

Guidelines

TO PROMOTE DEMOCRATIC
EDUCATION IN NATURE



Co-funded by
the European Union





**Co-funded by
the European Union**

The Guidelines to promote "Democratic Education in Nature" was produced by the partners of the DEN project and published in April 2023.

The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not imply any endorsement of its contents, which reflect solely the opinion of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Project: "DEN- Democratic Education in Nature "
2021-2-BE02-KA210-SCH-000051555



INTRODUCTION

DEN (Democratic Education in Nature) is a European project funded by the Erasmus+ Programme (Key Action 2 - Cooperation for Innovation and Exchange of Good Practices).

The duration of the project is of 15 months, from 01/04/2022 to 31/06/2023.

Responding to the needs of offering innovative pedagogical experiences promoting children's environmental stewardship, active citizenship and promotion of inner motivation and talents, the project has the ambition to systematise and disseminate a new developing approach that bridges Nature Pedagogy with Democratic Education.

Having the partners of the project a long-term experience in this domain, they promoted a research on this approach and its application, a series of workshops and guidelines for schools.

DEN is implemented by two Democratic Schools in Nature: Albero della Tuscia (Italy) and Playa Escuela (Spain) and by a European Education Network, QUEST (Belgium).

The DEN project has therefore the General Objective (GO) of putting forward a new developing approach that bridges Nature Pedagogy with Democratic Education (DEN).

The GO is supported by the following Specific Objectives (SOs):

- SO1: Promoting professionalisation of organisations already practising DEN
- SO2: Creating an exchange of competencies of European school/organisations interested in improving their competences on DEN
- SO3: Providing a systematisation of the DEN pedagogical approach
- SO4: Promoting DEN in traditional schools and organisations not familiar with these concepts yet
- SO5: Fostering change in education policy development

In order to achieve this objective, the project DEN is divided into three main activities:

- A1 Research
- A2 Workshop
- A3 Guidelines

The Den project

what is

DEN is a European project funded by the Erasmus+ Programme (Key Action 2).

Start date: 01.04.2022
End date: 31.06.2023

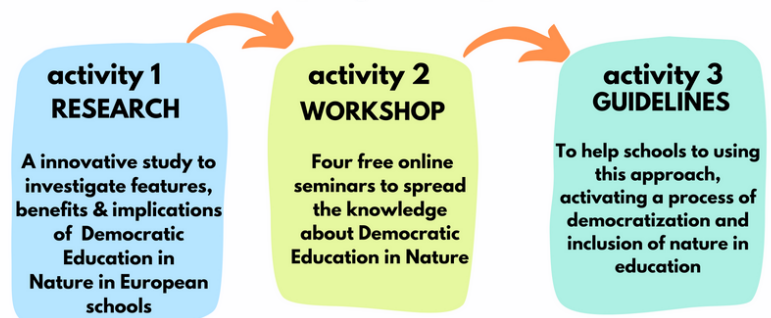
about us

The project is implemented in three European countries by three democratic schools in nature: Brussels Outdoor School (Belgium) Playa Escuela (Spain) Albero della Tuscia (Italy).

our mission

Systematise and disseminate a pedagogical approach that bridges Nature Education with Democratic Education, in order to promote children's inner motivation and talents, active citizenship and environmental stewardship.

The project steps



What is Democratic Education in Nature?

Democratic Education in Nature is a pedagogical concept that combines Democratic Education and Education in Nature, by establishing schools with a strong connection to Nature, where democratic values, such as self-determination and democratic community processes, are the central pedagogical approach.

This concept tries to combine the benefits of both approaches, understanding that the Democratic philosophy is the pedagogical core, taken out into nature, to benefit from all the richness this surrounding is offering.

Based on self-directed education, this approach comes from the belief that the neutral, not intentionally designed and not pre-established character of nature spaces, potentiates the fundamental idea of free self-determination.

Challenges, needs and possibilities

Several studies suggest the need for a more respectful education that is based on a holistic wellbeing of the person, not only on academic achievements, while also pointing out the importance of exposure and connection with nature for a healthy development of the child.

