

Democrat
EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY

Policy Brief

Education for Responsible Democratic Citizenship

A European Vision

Deliverable 2.2

Democrat

Education for Democracy

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KEY MESSAGES

Democracy is the cornerstone of European identity, which is complementary to national identities. One way of defending and improving this model against the challenges it is currently facing, such as growing polarisation, increasing threats to human security and expanding digitalisation, is education for responsible democratic citizenship or education for democracy (EfD) for short.. EfD strategies and tools to strengthen the democratic agency/capacity for action of citizens, the youth in particular, through transformative learning is the focus of the DEMOCRAT project. Key findings and proposed policy action as of now, after the first seven months of this three-year project, include:

- To safeguard democracy within the European Union, transformative education for democracy must be reinforced, also taking into account fast-moving digitalisation and fast-breached planetary boundaries.
- The shift to transformative education for democracy should be based on a coherent competence framework defined in complementarity with the frameworks of citizenship competences proposed by the EU (Key Competences for Lifelong Learning) and the Council of Europe (Competences for Democratic Culture).
- The competence framework should be translated by Member States and schools in different parts of Europe into a sample curriculum for responsible democratic citizenship adjusted to their education systems and societies.
- Schools have to be laboratories of democratic practice on a daily basis and across subjects, not just for a few hours of civic education or education for democracy per week, and need to connect with a conducive local, global and digital environment.
- Students need to be aware of both their rights and responsibilities, and be guided to act on both, within their peer groups and in relation to their teachers, parents, local authorities and other relevant stakeholders.
- A crucial aspect of any approach to education for democracy is the competence of the teacher to create an environment in which the students can learn democracy.

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Policy challenges and envisaged changes

Democracy as a political and social order is being increasingly challenged by polarisation and extremism, mistrust in scientific research and conspiratorial beliefs, as well as by threats to human security like the impacts of climate change, pandemics and rising inequality. This means that democratic principles such as liberty, equality and solidarity, as well as respect for other fundamental rights are at stake. Increasingly a sense of responsibility towards the planet is also being added to the responsibility towards people and societies, thus combatting biodiversity loss and pollution, including plastics pollution, is now part of the challenges facing democracy. Responsibility for the planet points to the global dimension that any concept of citizenship and especially democratic citizenship must have today. Moreover, the digital dimension is becoming ever more prominent and must be taken into account, as today's citizens, especially the youth, are increasingly active in cyberspace and form virtual communities within and across borders.

Democracy is the cornerstone of European identity, which is complementary to national identities. Therefore, the European Union and its Member States must place normative emphasis on democracy as a model for solving societal and environmental challenges and problems. One way of defending and improving this model is education for responsible democratic citizenship or education for democracy (EfD) for short.

Although education for democracy is an element of citizenship education in the EU member states, it needs to be strengthened and given a distinct status against the aforementioned background of growing anti-democratic tendencies. This requires a coherent design of democratic competences to enable citizens to address current societal problems at local, regional, national, European and global level. This can serve as a reference point for national and regional EfD strategies, in order to strengthen the democratic agency/capacity for the action of citizens, especially the youth, through transformative learning.

Evidence, Analysis and Results

The Democrat project is still at an early stage of its development. However, desk research on the conceptual framework and the competences associated with Responsible Democratic Citizenship (RDC) and Education for Democracy (EfD) already points in a certain direction for further research and policy action. The primary governance level for EfD as it relates to RDC is the country level, as it encapsulates what most people perceive as their main identity and polity of reference. The diversity of languages, education systems, historical and socio-economic circumstances, and legal frameworks among the different EU Member States makes it difficult and probably counter-productive to try to design an EfD curriculum that could be followed in all countries. In the area of education, the EU has only “supporting competence”, namely it may support, coordinate or supplement the action of EU Member States but cannot adopt legislation or implement policies. In fact, the EU has competence in certain related areas like multilingualism, but that can push the agenda only up to a point.

Although democracy involves a strong element of negotiation in the search for broadly acceptable solutions, something that is innate in human nature, democratic knowledge and behaviour need to be taught, because they contain structural and other elements and traditions that have taken shape over centuries, and cannot be expected to just be transferred via the human genome. DEMOCRAT argues that democracy is a social order and should be learned continuously in everyday practice to consolidate it and improve its quality. Therefore, education for democracy is crucial for empowering democratic agency.

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Democracy is a conflict-prone construct, in which conflicts of interest are commonplace and are (or should be) resolved through democratic procedures, which in turn can be the subject to interest-driven disputes. In addition, relevant studies on political participation show that socio-economic status influences political participation, in the sense that people with lower socio-economic status participate less in political processes but are also less represented in parliaments and other deliberative bodies. Therefore, EfD is not only about preserving democracy, but also about improving its quality through the inclusion of a broad range of social collectives and individuals in the deliberation of political decisions.

From current theories of democracy and proposals on citizenship competences and democratic competences, two key competences have been filtered out: own participation and ensuring the participation of other, especially underprivileged individuals and groups ("solidary participation") and the ability to debate ("deliberation"). Given the importance of the quality of the information underlying public policy debates and the growing prevalence of disinformation, it is necessary to add as a competence the ability to judge the trustworthiness of information. In the context of growing undemocratic tendencies, it is also necessary to be competent in democratic resilience, that is preventing or reacting to social challenges without losing one's democratic disposition, based on a critical commitment to fundamental principles such as respect for human rights and rights of minorities and keeping up democratic values and norms even in adverse situations. This way we identify four key competences of a responsible democratic citizen: Solidary Participation, Deliberation, Judgement and Democratic Resilience.

