

Cork Democratic School:

Do I really know what I'm letting my child (and myself) into?

A reality check

Democratic education is not for faint hearted. It really goes against the grain, challenging traditions that are centuries old and accepted almost universally. It is natural that rejecting such deeply engrained cultural legacy may trigger confusion, anxiety and resistance. While we have reasons to believe that democratic education is vastly superior to the kind of schooling we are all familiar with (otherwise we would not go into trouble of setting up a democratic school!), we would also caution against embracing this alternative model too readily, without considering all implications of such bold decision. This document was written to help you reflect on those implications.

Am I *really* OK with my child playing all day?

Children, when left to their own devices, spent much of their time playing. There is strong evidence to suggest that such free, unguided play leads to good social skills, robust mental health, creativity and strong academic skills (Gray, [2015](#), [2017a](#)). While those benefits should accrue over time, all that adults can see at first is children 'just playing'. We are conditioned to believe that such play is 'not education' – indeed, an enemy of 'proper education', as it takes time away from 'real learning'.

How would you feel if your child spent all their time at school playing – day after day? Would it make you anxious to the point of intervening to ensure that at least some academic learning takes place? If that's the case, then you may not be ready for democratic education. We would challenge you to read (and reflect) more on the potential of free play and self-directed learning. Various sources listed in this document may be a good place to start.

Am I prepared for my child being 10 years old and still not able to read?

Experience of democratic schools indicate that children acquire their literacy skills in a natural, spontaneous way. There is no drama around it and little (if any) talk of dyslexia . Still, the age at which children become

literate varies. Some kids arrive already literate before their 5th birthday. Most learn to read and write by the time they are 10. Few require a little longer ([Gray, 2010](#); [Harnish, 2015](#)). It appears that no one has graduated from a democratic school without sound literacy skills, even though the students are not compelled to acquire literacy, not even encouraged, and there is no systematic literacy instruction of any kind — unless the child requests it.

How would you feel if your child if it turned out that your child doesn't want to be anywhere near a book or other reading matter? That they are occupying themselves otherwise, while their mainstream school peers go through structured reading instruction every day? Would you trust your child to start learning when they are ready, and trust the school's approach of providing literacy-rich environment and prompt support *when requested by the child* — but nothing else?

Am I OK with my child spending a lot of time on screen?

Democratic schools differ in their screentime policies. Some are more liberal than others. What's common is the process of reaching such policy decisions: adults and children sit down together, deliberate, reach consensus or take a vote. Our school will be no different there. It is hard to predict what our staff and students — sitting and talking together — will come up with regards to accessing and using computers and other electronic devices. It is possible that such policy will be pretty liberal. Are you OK, therefore, with your child spending a lot of time on screen?

While we want you to reflect on this, we want you to reassure you as well. Whatever policy will emerge, it will naturally respect the law of the land — children won't access adult content they are legally barred from accessing. Secondly, there is evidence suggesting that the risks of spending time on screen have often been overplayed (and the benefits downplayed) ([Gray 2018a](#), [2018b](#); [Odgers & Jensen, 2020](#)). Thirdly — we anticipate that our school will offer some many face-to-face attractions, that a computer (or a phone) screen will find plenty of worthy competitors, Fourthly — and perhaps most importantly — our students, while free to choose their activities, will be monitored by adult staff. If a student alienates themselves from school life, burying themselves in online activities at the exclusion of all else, we will notice pretty quickly. We will try to engage with such student, to find out what is going on.

“If my child goes to a democratic school and is happy there, but not learning very much in a way of standard academic stuff, that’s OK – after all, I can always send them to after-school grinds to allow them to catch up”

If you think along those lines, you are not ready for democratic education. The experience of our colleagues from other democratic schools is unequivocal in that respect: expectations (spoken or unspoken) that the child *must acquire some academic skills by certain age*, ruins child’s experience at the school, loading them with sense of guilt and obligation that is inimical to genuine self-directed education. In any case, parents who feel that way usually end up pulling their child out of the democratic school in the end.

Am I OK with my child choosing not to go to university?