At the same time, we also witness that conventional educational is very slow to change, and the road to put in place a respectful education in nature is still long.

The benefits of self-determination and nature education that emerge in the most recent literature on children development are fully reported by the empirical findings showcased in the DEN project. Applying Democratic Education in Nature is beneficial for a healthy development of the students, to boost their motivation and to promote their personal and social skills.

At the same time, there are financial, logistical and legal challenges, especially at national level, that need to be overcome to support the application of Democratic Education in Nature.

There is a need for more awareness raising activities, evidence-based research, political advocacy towards key educational policy makers, and also legal actions at an EU and International level.

Why these guidelines?

DEN guidelines is a practical document aimed at providing recommendations to actors interested in adapting DEN methodology in their contexts.

The objective of the guidelines is to transfer project outcomes to educational stakeholders in order to activate a process of democratisation and inclusion of nature in the European schools.

The guidelines are considered a comprehensive, hands-on document that targets the following main actors: academia, policy makers, schools and families with the common aim of supporting such stakeholders in embracing Democratic Education in Nature.

Schools can use this documents to understand how to include nature and Democratic Education in their curricula and the need to offer visibility & recognition to the Democratic Education in Nature pedagogy.

DEN wants to propose solutions also at policy level, by promoting the creation of legal frameworks that facilitate the acceptance and the adoption of the approach behind DEN project. Policymakers at local, regional, national and European level can use this document to inspire government departments & educational policy makers in scaling up DEN methodologies and transfer the use of Democratic Education in Nature into other policy areas.

For academia, guidelines can be used as an instrument to further trigger the debate on educational changes, as well as providing insights for academic literature on Democratic Education and outdoor learning, as so there is no such project at European level.

DEN guidelines are also addressed to parents and parents' associations, as key stakeholders that interact with the school to improve the school environment and quality of education.

RECOMMENDATION FOR POLICY MAKERS

- Follow up-to-date recommendations made by international organisations like the UNESCO and the Council of Europe on the call for new pedagogical experiences, acknowledging that the old/traditional educational system is not equipped to the needs of the 21st century skill development.
- Bring more attention to soft and life skills, as for citizen competences, and promote them in the educational legal frameworks.
- Focus the educational curriculums on fostering dynamic interconnected competences, rather than on memorising rigid academical content.
- Prioritise mental health and promote inclusive policies as e.g. psychological attention.
- Make the teacher job less heavy and more attractive, reducing student/teacher ratios and taking bureaucratic pressure of them, so they can focus better on the human level of their interactions and adapt more flexible to the student needs.
- Reconsider the traditional exams (e.g. the PISA programm) as not the best way to evaluate learning development and real potential.
- Distinguish the pedagogical approaches, according to the different characteristics, between basic education (focused on soft/life skills and citizen competences) and higher professional education (focused on the needed specific knowledge), and establishing more flexible qualification models for accessing higher education, that respond better to the specific profiles that a needed in the different carriers, and leads the young talent more efficiently to flourish and succeed.
- Avoid ideologically loaded educational questions to be 'hot topics' for politicians, establishing committees of experts that lead the public discussion.
- Put direct democracy into practice in schools, especially in a context of rise of political populism.
- Recognise the Democratic Education approach and the importance of regular nature experiences, and allow flexibility in the legal frameworks so that Democratic Education in Nature can be recognised in its full and inclusive implementation, also through the access to public funding.

EU level:

- Need for better alignment between national legal framework and EU directives.
- Reach out to national levels with the EU position on educational updates and development.
- Provide national recommendations and supervise that national education policies follow international standards.

