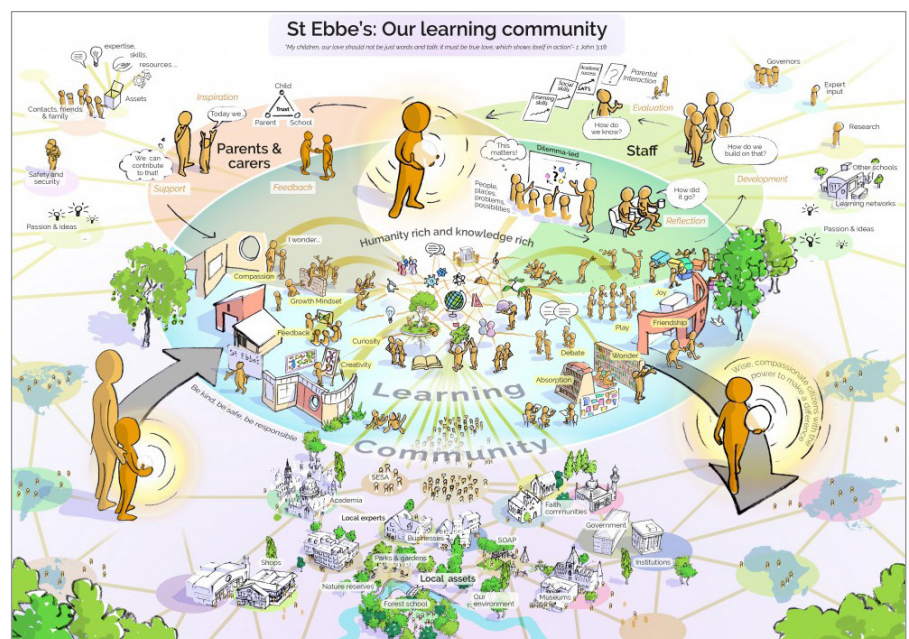


Democracy and the Primary School

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Democracy is one of the so-called Fundamental British Values (FBVs) that maintained schools in England are obliged to promote in compliance with the Education Act 2002 and the Prevent agenda 2014¹. This value can underpin the life of a school in a way that promotes an inclusive environment, excellent communications and outstanding human relationships. That said, how many schools have taken the opportunity to explore what the value *democracy* means for their community.

Drawing on research and scholarship featuring in our new book on children's rights educationⁱⁱ, we share some starting points for a democratic process. A dialogue about the aims of education and the priorities for the school can ensure that all voices find expression. An effective school community is one where all participants share a common vision of what is important in education and how to move from



Democracy as communication and cooperation. St Ebbe's School vision.

vision to reality. An understanding of democracy facilitates this process.

The guidance on FBVs provided by the Department for Education (2014) offers a limited view of democracy. Schools have to 'encourage respect for democracy and support for participation in the democratic

processes' and show how 'citizens can influence decision-making through the democratic process'. Democracy here means local, national and mayoral elections and the laws, rules, regulations and guidance that take their legitimacy from the ballot box. These feature in citizenship education.

Essentially everyone involved is entitled to give an opinion and that community is enriched when different views are expressed and confronted.

However, formal democracy under the adversarial British party system and in recent referendums is greatly divisive. Democratic processes can be contested and have proved fragile.

A school community requires a common vision and an agreed set of principles that transcend party politics. The FBV guidance suggests that the principle of democracy has implications for school organisation and management. Schools should 'ensure that all pupils within the school have a voice that is listened to'. This is something we strongly endorse, though it is minimal. The DfE guidance implies that student voice is a simulation to 'demonstrate how democracy works'. Voting for a school council enables children to understand 'democratic processes' in a formal sense, but democratic processes formal and informal should pervade schools. Participation is not just valuable as means to learn about democracy, it is also valuable as a means to recognise and realise children's rights.

Democracy is an ideal built by citizens and since the mid-20th century supported by the concept of human rights. As well as a system of government, it is also a way of looking at the world in terms of social structures that respect dignity and human rights, irrespective of any particular political arrangement. The eminent American philosopher and educationalist John Dewey (1859–1952) argued in *Democracy and Education* (1916) that although democracy is often associated with a form of government, it is also a principle that can be applied more



Parents and governors listen in the Town Hall to Year 4 children's teach-in on the climate emergency, the result of an enquiry Can we future-proof our planet?

widely and particularly to education. This principle is essentially that everyone involved is entitled to give an opinion and that community is enriched when different views are expressed and confronted. As he put it, 'A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience' (Dewey [1916] 2002)ⁱⁱⁱ.

