

## **Students making their voices heard: The weekly class meeting**

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Stage(s): 1–3  
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School  
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### **Rationale, aims and objectives**

The rationale that underpins the Weekly Class Meeting is the belief that to be active participants in a democracy then students must experience democratic practices in their daily life at school. The arrangement can be said to have three aims; firstly, to induct students into the values of democratic meetings; secondly, to give students the relevant skills and thirdly, to establish regular opportunities for students to practice their skills.

The whole school benefits from the Weekly Class Meeting in at least two ways; students can use the skills acquired in the context of the smaller class meeting to express their views in the larger whole school meetings, which are also a regular feature of this school. Secondly, the significance of a formal arrangement such as the weekly class meeting in the timetable for each class makes explicit to the whole school community, the importance of democratic procedures in the school's curriculum.

### **Implementation**

In the NSW HSIE syllabus, *social systems and structures; roles, rights and responsibilities*; we believe class meetings held by K-6 students introduce the students to experiences, grouped in the following stages: Early Stage 1, students identify ways in which their own needs and the needs of others are met, individually and cooperatively. They participate in development of class rules, behave responsibly and take on roles (SSES1).

Stage 1, students respect the process of rule making and rule enforcement and take part in classroom rule making, (SSS1.7 and SSS1.8).

Stage 2, students demonstrate how participation can contribute to the quality of their school and community life. They become more involved in school and

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community issues and demonstrate more responsible attitudes towards civic action (SSS2.8).

Stage 3 , students understand and explain why we value fairness and socially just principles. They accept responsibility for being involved in their community, take part in discussions about majority vote, the rights of minorities and involve themselves in whole school and community issues (SSS3.8).

The weekly class meeting is a permanent fixture of the school timetable. Each class appoints its own Chairperson, sets its own agenda and manages the meeting. The Chairperson has a facilitative role with the power of imposing sanctions on students who disrupt the meeting.

During *Celebrating Democracy Week* we held the weekly class meeting in Lane Cove. In turn, each class managed their meeting in public. The content of each class meeting was naturally varied. Older students in Years 5 and 6 debated the merits of increasing computer time. Years 3-4 discussed issues about pets in the classroom. Years 1 and 2 resolved, among other matters, that the class teacher did not have the right to move students from where they had chosen to sit in the class. The K-1 students were possibly a little overcome by the public attention and largely confined their discussion to a series of reminders about missing items.

The meetings were watched by the public, Councillors from Lane Cove Council, Anthony Roberts, the State MP and attended by the local press. Invitations were also sent to the Federal MP (who declined with apologies), Channel 9 News desk, Sydney Morning Herald and the Independent Education Union. We displayed a large banner across Lane Cove Plaza to announce *Celebrating Democracy Week* and distributed handbills explaining the significance of students taking part in school decision-making.

## Implementation

The main features, before the event, included liaison with Lane Cove Council for permission to use the plaza, hire of chairs, PA equipment, sending out invitations, design and printing of handbills and banner and following up invitations and media contacts.

The main problem we were unable to overcome satisfactorily was engaging with representatives of the wider community. For example, on a local level, press, Councillors and MP actively participated in our event whereas, we were less than successful on a broader level.

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In our experience we conclude that *Celebrating Democracy Week* was popular with the local community and received only superficial support from the broader community.

The weekly class meeting will continue as a permanent feature of the school.

## Evaluation

Students' reaction: *It was really good because I liked being up near the shops and showing people what we do at our school.* (student aged 7years)

*Great because a lot of people got to see what we do, how we choose things and get to do things.* (student aged 8 years)

Teachers' reaction: *I have a sense of professional pride seeing my students talk about their concerns and feelings in public, just as freely and as confidently as they do in class.* (Class teacher)

*The children were excited and I enjoyed watching them discuss their issues in public.* (Class teacher)

Community reaction: The State MP addressed the public between class meetings. He commended the school's initiative and described the students as future politicians. Members of the public made a point of telling students and teachers that they enjoyed and appreciated the event.

## Reflection

The class meeting, as a commitment to life-long learning, is an integral part of this school's commitment to democratic education. In accordance with the views of Dewey, Kilpatrick et al, we would say that the development of democratic habits must begin in the earliest years of a child's education.

*The school should be viewed as an extension of civil society and continuous with it and the student should be encouraged to operate as a member of a community, actively pursuing interests in cooperation with others.*

John Dewey (School and Society)

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