RECCOMENDATION FOR ACADEMICS

- Need for a better definition of Democratic Education from an academic perspective as there is no established, common and agreed concept that define Democratic Education.
- Importance that academics spend more time investigating on self-directed education and on its benefit on the long term development.
- Importance of undertaking research on self-directed education taking a cross sectoral research (pedagogy neurological studies); both theoretical and practical level.
- Importance to provide data and more research on the alumni of democratic school (their adaptation to higher education and/or to the job market).
- More presence of Democratic Education as a topic in higher education: more teaching on this subject - in particular for students of Educational Studies- more training, internships.
- As a follow up of the above points, there is need for more divulgation of Democratic Education in Nature outside the academic community.
- Need to put more in emphasis the recent studies and publication from international organisations that recognises the negative effects of traditional education in children wellbeing and whole development.
- Need to bridge the gap between university training and educational practices, allowing a more fluid exchange between University courses on education and what happens in the field.
- Raise awareness in academic surroundings and teachers curriculum about benefits of natural exposure for health, development, social live and environmental consciousness
- Include courses on outdoor activities in the teachers' curriculum.
- Invest in trainings on emotional accompaniment and non-violent communication.

RECCOMENDATION FOR SCHOOLS

- Consider the role of the teacher as a key starting point towards innovation in schools, therefore dedicate time to the selection of teachers and their training.
- Promote self-education of the adults, in particular of teachers, so they can be a reference to children development.
- Build trustful relationship within the school pedagogical teams.
- Seek to preserve Self-Directed Education as a central motor of development and learning.
- Promote personal development in democratic environments, which form citizens accustomed to responsible, cooperative and supportive democratic participation.
- Recognise free play as an ethological need for a healthy development, and therefore as a fundamental right of during childhood and youth.
- Strongly increase the students' freedom of movement.
- Be in continuous contact with the natural, socio-cultural and socio-economic environment outside of the school.
- Promote a pedagogical work that acts on situational and spontaneous concepts (and not pre-established and rigid study plans), and is focused on the process itself (and not mainly towards the visible products).
- Live together in inclusive, open and mixed, also mixed-aged groups, which provide indispensable empathetic social learning.
- Implement self-evaluation systems for students and teachers.
- Offer psychological support to both students and the pedagogical team.
- Enable students to evaluate their teachers, and consider their opinion in order to promote a reflective work of coexistence on the part of all.
- Offer training to parents on current topics that have an influence on education.

RECCOMENDATION FOR FAMILIES

- Parents should to go more outdoors in order to experience themselves as a family what are the benefits of being in contact with nature and allow children to get use to the natural environment.
- Need for better understanding from families on what Democratic Education in Nature is about: need for mental deschooling, critical review, create more understanding among families maybe through partent groups, collective readings and school circles that can help parents get acquainted with this educational philosophy.
- Outdoor Democratic Education facilitates inclusion of children with support needs, so we suggest to think about this option if your children has special needs.
- Parent should learn how to trust children, allowing them to experience their passions and to discover who they are through self-directed education at home.
- Parent should learn more about the importance of soft skills versus hard skills.
- Parents could take a more active role in the educational community of their children.
- Need to establish fluid communication with the pedagogical team of their children's school.
- Parents could apply some principles of Democratic Education at home, so that there is no discrepancy between school and family philosophy: this could be done by starting having a shared decision making process in family that includes also children.

National Transferability action plans

BELGIUM

- Democratic schools in Belgium are one of the few "alternative" educational settings not financially supported by the regional governments. We suggest schools to try to activate a process of recognition of democratic education with public authorities, in order to enter into the "free/subsidised" school system.
- A possibility for democratic schools to be created in Belgium is to become a small branch of an already existing public school, under a more experimental pedagogy.
- It is possible to restructure the school organisation even in big establishment and to find ways to have smaller group of students that can focus more on self-directed education and soft skills . One example is what has been proposed by the Warm School project: <https://www.warmescholen.net/inspiratie>
- For new school buildings, it is important to be created closed to nature or in a way that they can have more outdoor spaces in the school premises.
- It is fundamental to nurture a relationship with the nature that is present in the local surroundings. This can be done every day (a small walk) or once a week (trip on the closest park) or once every month (a few days camp).
- Even for more traditional public schools, it is possible to integrate democratic elements in their school organisation. Please see the DESC project for more information (<https://desc.academy/>). This can be done by encouraging taking and sharing in circles, small decisions together with children, some time for self-directed education.
- An open schooling approach can be fostered by knowing the neighbour community and the local savoir-faires and to integrate them in the school "hub".
- Given the flexibility that the curriculum can have in some schools, it is strongly suggested to include at least some hours a week where students can choose what to do and can propose activities.
- It is important that higher education in Belgium is aware of what Democratic Education in Nature is and that this topic can be taught to future teachers and headmasters during their studies.
- More training for teachers is needed, particularly on soft skills, so that they can learn what and how to experience themselves self-directed education, self discovery and continuous self-improvement. School managers in Belgium should therefore encourage the teachers body to pursue such trainings given the offers on this subject that are already existing in Belgium

