

# Democratic Participation in School Management

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## Abstract

This article offers an overview of the various approaches to youth participation in educational settings, particularly focusing on the experiences of democratic schools. The article starts with an analysis of the arguments for the inclusion of democratic practices to learning environments, followed by a description of the benefits and challenges of introducing democratic practices in schools described in the scientific literature. Finally, the article ends with an overview of Suvemäe-TKG, Estonia's first democratic-education based pilot project within a public school.

## Keywords

Democratic education, youth participation, education for social justice, inclusion, school within school

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## 1 Democratic Participation in School Management

The democratic participation of girls and boys is a fundamental characteristic of democratic schools. From this perspective, freedom is understood as finite and exists in relation to the coexistence and security of all the people who participate in the pedagogical space. In the global context of the lack of opportunities for student participation in school decisions, Effrat and Schimmel (2003: 4) denounce that most conventional schools promote a discursive ver-

sion of democracy through the teaching of the history of institutions, important constitutional decisions, discussion of contemporary social issues, but do not offer opportunities to learn it through practice or get involved in authentic activities that favor capacities for citizen participation in a democratic society. In this sense, *school self-government* seeks to comply with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 2006), making explicit the urgency of supporting processes construction of their own opinion and express it freely<sup>1</sup>, while promoting spaces for child participation in decision-making on matters that affect them<sup>2</sup>. From the perspective of *local management*, a horizontal leadership of adults and young people within the school space is the objective, avoiding bureaucratic administrative challenges and empowering those who have not had the option to exercise their rights (Seashore, 2003: 104). This article offers an overview of the various approaches to youth participation in educational settings, particularly focusing on the experiences of democratic schools. In general terms, seeking to overcome the paradox of teaching about democracy in non-democratic school structures and practices (Bridges, 1997: 163; Stevenson, 2010: 68; Hannam, 2021: 10), democratic schools facilitate regular meetings, known as the School Assembly or Parliament<sup>3</sup>. Such meetings involve the whole school community (the Democratic School of Hadera in Israel even includes families) to decide relevant issues for their coexistence such as shared agreements (rules), curricular issues, workshops and clubs based on self-initiated learning, graduation requirements, field trips and trips, visits to the school by experts or visitors, etc. At Sudbury Valley School in the United States, the school meeting has a final word in topics such as hiring or firing staff members or the admission of new participants.

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<sup>1</sup> Articles 12 and 15 (UNICEF, 2006: 13)

<sup>2</sup> Articles 12, 23 and 31 (UNICEF, 2006)

<sup>3</sup> In some schools, adults and children participate in the **Assembly** (as in Ojo de Agua, Sands school, Sudbury-type schools, Summerhill, the Sleeping Lion, among others) where every member of the school community can participate, while others have adopted the **Parliament**, such as the Hadera Democratic School, whose members are elected at the beginning of each year. However, in Hadera, there are also committees with participants of various ages and elected by secret ballot, which are in charge of various tasks (for example, relations between teachers and students, admitting new students, organizing trips and events, managing the maintenance of school structures, manage spending suggestions, and others.) For more on committees in Hadera, see Hecht (2010: 77–9)

A fundamental component of the Assemblies is respect and *active listening*, which involves taking other people seriously, trying to understand the degree of truth they carry, and defending one's own thoughts without attacking the other (Zuleta, 2016: 78). In this way, democratic education shares with Apple and Beane (1995) that "democratic planning is not to make use of the right to vote, but the convergence of different points of view and the search for a balance between particular interests." (p. 25). In other words, girls and boys in democratic schools participate in the Assembly under equal conditions as adults, having the same rights and responsibilities, being entitled to their voice and vote, and nominating themselves or others to manage and implement the agenda of the Assembly and take notes. As Mercogliano (1998: 36) refers, some democratic schools have adopted *Robert's Rules of Order* (Robert, Evans, & Balch, 2004) to organize Assembly meetings to change or make school rules and plan activities. However, when it comes to a controversial or very serious issue that affects the school community, the discussion can continue until some kind of consensus or shared agreement is achieved. Conversely, some democratic education practitioners have criticized *Robert's Rules of Order* for being very complicated (it is a 700+ page book that few people read and fully understand), while simpler alternatives are available, such as the proposed *Democracy 2.0* (Madson, 2014) or *Sociocracy* (Rau and Koch-Gonzalez, 2018), designed to guide people participating in a democratic system for daily use.