Graduates of democratic schools choose a wide variety of career paths, from traditional to quite unusual. Some (indeed, most) go to university, others don’t. Whatever they choose, they are generally happy, well adjusted, successful people ([Talgrass Sudbury School, 2017](#); [Gray, 2017b](#) — see especially the final section on follow-up studies of Summerhill and Sudbury Valley students).

One of the strengths of the democratic school model is that its students have time, resources and support to discover and develop their talents and interests, and learn about potential future career paths. There will be ample opportunities to discuss ‘What do I want to do next?’ and ‘How can I get there?’ question with our staff. We can also facilitate contact with professionals in a variety of fields our students may take interest in. Arranging a shadowing visit won’t be a problem, longer-term placements or apprenticeships may also be possible on occasions. Consequently, our graduates will be able to make more mature, informed decisions about their futures.

It is also worth bearing in mind that the further and higher education system is much more flexible than it used to be; older age — or even lack of Leaving Certificate — are generally no bar from entry. Universities reserve some places for so called mature students (where maturity is defined as 23 years of age!). For more information, see Citizens Information on [third level courses for mature students](#), as well as [Bernard Moran’s analysis of alternatives to Leaving Cert](#), published on Wicklow Sudbury School blog.

Do I trust my child to make good decision about their development, their learning and their future?

All specific questions listed above really boil down to this: ***How much do I trust my child? How much do I trust them to make wise choices, and recover from mistakes?*** Bearing in mind that, in making those choices, your child won't be alone, but will have access to competent, caring adults, and will be immersed in a stable, moral democratic school community?

If you have serious doubts on this front, we would advise you to engage in more self-reflection and research (on child development, effective learning, democratic school model) before you make your decision.

Am I prepared for awkward questions from family and friends?

Playing ALL DAY!? No homework!? Is he really learning anything!???? How is he/she going to learn any self-discipline? Is he going to be able to get a proper job? We see these questions as natural and understandable, but they may feel annoying or even threatening – especially if coming from those near and dear to you. What's your strategy for handling them? Do you expect any pressure being put on you to return your child to the mainstream education? If so, do you think you will be able to handle that pressure, without ripping your family (or friendships) apart? How are you going to do it?

I really want to send my child to your school, by my husband/wife/partner is opposed. What should I do?

If that's the case, we would advise against sending our child to our school until that disagreement is resolved. Conflict around school choice may ruin child's your experience with us. This is especially the case if you are separated or divorced from the other parent of your child, and your decision to send your child to our school my result in a custody dispute.

If at all possible, invite the reluctant party to explore democratic education. Suggest they visit the school, check the website, read some literature. Don't rush it.

“I think this is a great idea which I would be more than happy to support, but my child doesn’t want to hear about it. They tell me they are happy where they are, and don’t want to be separated from their friends”

Sending a child to a democratic school *against* their will would run counter to the principles of democratic education. Our school won’t take on the students who don’t want to be there. And being separated from your well-established network of friends is an understandable concern — one we hear about often.

Try to engage your child in the discussion about our school. Encourage them to watch some movies (you can find some in our *Democratic Education Reading List* document) — and then to visit, see the place, talk to staff and students. Also, bear in mind that each enrolment will be preceded by a two-week trial period, where both parties — the candidate student and the school community — have an opportunity to evaluate each other and see if they are a good fit.

Am I prepared for the fees?

Our school shall be not-for-profit enterprise. And we would dearly love our it to be free, so that parents’ limited means are not a barrier to entry, and the fees don’t burden them excessively. We have to be realistic, however: unless an amazingly wealthy and generous benefactor is found (we are looking!), or the education funding policy changes radically, so that the money follow the child, irrespective of the type of education they receive (we shall be lobbying for this!), we will have little choice but to charge fees to make the school viable. Please consider this carefully — not least to avoid a situation where the child has to be pulled out before graduation, as you are unable to afford the fees any longer.

It's all great, but....

If you have any other concerns about enrolling you child at our school, please discuss them with us. It is really important that all potential issues are resolved before you child joins our school community, rather than return to haunt us later.

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