as a dialogue in partnership

Parents want to be heard - and they have a lot to say. When they realise that their views count, partnership, trust and shared responsibility develop. A good feedback culture with parents means: listening, explaining and implementing - where possible.

What you can do (as a school):

- Offer regular, dialogue-based parents' evenings with feedback sessions.
- Ask for feedback - not just when there are problems.
- Communicate clearly: your perspective helps us to improve.

 **A practised feedback culture is therefore not an end in itself, but the foundation of a democratic learning culture. It creates transparency, mutual recognition and the opportunity to shape the school together. It is therefore indispensable for a democratic school.**

Summary

Democratic school development is not a goal to be achieved - but a path to be travelled together.

And: teaching democracy is not enough! Because democracy is not a method - it is an attitude

The Whole School Approach helps you to follow this path systematically: It combines needs-orientation, genuine co-determination and competence building - and turns your school into a place where mistakes can be learnt from and where democracy is not just taught, but lived.

Bibliography

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

→ This classic theory of citizen participation serves as a basis for the presentation of participation in the school context (e.g. the participation ladder). It helps to differentiate between genuine co-determination and sham participation.

Council of Europe (2018). Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC). Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.

→ The RFCDC defines key democratic competencies such as the ability to engage in dialogue and responsibility. These are taken up in the text as the third 'cogwheel' of democratic school development.

Glasser, W. (1998). Choice Theory: A New Psychology of Personal Freedom. New York: HarperPerennial.

→ Glasser describes five basic psychological needs that are considered the foundation of democratic behaviour in the module (security, belonging, power, freedom, fun).

Kriwy, P. & Lange, A. (Hrsg.) (2017). Demokratiepädagogik: Theorie, Empirie und Praxis. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.

→ This work combines the theoretical foundations of democratic education with empirical findings and offers practical approaches for school development.

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→ Reichenbach argues that democracy must be conveyed as an attitude and an experiential space in everyday school life - a central concern of the Whole School Approach.

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→ This book provides well-founded theoretical and practical impulses for the design of error and feedback culture - two focal points of the module.

Urban, M., Swadener, B. B., & Løkken, I. M. (2012). Democracy and Inclusion in Early Childhood Education: Practices, Politics and Policies. Springer.

→ The authors emphasize the role of inclusive, democratic structures in early education - particularly relevant for the primary school sector.

Ziegler, B. (2014). Partizipation in der Schule: Chancen und Grenzen demokratischer Schulentwicklung. Opladen: Budrich.

→ This work discusses the specific opportunities and challenges of participatory school design and complements the theoretical background in a practical way.



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