The recurring dynamic in school meetings is that someone makes a proposal or points to a topic, argues their reasons or motivations, all voices are heard and taken seriously<sup>4</sup>, and shared decision is reached. However, in most cases, the adoption of a rule or decision is decided by voting, adopting a majority rule<sup>5</sup>. In the words of Zoe Redhead, current director of Summerhill, even if the decision of the majority is accepted, a *long-term* consensus is the general goal, since almost any regulation can be revoked (Herrero and Fuentes, 2010, p. 49).

Alternatively, some democratic schools have adopted the sociocratic method (Rau and Koch-Gonzalez, 2018) with the aim of being able to lis-

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the rights of children and young people to be heard at school and such influence on their perceptions and experiences of school, see Jones (2013, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> According to Gribble (2004: 48), voting is preferable to an endless debate, since there are mechanisms so that, on the one hand, all people can participate, and, on the other, a decision can be revoked later.

ten to all voices and reach consent among the school members, instead of the majority opinion. Applied to a pedagogical environment, this is quite similar to the *deliberative democracy approach*, emphasizing the common good, shared responsibility and the consequences of the decisions made. According to Englund (2006: 510), and closely related to the sociocratic approach, deliberative democracy emphasizes participation in democratic processes, while underlining the nature of the processes, insofar as they must guarantee the presence of diverse opinions and arguments that must be considered, confronted and considered through argumentation. According to a former participant in the first Dutch democratic school (Plesman, 1961: 8), young people can understand easily the sociocratic dynamics, making meetings efficient and being inclusive. Nevertheless, the process can be delayed when the school community grows disproportionately, so many schools elect delegates, combining a participatory democratic perspective at the micro level and a representative perspective at the macro level of the school.

## 2 What are the benefits of involving girls and boys in decision-making?

Some of the benefits reported from participation in school management are:

- The development of moral reasoning skills (Kohlberg, 1971: 89)<sup>6</sup>
- A reduction of school abuse<sup>7</sup>, which emerges from power imbalances within schools and at home<sup>8</sup> (Delval and Lomelí, 2013: 39)
- Setting functional limits (Juul, 2001: 168)

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<sup>6</sup> In this sense, one of the companions of the Free School Ojo de Agua (Spain) points out that more than *educating in values*, what it is about is *exercising values*, through the defense of one's own rights, the assumption of responsibilities, the joint definition of limits, etc.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of strategies against school violence, see Del Rey and Ortega (2007) and Ortega and Del Rey (2003).

<sup>8</sup> Highfield school in England managed to solve its bullying problems through the possibility of each class making its own rules of behavior during the lessons; the creation of a self-managed school assembly; and a closer collaboration with families, to whom girls and boys decided when they should be invited to discuss topics of interest to the class/school. For more detailed information, see Wittwer (2015) and Gribble (2016)

- The strengthening of the sense of belonging<sup>9</sup> which, in turn, positively affects the commitment to one's own learning, reduces anxiety, and facilitates autonomy and self-regulation<sup>10</sup> (Anderman, 2002: 804)
- The improvement of the argumentative capacity and the academic results of the students (Bouché Peris, 2003: 85; Day, Sammons, Hopkins, Leithwood & Gu, 2009: 192)
- Creating cultures of participatory leadership (Louis et al. 2010: 108)
- The development of attitudes that value diversity and social commitment (Bruyere, 2010: 216)
- Learning about rights and duties through empirical experiences (Danner and Jonyniene, 2012: 414)
- The articulation of the defense of one's own and collective rights, the development of empathy, and political literacy<sup>11</sup>
- The assumption of responsibility for one's own actions (Garriga, 2013: 18')
- Attitudes of respect towards diversity and citizen involvement, through the feeling of empowerment and critical thinking processes during decision-making (Prud'homme, 2014: 48).

Likewise, it is important to consider the performance of the Assembly in terms of scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978: 81) and participation and guided appropriation (Rogoff, 2003: 285), in which "more competent participants" in the meetings of the school community share with other people appropriate discursive tools to, for example, participate, speak, take turns and actively listen to other people.

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<sup>9</sup> Hope (2012) carried out an investigation on the sense of belonging in the students of the Sands free school, which identified factors such as democratic structures, the small size of the school, the quality of the relationships between students and teachers, good relationships between peers, and positive classroom environment (p. 744)

<sup>10</sup> For Wild and Wild (2002: 71), three types of discipline are distinguished in the self-government process: authoritarian, functional and self-discipline. While the first requires the presence of an authority figure who authoritatively imposes its rules; the second may depend on adult or child decision-making processes, being directly related to daily practice; and finally, the third is an internalization of the functional discipline and requires fewer controls than the other two.

