

## Learner awards: democracy in action

### Teacher guidance

You can use this resource to introduce underpinning concepts that will help learners with autism and other types of SEND to understand **democracy**.

It also provides opportunities for learners to develop and practise their **English skills** including:

#### Reading

- Recognise names/photos of people in a group
- Read single words or short phrases, such as award category titles

#### Writing

- Write other people's names
- Design a ballot paper/winners' certificate
- Use signs or symbols to indicate a choice
- Register own choices on a ballot paper

#### Speaking and listening/communicating

- Contribute ideas and opinions in a discussion
- Listen and respond to the ideas of others
- Negotiate with others to reach a collective view
- Indicate a choice between given options
- Respond to questions

### Introduction

**Learners with autism and other types of SEND often find it difficult to understand abstract concepts, such as democracy. This resource will help you root some of the principles and practices associated with democracy into a context with which the learners are already familiar.** Learners will also have a chance to actually engage in the democratic process of voting and see how it leads to collective decisions or choices being made – in this case, which learners get to win an award.

The activity also provides opportunities to explore with learners

- what qualities we admire in those around us
- how different people can contribute differently to a group, community or society.

This learning may be useful in helping learners begin to engage with the British value of **mutual respect and tolerance**.

In order to make the learning truly meaningful, it would be helpful if you or your organisation goes on to make the awards and celebrate the winners through some form of awards ceremony.

The tasks below can be adapted to suit your own setting and the needs and abilities of your learners; the notes for teachers below include some suggestions for how to do this.

## Task 1: Agreeing the categories

(If you are working with a fixed set of categories for an existing learner awards scheme, which means you can't involve learners in agreeing categories, you can skip straight to Task 2.)

Introduce the idea that the learners are going to help organise a set of learner awards which will recognise and reward learners who are doing something good, whether that's to do with achievement, attitude or progress in class, or doing something that benefits others – their friends, their learning group, the organisation or the wider community.

You will need to decide how wide a range of learners are in scope for the awards; they could be for a single small learning group, a department or year group, or the whole learner body. In order to keep the associated activities meaningful and manageable, learners with more limited cognitive ability will benefit from an awards scheme with a smaller scope where they all know the full range of eligible learners. They may also find it easier to work with just three or four clearly differentiated categories of award.

Explore with the learners the categories for the awards that they think should be included. You might decide that staff will come up with some categories (perhaps around achievement) and learners will come up with others (perhaps around personal qualities).

Depending on the ability of your learners you might:

- give them a set of cards using words and/or symbols representing possible categories and have them indicate which they want to include and which they don't (e.g. through sorting them into two piles – yes and no; ranking the cards, perhaps through a Diamond 9, to indicate which are most and least important to them; giving a YES/NO response to a direct question: 'Do you want an Award for kindest learner?')
- provide learners with a few examples and ask them to come up with their own suggestions
- hold a class discussion about what attributes deserve recognition. You might pose some specific questions like: is it more important to reward people who achieve great things or people who put in lots of effort? Then invite groups of learners each to come up with two suggestions around a certain theme (e.g. learners making a difference; attitudes we want to reward).

Possible categories could include:

- most helpful learner
- best team-worker
- most hard-working learner
- learner who is most fun to be around
- learner who has made most progress
- kindest learner
- learner who never gives up
- most enthusiastic learner
- best leader
- most positive learner.

You can use this activity to help learners understand that:

- people have different strengths and qualities
- people contribute in different ways to their communities
- everyone can bring something to their community
- it's important to recognise and value positive achievements, actions and attitudes.

## Task 2: Voting

### Exploring decision-making options

Where appropriate, you can discuss with your learners different options for deciding who should win each award. You could put different suggestions to them and ask them to say which is fair, which is not and why, or which of the suggestions is *most* fair. Options to discuss could include:

1. I (the tutor) am going to make the decision
2. The principal is going to decide
3. I am going to ask one learner (in each group) to say who they think should get an award
4. Parents are going to vote on it
5. Learners and staff are going to vote, but one staff vote is worth twice as much as one learner vote
6. Learners and staff will vote and everyone's vote counts the same.

You might present them with option 1 as the planned way forward and see how they react – before leading them into a discussion of what would be a fairer way to choose the winners and why.

### Casting votes

Once the categories are agreed and voting is established as the best way to decide who should win each award, you can move on to organising the vote. Depending on the needs and abilities of your learner group and the number of possible candidates, you could use

1. dot-voting
2. a show of hands
3. learners standing next to a photo/poster of their preferred candidate
4. a simple online voting app (e.g. Doodle)
5. a secret ballot.

The first three options are good visual ways to show the views of the majority and therefore may be appropriate to more visual learners. They also lend themselves to an analysis of the spread of voters and the margins by which decisions were made. They are only suitable, however, where there is a relatively small pool of candidates.

Option 4 may increase accessibility for some; it also allows learners to use a medium with which they are familiar (and which they may already use to vote for contestants on shows such as *Strictly*, *the X Factor*, or *I'm a Celebrity*).

You can use a ballot box approach, option 5, when there are lots of candidates by asking learners simply to write on a slip of paper the name of their choice of winner and post it into the box. Where you have a more limited number of candidates, option 5 gives you the chance to re-create the voting methodology and forms used in local and general elections, which may be of particular benefit if you are helping learners prepare to cast their vote in an upcoming election.

### Task 3: Reflective discussion

The nature of the discussion will depend on the abilities of the learners but could include the following observations:

- Sometimes decisions need to be made about things that affect us all
- We need a fair way to make decisions
- Voting means everyone gets a say
- In a fair vote, no one person's vote counts any more than anyone else's
- Decisions made by voting satisfy the majority
- Sometimes the result of the vote isn't what you wanted, but it's still a fair way to decide
- In the UK, we make decisions about who runs the country by voting
- Different countries have different ways of deciding who runs their country
- In some countries all the big decisions are made by just one person or a very small group of people. (That's a bit like the principal or the senior management team getting to choose all the award winners by themselves.)
- The way that the UK is run is called democracy – that means that the people decide who they want to be in charge. (Like when we *all* voted for who we wanted to win an award).

You could put the following questions to learners:

- Do you think the result was fair?
- How do you feel about someone winning when you didn't vote for him/her?
- (When) have you used voting as a way to make group decisions or choices before?
- Have other members of your family or friends been involved in voting? Do you know what they were voting for/about?
- Can you think of other occasions where voting would be a good way to make a decision or choose something?