

Lessons in Democracy

by Annika Scharnagl

No one can say with certainty how the world will look like in ten years. The ground beneath our feet—politically, environmentally, socially—feels increasingly unstable. Liberal democracy with its core values of freedom and equality, is in retreat, while illiberal leaders gain ground. Amid an overflow of mis- and disinformation, it is becoming harder to discern truth from manipulation. Young people are especially susceptible to radical messages, making it more important that society responds collectively to counter extremist and/or violent rhetoric. In these uncertain times, it is easy to feel overwhelmed, even powerless. But perhaps the most crucial response we can offer is not to retreat, but to teach. It might sound like a simple answer, but as our future lies in the next generation, they should be equipped with the right tools to navigate it.

Education has always gone beyond facts and figures; its deeper purpose is to shape how individuals understand the world and their role within it by providing them with the tools to form their own beliefs and mindset. Today, this shaping takes on a new urgency. As liberal democratic values are tested across the globe, and authoritarian narratives grow louder, we must ask ourselves: Are we preparing the next generation to uphold democracy—not as a distant ideal, but as a lived, everyday responsibility? And in a time when digital platforms shape political understanding more than textbooks, media literacy is no longer optional, but it is the foundation of democratic education.

The practice of democracy must be taught through history lessons on the erosion of democracies, but also by cultivating the skills that uphold it: critical thinking, dialogue, empathy, and an understanding of democratic institutions. But above all, young people must learn how to engage with the media landscapes that shape their realities. Media literacy is not just a technical skill; it is a democratic one. Understanding how information is created, spread, and manipulated is crucial to becoming an informed citizen.

While many of these elements can be addressed in the classroom, families, community spaces and media also play a role. Habits formed early through discussion, participation, and volunteering can carry democratic behaviour into adulthood. Yet schools and teachers face mounting challenges: underfunding, political pressure on curricula, and the constant expansion of topics they are expected to cover. The digital world, while rich with learning opportunities, also brings the spread of misinformation and polarized narratives, reaching even very young children. Many are unequipped to recognize manipulation or seek out reliable sources.

A growing distrust in political processes among young people is another concern. Some seek alternatives in movements and parties that challenge democratic norms, often providing abbreviated answers to complex problems.

A key challenge in democracy education is ensuring that it is both

“Democracy builds on the belief that we all have a say and that our voices matter.”

meaningful and balanced, empowering students without prescribing what they should believe. In this context, educational frameworks can offer helpful guidance. One influential example comes from the German-speaking world: the Beutelsbacher Consensus, developed in the 1970s as a response to debates about political neutrality in the classroom. It lays out three core principles that continue to shape civic education in German and Austrian schools today: 1) It is forbidden to overwhelm students with an opinion and thus prevent them from forming an independent judgment, clearly marking the boundary between education and political indoctrination. 2) What is discussed controversially in politics and science is also discussed in class. The teacher has a corrective role to address viewpoints that are foreign or contrary to the students' own opinions. 3) It is important to generate an environment and situation in which students can analyze a political situation and their own attitudes towards it.



Using this as a background to teaching about democracy, the following practical steps should be considered by educators to prepare the next generation across formal and informal educational settings for the navigation of an uncertain future:

1. Strengthening Democratic Thinking

- Empower young people to find their own voice through exploring what democracy is and could be, using open reflection and inclusive definitions.
- Break down complex political situations, locally and globally, and invite multiple perspectives into the conversation.
- Bring local politicians, activists, or civic actors into schools to encourage dialogue and democratic engagement.
- Learn from best practices in civic education from other countries and adapt them locally.

Such efforts are not isolated interventions, but components of a broader educational framework aimed at strengthening democratic resilience. This includes recognizing that many students in European classrooms cannot vote or participate in formal politics due to their citizenship. Yet they are part of our democratic society, and they deserve to be included in its education. Because what is democracy, if not the belief that we all have a say and that our

2. Media Literacy in a Digital World

- Teach media literacy consistently and sustainably, starting from an early age. This requires long-term funding and full integration into curricula.
- Talk about the digital platforms where young people form opinions. Teach how algorithms work, how to spot manipulation, and how to fact-check.
- Equip educators to tackle difficult topics such as misinformation, hate speech, or extremism through training and collaboration with peers and experts.
- Partner with content creators and platforms that promote constructive democratic dialogue in digital spaces.

voices matter? This belief must not only be protected, but practiced, passed down, and lived out loud. By fostering critical thinking, media literacy, and inclusive dialogue, we can help ensure that young people don't just inherit democracy, but shape and defend it. To support this mission, the oiip is currently engaged in two projects focused on extremism prevention and security politics education in Austrian schools. These efforts aim to help students critically

3. Inclusion, Belonging, and Social Safety

- Pay attention to mental health and belonging. Feelings of loneliness, especially among boys and young men, can create openings for radical or hate-based ideologies.
- Train teachers on how diversity and intersectionality affect students' access to and experience of education.
- Include all students in democratic learning — regardless of their citizenship status. Traditional models often assume full political participation, but resilience is only possible when everyone is involved.

engage with the world around them, and to play an active role in building the one they want to see.

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