<sup>11</sup> Sabia (2012) suggests that, through democratic participation, girls and boys become experts in judging political arguments, proposals, existing norms and practices, policies and laws, and the promises and conduct of public officials and other leaders. and collectives (p. 377)

### 3 Are there challenges in promoting child and youth participation in decision-making?

Certain challenges emerge in the (partial or conditioned) promotion of spaces for student participation in the management of conventional schools have been mentioned, particularly when children's participation is limited to expressing their opinion in relation to the manipulated formulation of issues, without having real power to make decisions (Taylor and Percy-Smith, 2008: 381). Furthermore, adult manipulation of children's opinions is always a challenge, leaving few opportunities for them to formulate new ideas (Hecht, 2010: 32; Thornberg, 2010: 928). Moreover, there might be an imbalance between private and collective interests (Criado, 2009: 8) or child voting patterns<sup>12</sup> could be established in favor of certain decisions due to social pressure. Finally, passive participatory models could be promoted, such as representation or consultation (Lucio & L'Anson, 2015: 132) or participation in the Assembly being limited to individual election<sup>13</sup>.

An example of these risks has to do with informal hierarchies when making decisions. According to a study of a Sudbury school (Huang, 2014), it is debatable whether or not there are hierarchies in democratic schools: "even if they are democratic, since all people have the same rights, there are always people who are more dominant or more visible. The same logic applies to the adult team: although they try not to dominate the student body, it can happen – even unintentionally – that the adults are more powerful than the participants regarding, for example, complex communication skills, due to greater experience and practice. In any case, schools are part of a society that is less democratic than themselves" (p. 63). The author concludes by suggesting that, if the contradictions between a democratic educational approach and society itself are not reflected in the school, students may come into conflict with society, since they are not used to a system in which they have no power or participation. This conflict would, in turn, prevent them from integrating into society, or they would not know how to relate (from a hegemonic participation/representation perspective) with other people. On the other hand,

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<sup>12</sup> In this sense, the adult experience in democratic pedagogical spaces suggests that it is temporary and, rather, is part of the citizen learning process (Hecht, 2010: 93).

<sup>13</sup> Wilson (2015: 127) has pointed out that the vast majority of participants eventually decide to do so and learn the necessary skills to engage in democratic processes within the school.

a positive consequence of such contradiction would be that young people can realize that they only live in a democratic community and not in a democratic society, which can empower them to question and position themselves against inequities, hierarchies and non-democratic social structures.

#### 4 Conflict resolution

In order to reduce the intensity of conflicts, some schools have adopted the “Stop” rule, initially suggested by Jerry Mintz at the Shaker Mountain School in the United States, through which, when a person feels that they are being treated in a unacceptable (for example, threatened, belittled, bullied), they can shout “STOP” clearly to enforce their rights. If the offending person does not stop their actions immediately, then the offended party has the option to put a point in the Assembly and discuss the abuse (Mercogliano, 1998: 88).

On the other hand, according to some educational psychologists and researchers (Lave and Wegner, 1991: 121; Vygotsky, 1978: 81), if the objective is for girls and boys to become competent adults, it is necessary to establish spaces that facilitate their involvement in actions that represent total participation in adult practices. In this sense, it has been suggested that the best way to guarantee it is through democratic dialogic practices typical of *relational restorative justice*<sup>14</sup>, which has been adopted in some free and democratic pedagogical spaces, for example, Werkplaats (Holland), the Sleeping Lion (Ecuador), the Free School of Albany (United States), The Garden (England) or Kapriole (Germany) when a conflict arises. For Mercogliano (1998), the solution is found, not in punishments or permissiveness, but in compassion and true sincerity, since,

“...girls and boys need adults who have assumed their own innate aggression and know when they should intervene and when it is okay to discuss something at length. (...) Paying particular attention to the states of mind of the girls and boys involved, these adults must have contact with a wide range of human emotions so that they can feel when a girl or boy is about to vent their anger

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<sup>14</sup> This is a process by which the people involved in a conflict and the school representatives (adult mediators) meet to “articulate and listen to each other’s concerns, perspectives and ideas with the aim of managing them and transforming the conflict and its causes” (Bickmore, 2015, p. 447).

and hurt someone, in which case they must be able to respond quickly, creatively and effectively.” (p. 28).

