



Policy Brief

European Curriculum for Education for Democracy

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Executive Summary

This brief consolidates Project *DEMOCRAT* insights from a comparative analysis across six European nations—Germany, Spain (Catalonia), Finland, Estonia, Poland, and Ireland—highlighting the necessity for systematic incorporation of democratic education into national curricula. The current educational landscape reflects a broad acknowledgment of the importance of democracy education, though strategies for implementation vary widely. Common educational frameworks emphasize the integration of democratic principles into curricula, employing both theoretical and practical approaches. However, pedagogical practices differ significantly, ranging from traditional lectures to interactive methods. This diversity leads to inconsistencies in the effectiveness of democracy education across different countries.

Key observations made in the DEMOCRAT national analyses and desktop research reveal **that while national curricula often include democracy education, the depth and delivery methods lack uniformity. Pedagogical resources**, though diverse, are **inconsistently integrated across educational settings and levels**. Additionally, variations in teacher training programs result in **disparities in educators' preparedness** to effectively teach democratic principles. These inconsistencies highlight the need for a more cohesive approach to ensure uniform and effective democracy education. By addressing these variations, the educational systems can better prepare students to participate meaningfully in democratic processes.

This policy brief proposes **a coordinated European strategy** to foster a comprehensive understanding of democratic values among students. It also **promotes a more holistic view of learning and future competencies**.

By fostering a comprehensive, inclusive, and dynamic approach to democracy education, we can empower students not only to learn about democracy but to *live it*. This vision carries the optimistic message that we can inspire engaged, resilient, and informed citizens capable of steering democratic societies into a stronger, more inclusive future.

Proposed policy action

To enhance democracy education across Europe, the following strategies are recommended:

- **Unified curricular standards:** Develop standardized European curricular objectives for democracy education to ensure consistent learning across member states.
- **Comprehensive teacher education:** Integrate democracy and human rights modules in teacher training, supported by EU-funded initiatives and resource exchanges.
- **Accessible, timely pedagogical resources:** Create a centralised repository for educational materials aligned with standardized curricular goals.
- **Active learning methodologies:** Promote participatory teaching methods, such as simulations and student governance and citizen initiative projects, and implement more holistic approaches to learning, with the goal of a more embodied experience.
- **Continuing curricular evaluation:** Establish a framework for regular assessment and adaptation of democracy education programs in response to evolving societal needs.

Recommendations for organising the EfD

Organising framework

National and transnational workshops, desktop research and other research performed during the DEMOCRAT project have all contributed to an organising framework for the curriculum for EfD. The organising framework for the EfD curriculum that DEMOCRAT proposes comprises from seven to eight interconnected layers, each deemed important for the effective delivery and integration of democratic education across various contexts. This multi-layered approach ensures that the curriculum is adaptable, inclusive, and responsive to the diverse needs of learners and their communities. The organisational structure supports the seamless incorporation of democratic principles into educational practices, aiming to promote a comprehensive and cohesive learning experience that aligns with the values of democratic engagement and citizenship.

For different educational contexts and levels – not forgetting informal education that takes place in for instance NGO settings – the organisation and foci will naturally differ.

Introducing democracy, rights, and responsibilities **at the primary level** is achieved through age-appropriate stories, interactive exercises, and engaging tasks. The aim is to foster empathic cooperation and an understanding of common values. For instance, children learn about justice and fairness through stories from different cultures, followed by discussions and creative activities. Participatory activities, such as classroom voting, introduce democratic processes and foster appreciation for shared decision-making, helping students understand democratic concepts, rights, responsibilities, empathy, and cooperation.

At the secondary level, the focus shifts to detailed exploration of democratic processes, critical thinking, and media literacy. Students study legislative processes, elections, and the roles of various organizations. Critical thinking skills are emphasized to assess media sources, understand the role of a free press, and identify bias. Interactive elements like debates, model parliaments, and mock elections deepen practical understanding of democratic principles and prepare students for active civic participation, ensuring they analyze democratic processes, develop critical thinking, and engage in practical democratic activities.

In higher education, there can be a rich variety of advanced courses that cover democratic governance, the role of international institutions, and policy analysis. Students engage in research projects, internships, and case studies illustrating democratic challenges and the need for future competencies in diverse contexts. Seminars and workshops by visiting academics can provide various perspectives on contemporary issues. The goal is to equip students to participate in, lead, and innovate within democratic processes, preparing them to conduct advanced research, analyse international institutions, and engage in practical experiences in democratic fields.

The layers of the proposed framework include the following:**Child-Centered Approach**

- Prioritises children and young people, ensuring their rights and voices are central.
- Educational methods are age-appropriate, focusing on inclusive and holistic experiences.

School, Class, and Community

- Involves the immediate educational environment, including teachers and leaders.
- Emphasizes creating a democratic school culture and engaging the local community.