Dewey argued that democracy requires 'a large number of values in common' ([1916] 2002 : 97) achievable by interaction within and between communities. All perspectives including those of minorities should find expression and be considered. This provides opportunities to continuously revisit habits, processes and procedures and to develop new perspectives and



Year 3 children ask What do human beings need to survive. Do we need art and why? They learn communications skills by building their own prehistoric cave with wall art and offering guided tours.



The aim of the educational process is the development of 'wise, compassionate citizens with the power to make a difference'.

experiences. Democracy is a way of life that recognizes and values the perceptions and the experiences of everyone within a given community. This responds to the FBV guidance that schools should be 'identifying and combatting discrimination'.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)^{iv} from 1989 gives legal and moral status to democratic education. The UN's commitment to human rights education, confirmed in a Declaration^v, proposes three ways of planning for its implementation. Education can be *about*, *through* and *for* human rights and democracy. *About* refers to knowledge of the principles and the main instruments setting out international norms (Universal Declaration of Human Rights^{vi}, CRC, European Convention on Human Rights^{vii}) as well as key UK legislation (Human Rights Act, 2000; Equality Act, 2010). *Through* is democracy influencing all aspects of the life of the community. Learning and teaching is respectful of the rights of both educators and learners. *For* concerns the fundamental purpose of schools as empowering all to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others.

Order in schools is best maintained when conceptualized in line with the principles of the CRC (Osler 2000^{viii}; Ekholm 2004^{ix}; Durrant and Stewart-Tufescu 2017^x). Rules are better kept by staff and students if democratically agreed (Harber 1995^{xi}). This is confirmed by the experience of many schools that have adopted UNICEF UK's Rights Respecting Schools initiative^{xii}.



Pre-Covid, Year 5 practice skills of political communication starting from the question Do we have the power to change the world?

Participation is a right to 'participate in procedures whereby order is constructed, maintained and changed' (Bernstein 2000: 20^{xiii}). Procedures in schools that are intended to construct and maintain order include rules, discipline, timetables, exams and tests, parental contracts, homework, rewards and punishments, pastoral systems, hierarchies and the curriculum.

Democratic processes of dialogue based on rights and law can reconcile parents' wishes to protect and promote a distinctive religious ethos when it is in tension with recognition of equality for LGBT+ people. An evaluation of a project *Educate and Celebrate* found accommodation to be possible where conversations are framed by understandings of rights and the law. As one child said: When my dad knew about the Equality Act protecting us because we are Muslim as well as protecting LGBT people he was OK about it; he said school was just telling

us about the people we might meet in the world'^{xiv}.

In 2020, St Ebbe's CofE Primary School, serving a multilingual and multicultural community in Oxford, set out to involve all stakeholders in the school community in articulating by means of an illustrated map a shared vision for the school. In a democratic process, a series of meetings and consultations resulted in the lively depiction of values that now features on the school website. It represents communication between members of the school community and with the wider world. Rules have been reduced to 'be kind, be safe, be responsible'. The aim of the educational process is the development of 'wise, compassionate citizens with the power to make a difference'. The vision has inspired written articulations of aims and values that inform the development of a range of policies including diversity and RSE. Working with consultant educationalist





Year 2 children ask Is water the most precious thing in the world? They put on an art exhibition based on Hokusai, for parents and visitors

Debra Kidd, and part-funded by ASPE, the school developed an enquiry-based curriculum based on people, places, problems and possibilities. Year 1 ask: how can we help other people feel like they belong? Children work with both older people in the community and younger children preparing to move from EYFS. Year 3 children ask What do human beings need to survive? Do we need art and why? They learn communication skills by building their own prehistoric cave with wall art and offering guided tours. Year 5 have power and leadership as an overall

theme. Work on climate and the environment starts from 'do we have the power to change the world?' The Victorians theme asks 'why do children need rights?' Factory acts are precursors to the CRC. The termly projects all have a public facing outcome such as an exhibition or a debate to which parents and governors are invited^{xv}. Committing to democratic principles not only meets the DfE requirements but it can also gradually transform schools to be more inclusive and more effective.

Pen Portrait

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Feedback

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**The next Bulletin will be
published in April 2021**

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