From this perspective, the accompanying adult approaches the people involved and tries to find solutions collectively, through *active listening*<sup>15</sup>, *reflection techniques*<sup>16</sup> and *non-violent communication*<sup>17</sup>. In the case of conflicting issues that concern the entire community, many schools appeal to the Assembly to deal with the issue and decide on strategies to follow. For Mercogliano (1998), what it is about is that girls and boys discover that they have behaviors or attitudes that are costing them, not a punishment or loss of privileges, but the friendship of other people, or their place in the community, or the feeling of internal well-being. However, the role of adults is not to establish value judgments, but “it is more likely that they learn this information through their peers” (p. 31).

As Wild (2006: 199) suggests, most conflicts are resolved face-to-face, promoting child and youth empowerment and the adoption of conflict resolution strategies. For example, when little boys or girls go to the adult, in order to make him or her solve the conflict,

“... We paid attention to him and then we assured him: ‘if you want to tell Chad that, I’ll go with you and I’ll stay with you while you tell him’. If the child just needs attention, he or she may drop the matter; but if you really want to defend your point of view, our presence will make you feel reinforced. But then they will experience that we give the same attention and coverage to the other boy or girl, so both of them will be able to settle their disagreements with the same opportunities.” (Wild, 2006, p. 199)

In order to prevent aggressiveness from spreading in the educational space (Mercogliano, 1998, p. 30), flexible solutions are adopted, which might cause

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<sup>15</sup> *Active listening* focuses on listening carefully to what the other person (boy or girl, in this case) says, trying to capture the message they want to share and refraining from making value judgments (Rogers and Evans, 1957: 101).

<sup>16</sup> The *reflection technique* is based on the reformulation of what the child wants to express, suppressing any interpretation, and trying to help him understand his own experience and identify his emotions (Rogers and Evans, 1957: 114)

<sup>17</sup> *Nonviolent communication* consists of expressing points of view without judgment; identifying and expressing their own and others’ needs, feelings and emotions; demonstrating empathy; and managing anger and guilt. The objective is to develop tools to restructure the way of understanding situations and communicating with oneself and other people (Rosenberg, 2003: 24; 2016: 134)



the meetings end only when those who convene them consider that the problem has been resolved (Suchak and Root, 2006: 52’).

On the other hand, some schools, particularly those following the Sudbury model, have developed a formal disciplinary system based on the Judiciary Committee (JC)<sup>18</sup>, which meets every day and is in charge of ensuring order. According to Greenberg (1992: 190), founder of the Sudbury Valley School,

“The principles of this system were clearly established since the opening of the school (1968), that is, due legal process is an essential element in a school that upholds the principles of personal liberty, mutual respect, and political democracy. . .” (p. 190)

The JC process is very simple: if a person, whatever their age, sees something that goes against school rules, they make a written complaint about it<sup>19</sup>. For each complaint, the JC goes through five phases: allegation, investigation, prosecution, trial, and sentencing. After having investigated the matter, the JC decides whether to summon the people involved, who can plead “not guilty” or “guilty”. During the process, the parties are heard, and later, six volunteers, with no interest in the case, serve as a jury. If it is determined that the accused person is guilty, he must sign a written statement summarizing the violation of the norm, and wait for the JC to discuss the sentence, which is then published on the bulletin board. As Gray and Chanoff (1986: 189) suggest, all the participating people of the school serve in the JC, so they can appreciate all the perspectives of an issue; thus, the offenders yesterday are the judges today, “trying to solve the same kind of problems they themselves were in.” (p. 189)

Other variations of the JC have been the *Court of Peers* established by Korczak (Josephs, 1999: 52) in the orphanage he directed, where girls and boys were chosen through a lottery to serve in the Court, although the “clerk of the court” was an adult, and the chosen people served for a period of one week. On the other hand, the Democratic School of Hadera has a Disciplinary

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<sup>18</sup> The *Judicial Committee* is made up of seven students of different ages (two “official” participants and five “assistants”) and one adult (who plays the role of support and guide). Twice a year, two “officers” are elected to chair the sessions; while the other members, representative of the different ages of the school, are chosen by such officials to serve for one month a year in the FT (Feldman, 2001: 5), which has been called *peripheral participation* (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 76).