Learning Approaches and Teacher Training

- Utilises innovative methods, quality materials, and comprehensive training.
- Ensures educators are equipped for democratic teaching through continuous development.

RDC Competencies

- Focuses on Resilience, Participation, Solidarity, Democratic Resilience, and Deliberation.
- Implements these in schools and broader contexts to develop democratic skills.

National Educational Policy

- Aligns the curriculum with national standards and policies.
- Adapts to local challenges and supports democratic education integration.

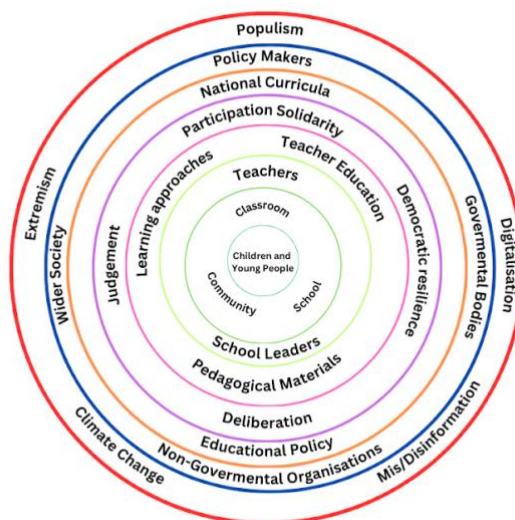
Political and Societal Context

- Considers the influence of policymakers and societal bodies on education.
- Highlights the need for supportive policies and societal engagement.

Global Context

- Addresses global issues and the role of students in the global community.
- Prepares students for global responsibility and environmental stewardship.

The layers can be visualised as follows.



By integrating teacher training, pedagogical resources, and innovative learning methods—with help of material and guidelines provided through the DEMOCRAT project—educators can embed specific elements of responsible democratic citizenship competencies (RDCs) into classroom, school-wide, and community education practices. This approach allows children and young people to learn about, through, and for democracy, thereby enhancing their democratic competencies.

The multilayered framework for the EfD curriculum provides a comprehensive, inclusive, and adaptable approach to democratic education. It considers the interactions and influences at various levels, from individual children to the global community, supporting the development of democratic values and skills across diverse educational contexts. This structured approach establishes a strong foundation for an effective EfD curriculum, equipping individuals to actively contribute to and sustain democratic societies.

Emphasis on National and Coordinated Implementation

These recommendations should be implemented at the national level within each country's educational policy framework to ensure that they meet localized educational needs while maintaining a cohesive European standard. This coordinated approach will not only promote uniformity across Europe but also allow for the customization necessary to address specific national contexts and challenges.

Aspects of EfD

Empowerment through Knowledge and Participation

Education for Democracy (EfD) aims to empower students by providing comprehensive knowledge of their rights and the political and economic systems they inhabit. For instance, knowledge of electoral, judicial, and administrative processes enables students to participate meaningfully in decision-making. This includes understanding how policies are shaped and how they can influence these processes.

Development of Personal and Cultural Identity

EfD also emphasizes the importance of enabling students to explore and develop their personal and cultural identities. Exposure to diverse ways of thinking, different languages, and varied cultural practices is fundamental to this process. Encouraging students to identify and embrace their unique characteristics fosters a sense of belonging and self-worth.

Cultivating Critical Judgment

One of the key competencies in the curricular approach proposed by DEMOCRAT is the ability to cultivate critical judgment, especially in an era saturated with different sources for information. This involves fostering clarity of vision, which is not obstructed by chatter, obfuscation, or flattery. Students should be taught to question information, seek proof, and develop a healthy level of skepticism towards different kinds of claims.

Building Resilience

Finally, the proposed curricular approach focuses on equipping students with the conceptual and practical tools necessary to remain resilient in the face of personal and collective crises. This involves fostering personal peace and balance, which are essential for maintaining mental health and well-being. Empathy is a critical component, thereby strengthening community bonds.

Country contexts and approaches

Estonia

In Estonia, the Living Lab approach has been instrumental in piloting the integration of democratic competencies into the curriculum. These pilots prioritise essential skills such as communication, problem-solving, and active participation in key societal issues, including migration and environmental sustainability. Project-based learning is widely adopted, with schools involving students in tackling urgent real-world challenges like climate change and global citizenship. Estonia has made notable progress in revising its civic education curriculum and has placed a strong emphasis on fostering critical thinking, civic knowledge, and participatory skills. The Suvemäe Democratic School stands out as a pioneering example, promoting joint decision-making between students, teachers, and parents, and empowering students to take charge of their own learning journeys.