National Transferability action plans

ITALY

- Offer financial support for democratic school projects to make them accessible for everyone
- Spread awareness of what 'Democratic Education in Nature' is and include it in all educational studies to inform future teachers
- Flexibility in following the curriculum.
- Promote presentations and other material to inform society about benefits of Democratic Education in Nature.

- Integrate nature in schools:
 - New schools should be positioned close to nature
 - Schools should have more outdoor programs for children.
 - Nurture a relationship with nature and local surroundings (through walks, camps, survival training, green constructions, gathering of wild plants, animal interaction, agriculture)
 - Find a stable and unambiguous legal framework for organising outings in nature with students that relieves teachers of their legal responsibility.
 - Include in each school's curriculum the need to spend at least 50 hours per year in natural spaces.
 - Organise outdoor lessons whenever possible. Equip the outside perimeter of schools with facilities that allow lessons to take place. Where there is no space outside the school, find an agreement with insurance companies and create conventions with the nearest parks.

- Integrate democratic elements in public schools:
 - Less children in one class to allow a more personalized approach
 - Activities with mixed age groups at school
 - Include more "free time" in daily school live instead of structured lessons (for free play, social interactions, exploring, moving ...)
 - Include student class assemblies from primary school.
 - Increase the frequency of class assemblies in the secondary school, organise school councils with a larger number of participating students and broaden the students' outreach both within the school structure and outside to the community by organising social and cultural events
 - Making civic education a process of democratic participation, in which students can actively participate in their learning and in the challenges they will face once they leave school.
 - Plan some time in which children freely follow a personal project and do autonomous research etc.
 - More focus on softskills.
 - Meetings in circles to speak and listen.
 - for more inspiration see DESC-project (<https://desc.academy/>)

National Transferability action plans

SPAIN

- Create an independent national institution for pedagogy, which sets scientific standards for education policy and helps to establish independent continuity in legal frameworks, avoiding the common abrupt changes of direction every time the government changes..
- Enable the creation of smaller schools, with infrastructures adapted to the pedagogical concept, and not the other way around.
- Allow the curriculum to be co-created by the students themselves in a situationally flexible way, so that their interests and motivations are prioritised.
- Understand and accept the unique identity and autonomy of different educational communities as part of democratic diversity.
- Allow for retroactive documentation of self-managed learning processes as evidence of assessment, rather than requiring a pre-set syllabus to be followed and standardised tests at the end of each subject.
- Give greater weight to psycho-pedagogical knowledge in teacher training.
- Train pedagogical professionals in Democratic Education and Education in Nature so that they can apply it in their daily work.
- Promote spaces for debate and self-management of the entire educational community, with the main participation of children as protagonists.
- Introduce Democratic Education in Nature in public schools with, for example: training and accompaniment of teachers by experts; community organisation of daily outings in Nature, once a week as a daily day in the open air, and once a month, in coexistence trips (of more days), in mixed age groups.
- Support innovation programmes within public schools, with, for example: a micro-school within the macro-school, see the DESC project (<https://desc.academy/>).
- Going out into the world: integrating everyday local activity from an early age, more and more frequently.
- Guarantee financial support to Democratic Schools, Schools in Nature and Democratic Schools in Nature, in order to guarantee equal educational opportunities, as they are allies on which public education is nourished.
- Understand the urgency of reconnecting with Nature: generate a wide range of activities (including free play!!!) in Nature for all ages, and demand that this is taken into account in urban planning.



**Co-funded by
the European Union**

The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not imply any endorsement of its contents, which reflect solely the opinion of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