<sup>19</sup> In some cases, older girls and boys help those who cannot write to write the complaint (Feldman, 2001: 18).

Committee (composed of students, teachers and families), which decides if a rule has been broken and its possible consequences; while the Mediation Committee deals with finding, together with the parties involved, strategies to resolve conflicts (IOPD, 2015: 18).

Regarding the possible consequences of breaking norms, although young girls and boys often apply disproportionate punishments, in many cases a restorative perspective is sought<sup>20</sup>. For example, the democratic school *El León Dormido* (Ecuador), when it comes to physical violence, the aggressor is warned that, if it happens again, he will have to stay with a companion for half an hour or an hour, while you are given as much attention as you want (Wild, 2006: 92). Precisely, the objective of the sanctions is to be able to guarantee a relaxed environment for all the participants, while the objectives of participation in school management (whether through the Assembly, a Disciplinary or Judicial Committee) are related to the development of moral reasoning skills of girls and boys (Kohlberg, 1986: 64), practice in respectful conflict resolution and compromise (Bonta, 1996: 411; Bouché Paris, 2003: 73; Furth and McConville, 1981: 416), and attitudes that tend towards the establishment and consolidation of peace<sup>21</sup>.

## 5 Suvemäe-TKG, an experience of democratic education within a public school in Estonia

Suvemäe-TKG is the democratic branch of the Tallinn School of Art (Tallinna Kunstigümnaasium), which serves around 700 students in the Estonian cap-

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<sup>20</sup> For example, in the Sleeping Lion, a list of possible penances has been organized, such as tidying up the library, sweeping the floors, tidying up the school printing press, etc. In the case of Sudbury, if someone litters, they have to pick it up for a whole day; if there is noisy behavior that does not allow other people to concentrate, you may face restriction to the use of spaces for a certain period (Sadofsky, 2004: 27)

<sup>21</sup> According to Galtung (1969: 169) and Kahne and Sporte (2008: 742), there are three conflict management goals and practices: peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding. While *peacekeeping* includes the re-establishment of security through policing (ie, school discipline and punishment regimes); *peacemaking* includes negotiation and dialogue, and consideration of multiple perspectives and interests; and, finally, *peacebuilding* involves social transformation and repair of the underlying causes of the conflict, through democratization, the protection of human rights, and the reconstruction of healthy horizontal (peer-to-peer) and vertical (peer-to-peer) relationships. between adults and young people). The last two options seek democratic participation and reflection.

ital. Suvemäe-TKG is going through its third year offering an alternative to families who believe in the need to promote a balance between academic learning, spiritual growth, social skills and emotional well-being of young people.

From the perspective of child/youth participation in decision-making, Suvemäe's approach promotes the active participation of young people in two main aspects. On the one hand, young people collaborate with their mentors in the implementation of learning possibilities that are adapted to their individual characteristics and interests. On the other hand, they are encouraged to express their voice and participate in decision-making within the school community on various topics, such as excursions, shared agreements and conflict resolution (rules of coexistence), events, learning opportunities, etc.

During its first academic year (2019–2020) as a “pioneer of possibilities” (Hannam, 2021: 13), Suvemäe-TKG welcomed 63 students, of whom about 19% came from Russian-speaking families with little or no knowledge of the Estonian language, 20% had been diagnosed with special learning needs (ADHD, Asperger's, autism), while the remaining students were considered “average” or “normal” students at their previous schools. During the first year, a learning process was initiated that allowed the pedagogical committee to identify ways to support girls and boys to become emotionally and socially aware, creative and responsible for their learning. Thus, this democratic branch began with a lot of freedom and few functional rules:

- the STOP rule,
- My name: no one can call others nicknames, unless the recipient wishes so;
- My body: no one can hold, hit, push, etc. to the other participants; and
- My Stuff: No one can use other participants' stuff without authorization.
- Our nature and our school: Everyone is responsible for environmental care and the good use of the school resources.

During the first months, students were not required to engage in much academic learning, but rather build the shared agreements and learning possibilities together with adults. The main objective was to collaboratively create a school culture based on respect, shared decision-making and a balance between freedom (to follow one's own interests) and responsibility (in relation to the contents established in the official curriculum). Through our shared efforts to build on learning skills, the school community had to deal with some young people's “school hangover”: passivity towards the use of learning possibilities

or assumption of academic responsibilities, low self-esteem limiting social and academic belonging, little initiative and fear of making mistakes, short creative capacity and dependence on technological entertainment to alleviate boredom. Then, the Covid-19 pandemic confined everyone at home and the school year ended through academic and non-academic meetings via Zoom.