Challenges:

- Curriculum overload and disconnect from real-world issues.
- Lack of emphasis on civics didactics in teacher education.
- Effective integration of democratic values across schools

Finland

Finland's education system is globally recognized for its emphasis on equality, quality, and its holistic approach to fostering well-rounded citizens. Education for Democracy (EfD) is deeply integrated into Finland's curriculum, where democratic values are embedded across subjects. This way, students are not only learning academic content but also developing the competencies necessary for active, responsible citizenship. The Finnish approach places a strong emphasis on student-centered learning, collaborative methods, and critical inquiry.

Finnish schools emphasise the importance of student involvement in decision-making processes through student councils and regular classroom debates. However, despite strong democratic knowledge, participation in civic activities remains limited. It also appears that the implementation of education for democracy often falls on the shoulders of individual teachers. While the foundations in Finland are strong, there is a lack of systematic approach.

Challenges:

- Superficial student engagement in decision-making processes, with a gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application.
- Need for a more systematic investment in teacher education.
- Limited student involvement in civic activities and decision-making outside of the classroom.

Germany

Germany's approach to Education for Democracy is profoundly influenced by its post-World War II commitment to fostering democratic values. In the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, the emphasis is on competence-based curricula that prioritise democratic participation, deliberation, and solidarity. Pedagogical strategies such as youth debates, Model United Nations simulations, and problem-oriented learning

encourage students to develop critical thinking, judgment, and active participation skills. These approaches help people better understand how democracy works and encourage informed and responsible participation in society.

Challenges:

- Adapting curricular frameworks to facilitate deeper engagement in democratic practices.
- Balancing the demands of knowledge acquisition with active citizenship.

Ireland

In Ireland, Education for Democracy (EfD) is a cross-curricular concern integrated into various subjects such as Social, Personal, and Health Education (SPHE) and Civic, Social, and Political Education (CSPE). The Irish curriculum emphasizes the development of democratic knowledge, skills, and values through participatory approaches and active learning. At primary and post-primary levels, students engage in learning that explores democracy, human rights, and citizenship, with significant focus on active participation through initiatives like Student Councils and Green Schools Committees. Programmes such as the UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools and Yellow Flag Programme promote inclusion and cultural awareness, while restorative practices enhance school environments by teaching conflict resolution and respect. Key policies, such as the Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) strategy and the Irish Aid Global Citizenship Education Strategy, recognise democracy as a fundamental component of civic education.

Challenges:

- Gaps in teacher training for delivering democracy education effectively.
- Persistent inequalities affecting democratic participation among students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Poland

In Poland, schools have incorporated democracy education through various methods, including simulation games, community projects, and the promotion of student councils. Despite these efforts, students often lack a deep understanding of democracy beyond political participation. The education system's reliance on lecture-based teaching methods further limits opportunities for active student participation and meaningful engagement in democratic processes. The use of alternative methods in schools depends on their popularity and teachers' preferences. Engaged teachers often use a variety of methods, while those experiencing burnout tend to stick to basic knowledge transmission.

There is also a gap in fostering intrinsic motivation for social causes, as students tend to engage in volunteer activities for personal benefits rather than a genuine commitment to societal well-being. To address this, interactive teaching and community projects are needed to build democratic skills for active citizenship.

Challenges:

- The predominance of lecture-based teaching limits active student participation.
- Insufficient focus on experiential learning and community involvement.
- Insufficient opportunities for students to connect democratic principles with everyday actions and decisions.

Spain

Spain's educational framework incorporates democratic values through a transversal competence known as Citizenship Competence, which is integrated across subjects from primary to secondary education. The curriculum emphasizes the importance of civic literacy, human rights, gender equality, and sustainable development. However, the implementation faces challenges due to political transitions and varying regional curricula, particularly in autonomous communities such as Catalonia, where language and cultural considerations may influence how the competencies are applied.

Key interventions in Spanish schools focus on participation in democratic processes and the integration of local social issues, such as migration and historical memory, into the learning environment. For instance, primary schools have initiated projects to foster dialogue between immigrant families and the local community, while secondary schools have explored the history of political persecution under the Franquist regime.

Challenges:

- Teacher training gaps in civic education and the need for a shift in teachers' roles toward fostering democratic participation.
- Limited spaces for teacher collaboration and professional development.
- Emerging extreme political positions among students, requiring teachers to manage classroom dynamics carefully and navigate conflicts constructively.

Call to action: policies for implementation strategies

Developing unified curricular standards for democracy education across Europe is essential to ensure that all students receive a consistent and high-quality education in democratic principles. Harmonization of these standards would involve establishing a core set of learning objectives that address the fundamental aspects of democracy, including the history and functioning of democratic institutions, human rights, civic responsibilities, and critical thinking skills. This process should be collaborative, engaging educational experts, policymakers, and civil society organizations from all member states to reflect diverse perspectives and contexts.