The framework developed by the Democrat consortium permits the design of a European curriculum for responsible democratic citizenship and its testing in a flexible way in local settings in cooperation with schools and other societal actors. These local pilot projects will use innovative pedagogical approaches and digital tools to engage learners and convey a deep understanding and acceptable patterns of democratic action.

Democracy needs to be learned continuously and public policies on education for democracy should go beyond purely technical, rigid, and top-down education. They should be linked to democratic practices within schools, in cooperation with other organisations and initiatives promoting democracy. DEMOCRAT's approach addresses policy development and implementation, combining top-down and bottom-up perspectives, and the positions of different stakeholders and their discourses.

Implementation of the DEMOCRAT project only started in March 2023, so much work remains to be done to deliver final recommendations on new curricula, pedagogies and tools to be used for Education for Democracy. However, based on the research done while developing our first deliverable, the Consortium has already come up with some initial policy recommendations.

Policy Recommendations

- **To safeguard democracy within the European Union, transformative education for democracy must be reinforced by giving priority to this topic in the open method of coordination at EU level and promoting mobilities and mutual learning, taking also into account fast-moving digitalisation and fast-breached planetary boundaries. EU Member States should review their curricular frameworks and the organisation of their school education to ensure the inclusion of EfD as a cross-cutting element in formal education.**

A review of policies on citizenship education and education for democracy in a number of EU countries shows that their relevance is often limited to the understanding of democracy as a formal political system. This

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reduces education for democracy to the transmission of knowledge about the political institutions and democratic procedures, but does not include the learning of democracy in practice.

Understanding democracy not only as a formal political system, but as a social order, the focus of strategies to safeguard and improve the model of democracy in Europe should shift to transformative education for democracy placing emphasis on learning democracy by doing.

National citizenship is increasingly challenged by the international codification of human rights, the constitution of supranational entities such as the EU, but also global societal changes such as migration flows and digitalisation, as well as environmental changes, like climate change and biodiversity loss. Alternatives such as global citizenship, digital citizenship and European citizenship are emerging.

- **The shift to transformative education for democracy should be based on a coherent competence framework defined in complementarity with the frameworks of citizenship competences proposed by the EU (Key Competences for Lifelong Learning) and the Council of Europe (Competences for Democratic Culture). Democrat is offering a framework that can be translated by the EU into a well-visualised and supported "DemComp", similar to other such tools (e.g. DigiComp, EntreComp, GreenComp, LifeComp).**

The shift to transformative education for democracy should be based on a coherent definition of a competence framework. There are many proposals for citizenship competences developed by academics, but also by the EU and the Council of Europe. In general, these proposals have a broad perspective on citizenship, so that democratic agency recedes into the background. To reinforce the democratic agency through education it is necessary to define the core competences of responsible democratic citizenship in detail, as proposed by DEMOCRAT in terms of solidary participation, deliberation, judgement and democratic resilience (see previous section).

- **The competence framework should be translated by Member States and schools in different parts of Europe into a sample curriculum for responsible democratic citizenship, that can be adapted in a flexible way to the distinct education system and societal context of each EU Member State.**

In order for such a competence framework to be incorporated into the education systems of EU Member States or other countries, it must be transferred into a learning curriculum that can be fitted into the national education systems flexibly. This is in response to the heterogeneity of the educational landscape in the EU, but also to the heterogeneity of school situations and the distinct societal characteristics of each country and region.

- **Schools have to be laboratories of democratic practice on a daily basis and across subjects, not just for a few hours of civic education or education for democracy per week, and need to connect with the local, global and digital environment by introducing participatory leadership methods. Local communities and society at large need to be conducive to learning and practising responsible democratic agency, through the actions of citizens, authorities and other relevant actors.**

Schools are central educational institutions for children and young people. This means that they are in a key position to play a central role in the development of democratic competences. Nevertheless, it has been shown that citizenship education that is based more on imparting factual knowledge of political institutions and procedures in traditional classes does not lead to a strengthening of democratic agency and to a strengthening of the will to act democratically. For this, it is necessary that democracy be practised within the school and outside of the school, thus enabling its internalisation by young people.

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In fact, education for democracy should not be conceived as a purely school-based matter, but as a social mandate. In order to strengthen responsible democratic agency, the cooperation of different actors is necessary, such as state institutions on different political and administrative levels, non-governmental organisations, social partners, neighbourhood associations and citizens, with the schools and other educational institutions as central actors.

- **Students need to be aware of both their rights and responsibilities, and be guided to act on both, within their peer groups and in relation to their teachers, parents, local authorities, and other relevant stakeholders.**

The focus on practical experience with democracy is intended to strengthen the students' democratic agency so that they become aware of their democratic rights and duties and perceive them as guides for their actions at all levels of society, such as in the family, at school, in their dealings with friends and acquaintances, but also at local, regional, national, European, and global levels. This does not imply that formal democratic procedures apply to all life situations, but that actions in all life situations should not violate basic democratic values, such as respect for human dignity and the rights of minorities.

- **A crucial aspect of any approach to education for democracy is the competence of the teacher to create a learning environment in which the students can learn democracy and to steer the process. For this, the EU as well as Member States should create learning and mentoring opportunities.**

A critical point of this approach is the preparation and willingness of teachers, trainers and other education professionals to apply principles of education for democracy. Teaching competence for democratic education is not a central element of teacher training either at universities or in continuing teacher training programmes. Therefore, a central requirement is to strengthen teachers' competences in the field of education for democracy. However, this does not only refer to teachers in public or private schools, but also to those who are involved in democratic education outside the formal education system. This is especially important for countries where democracy as a social order is at risk or not fully-fledged yet.

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