The second year (2020–2021) as a democratic school within a public school began with 70 students, some from the main school, and a baggage full of ideas and projects that consolidated with the support of girls and boys. Above all, the determination of the adult team was to become an intellectual and emotional support for Suvemäe-TKG students and their families, continuing with the school assembly, group assemblies, and the development of autonomous learning skills. However, after a few months, the entire school community had to return to mandatory lockdown, which clearly affected shared participation in decision-making. During the period of distance education it became clear that the evolutionary need for socialization was still very powerful, so regular contact was promoted, having meetings that were not focused on academic learning, but rather on strengthening our identity as a group of people who want to learn in different ways, creating open spaces to talk about personal issues and building a network, virtual support especially for girls and boys, but also for families.

Regarding shared decision-making, the process of these two years has encountered challenges and possibilities of various kinds. On the one hand, girls and boys did not have a clear understanding or confidence to believe in the veracity of the shared participation mechanisms that were available. Having grown up under the authority of adults, most of the students considered the school assembly as a waste of time and a strategy used by adults to “fake” democracy within the school space. In this way, the school assembly was initially full of interruptions from those who did not believe in its legitimacy, which invited most participants to suggest that their attendance be voluntary (which, however, makes some people not aware of the decisions made). After a couple of months, class assemblies (1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-9) during the week were suggested and adopted in order to promote more active participation at the micro level (small assembly) and representation processes at the macro level (school assembly). Over time, some participants assumed an active role and began to propose and reflect with the other participants on topics of interest: shared agreements on the use of electronic devices for entertainment during

the school day<sup>22</sup>, use and organization of spaces, learning opportunities outside the school space, organization of events, etc.

In relation to conflict mediation, initially the responsibility fell on adults, who, little by little, promoted the participation of students in their resolution. For this purpose, the school assembly created the *Mediation Circle*, made up of 4 or 5 student volunteers and an adult accompanying them. The goal of MC is to promote a restorative justice perspective rather than punitive justice, not intending to punish the offenders, but rather helping the people involved to find agreements, restore the relationship and attend to the needs of each person.

Since the beginning of Suvemäe-TKG, young people have participated in the creation and socialization of coexistence agreements and have the right to write a “report” when they consider that their rights have been disrespected. In a few words, the report indicates the people involved in the conflict, describes the situation and names witnesses. The MC then meets every day at noon, and, through active listening, the reflex technique and non-violent communication, aims to involve the school community in conflict resolution, keeping in mind the need to avoid labeling people, but reaching agreements in which everyone can feel relaxed and appreciated.

The results have been very positive: girls and boys who attempted to bully others found themselves in front of a community that listened to them and gave them opportunities to correct their relational mechanisms. Over time, these people have become active members of the MC and helped their peers to resolve conflicts while building the social fabric. Although the process of child and youth socialization of shared decision-making processes takes time, it is evident that many students have understood the importance of participating in the construction of coexistence, the decision on learning activities and the use of spaces and learning times.

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<sup>22</sup> This topic was discussed at length, and it was concluded that games on phones constituted a distraction during moments of semi-structured learning and tutorials aimed at the development of self-directed learning projects required by educational authorities. For these reasons, it was determined that girls and boys would have the right to use their phones to play games or watch videos for one hour every day, from 12 to 13 in the afternoon, which most participants follow and respect, as it came from them. When someone “breaks” these agreements, they must explain their behavior in the *Mediation Circle* (MC) and reach agreements, otherwise they can face the loss of some rights, like having their phone at hand.

Currently, Suvemäe-TKG and its community are starting their fourth year of work. The expectations in the beginning of the 2021–2022 school year were great, as well as the signs of initiative, autonomy and responsibility in girls and boys. Now both children and adults have reached a very close relationship based on trust and care, while consolidating the shared decision-making mechanisms and finding learning opportunities that suit individual needs. Every single day brings new challenges, but also new possibilities for young people to learn how to be a good citizen, care for the most vulnerable and the environment, and play a positive role in their communities. The Suvemäe-TKG experience can give indications of the importance of understanding minors as human beings who need and want to be important parts of the community. In a few words, when adults abandon the exercise of authoritarian power and become emotional guides and relationships, girls and boys really begin to learn to live in democracy and re-connect with their identities, needs and plans.

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