



Democratic classrooms

[Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec \(2022\)1 on the importance of plurilingual and intercultural education for democratic culture](#)

Measures

b. xiii. encourage pedagogical approaches that empower learners by developing their autonomy and their critical thinking skills, make space for the learner's voice, create a democratic classroom and school culture and prepare learners for lifelong learning.

c. vi. helping teachers to develop the pedagogical competences needed to support a democratic classroom culture that fosters autonomous learning and critical thinking and makes space for the inclusion of the learner's voice.

What is it about?

The Recommendation CM/Rec (2022)1 sees the democratic classroom as a key facilitator of plurilingual and intercultural education and a learning environment which encourages learner autonomy, fosters critical thinking and values the learner's voice.

A democratic classroom can be characterised by:

- **equal opportunities**: all learners are encouraged to participate actively and have equivalent access to resources and support;
- **respect for diversity**: different languages, cultures, and perspectives are acknowledged and valued by both teachers and learners in the classroom;
- **shared governance**: learners participate in negotiating and making decisions including about learning activities and classroom rules;
- **learner agency**: learners can reflect critically on their own learning and make meaningful and informed choices about their own priorities and ways of learning, competences essential for effective (life-long) learning;
- **collaborative learning**: learning activities encourage powerful, autonomous group learning opportunities, which involve critical reflection, negotiation, peer evaluation and mutual support.

Developing a democratic culture in classrooms needs to be part of – and will be enhanced by – a democratic culture in the whole school. Teachers who work in an environment where there is collaborative reflection on the attitudes, values and skills intrinsic to democratic culture,

where different opinions are listened to and there are positive views of diversity are more likely to develop the attitudes and skills necessary to establish such a culture in their classrooms.

See also Toolbox Entry on [Complex learning environments](#).

Why is this important and what can be done?

For many teachers, moving towards establishing and maintaining a truly democratic classroom culture in which learners are encouraged to contribute their thoughts and feelings and to engage in critical thinking and interaction poses new challenges because as learners they may well not have experienced such classrooms. As stated in both the Measures cited above, it is very important that the pedagogical competences needed are addressed in the initial training and professional development of all teachers and other educational staff.

Teacher educators and supervisors should strive to ensure that teachers adopt attitudes and develop the pedagogical competences needed to ensure that, in their classrooms:

- learners are free and feel safe to express their own thoughts, feelings, and viewpoints
- learning often involves critical thinking and reflective dialogue
- learner autonomy and empowerment are nurtured
- strategic competence in effective collaborative learning is developed
- differences among learners are seen as useful rather than as obstacles
- relationships between teachers and among learners are trusting and respectful
- learners are encouraged to reflect on and develop an openness to other languages and cultures and the relationships between different languages and cultures.

Council of Europe resources for policy/ decision makers

Resource 1: [Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture](#) (RFCDC).

The Framework is a model of the competences that need to be acquired by learners if they are to participate effectively in a culture of democracy and live peacefully together with others in culturally diverse democratic societies.

In addition to a model of the competences required in democratic cultures and for intercultural dialogue (**provided in volume 1**) and detailed descriptors of the specific values, attitudes, skills and knowledge described in the model (**volume 2**), there is guidance in volume 3 on appropriate methods and approaches and on teacher education (see below). The RFCDC is thus essential for policy makers who are reviewing and planning school curricula with the aim of incorporating a focus on the development of the competences described and who are seeking to foster whole-school approaches to democratic culture.

It is critically important that decision makers ensure access for all educational staff, especially teachers, to opportunities in their initial and in-service education to explore and further develop

their own competences for democratic culture, including the very values, attitudes, skills and knowledge to be mirrored in their work with learners.

Council of Europe resources for teacher educators/ pedagogical advisors

Resource 1: [Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture \(RFCDC\)](#)

See above, especially [Volume 3](#).

This part of the RFCDC focuses on the implementation of the Framework in schools. It covers implementation in the curriculum, in pedagogy, in assessment, in teacher education and in the whole school approach.

Chapter 2 highlights that democratic values are communicated through how teachers act and interact, not only through what they teach. It shows how involving learners in decisions about lesson aims, content, materials or classroom rules helps reshape traditional teacher–learner roles and creates an inclusive learning climate. When teachers use participatory and inclusive methods, they send learners the message that everyone is valued and can contribute—something especially important in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. By practising democratic processes in everyday classroom situations, learners develop the competences they need to participate actively in school and society.

The appendices to Chapter 2 on ‘CDC and pedagogy’ contain numerous examples of practice such as using and developing CDC through co-operative learning, project-based learning and developing critical thinking skills (pages 44-50).

Resource 2: [Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture -Teacher reflection tool](#)

This useful handbook supplements the practical guidelines offered in volume 3 of the RFCDC by looking at ways in which teachers can use self-observation (looking at what they do from the point of view of an observer) and reflection in their professional development to develop the competences needed to establish democratic classrooms and ensure greater learner participation and agency in lessons (in any subject).

Professional learning is further stimulated by opportunities to reflect on various ‘scenarios’ in which the CDC described in volume 2 of the Framework are necessary or would be advantageous.

Resource 3: [Teaching Unit 6 - Creating democratic classrooms](#) from the resources provided through the ECML’s ‘supporting multilingual classrooms’ project.

This worksheet aims to help teachers to formulate “*classroom strategies to enhance democratic practice in the multilingual classroom settings*”. It provides suggestions for practical activities that aim to increase learners’ awareness of CDC and, especially in activity 2, to explore the features of democratic classrooms.

Further resources

[Developing competences for democratic culture for young learners through language education \(DECODE\)](#) project website.

This ongoing project, which forms part of the ECML's 2024-2027 programme, aims to *support the development of young learners' competences for democratic culture*. This will include developing and making available a collection of digital materials for teachers, as well as digital guidelines for the implementation of CDC in primary language classes.

Council of Europe (2020) [Competences for democratic culture and the importance of language](#)

Council of Europe (2023) [Manual of the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture - Introductory Course](#)