The implementation strategy should include phased rollouts and pilot programs to refine the standards before full adoption. Additionally, these standards must be flexible enough to allow for national and regional adaptations while maintaining a cohesive educational framework. The goal is to create a shared understanding of democracy that transcends national boundaries, fostering a sense of European citizenship and unity. Regular reviews and updates of the standards will be necessary to incorporate new developments in democratic theory and practice, ensuring that the curriculum remains relevant and impactful.

Introducing comprehensive teacher training programs focused on democracy and human rights is key for effective democracy education. These programs should include compulsory modules that equip teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to teach these subjects confidently and effectively. Teacher training institutions across Europe should integrate these modules into their curricula, ensuring that every new teacher is prepared to promote democratic values and human rights in their classrooms.

EU-funded initiatives can support this by providing resources, facilitating the exchange of best practices, and offering professional development opportunities. These initiatives should include workshops, seminars, and online courses that allow teachers to continually update their knowledge and skills. Establishing a support network for teachers will also be beneficial, enabling them to share experiences, challenges, and innovative teaching practices. Such a network can foster a community of practice that enhances the quality of democracy education across Europe.

In such a network, action should be taken to

1. **Ensure that teachers are prepared** to deliver democracy education Invest in comprehensive teacher education programs to foster educators who are equipped to inspire and engage students in the principles and practices of democracy. Establish means to evaluate and measure impact by evaluation mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of EfD initiatives.
2. **Create a centralised repository** for pedagogical resources. These can work to support democratic education across Europe. This repository should be an easy-to-access online platform with high-quality educational materials aligned with the standardised curricular goals. **Review the materials regularly**, update them and ensure they reflect current academic research and pedagogical practices.
3. In addition to providing resources, the platform could include forums and discussion boards where educators can **share experiences and best practices**. Support the creation of communities of educators committed to democracy education. Strengthen teacher education and continuing professional development. Also, foster collaboration among educators, policymakers, civil society organizations, and local communities to create a shared vision for EfD.

4. **Promote active learning methodologies** to engage students in democratic processes through a more embodied learning experience. These participatory teaching methods extend beyond traditional lectures, encouraging the practical application of democratic principles. Debates, simulations, project-based learning, and student governance projects offer hands-on democratic experiences. Schools should also create **environments conducive to active learning**, with flexible classroom layouts and necessary resources. Expand proven approaches such as project-based learning, election simulations, theatre-based methodologies, and school governance programs.
5. **Extend the focus on holistic learning and embodied practices.** Pay attention to the the cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of learning. Students should not only develop intellectual understanding but also emotional and social skills that are essential for democratic participation.
6. **Make the curriculum timely and adaptive.** See to it responding to technological, societal, and political changes. Evaluate the framework to regularly update and adapt the curriculum based on feedback and new developments in AI-based solutions and other platforms.

From challenges to future implications

The Responsible Democratic Citizenship (RDC) framework proposed by DEMOCRAT promotes democratic agency through four key competencies: Solidary Participation, Deliberation, Judgement (and Critical Thinking), and Democratic Resilience. These interdependent competencies aim to develop active, informed, and resilient citizens. A comparative analysis of six European countries (Germany, Catalonia, Finland, Estonia, Poland, and Ireland) highlights essential skills, values, and learning outcomes, along with specific gaps and challenges that need addressing to enhance democracy education.

However, across the analysed countries, there is often insufficient emphasis on ensuring that educational frameworks comprehensively include and support marginalized groups. By focusing on these groups in the highest levels of learning outcomes, students and teachers and others working in pedagogical contexts alike are better prepared to foster inclusivity and solidarity. This focus can actively work towards reducing social inequalities, and promote democratic participation. Enhancing inclusivity ensures that all individuals, especially those from marginalized communities, feel valued and engaged in the democratic process.

Conflict resolution, to give one example, is a critical skill that is not always adequately emphasised in educational systems. Emphasizing conflict resolution helps students navigate diverse opinions and interests, fostering a more cohesive and respectful democratic dialogue.

The need to have tailored interventions is foreseen at the national level while promoting a cohesive European strategy for EfD. Policymakers should work towards

- **EXPANDING** participatory pedagogical practices, including simulation-based and project-based learning
- **ADDRESSING** teacher education and continuing development gaps to standardize EfD integration
- **SUPPORTING** real-world applications of EfD, such as school councils and collaborative governance initiatives
- **SCALING** localised successes to the national level to ensure broader impact

Based on the research and insights from the DEMOCRAT project, a curriculum integrating RDC competencies is recommended, along with a general understanding of civic education. These competencies, typically part of civic education, history, or social studies, include understanding democracy, the roles played by the government, and citizen rights and responsibilities. By ensuring that students not only engage in deliberation but also develop strategies for resolving conflicts, the RDC framework addresses this gap. This prepares students to handle disagreements constructively and build consensus in democratic settings.

Through targeted, evidence-based actions, policymakers hold the transformative means to build educational frameworks that equip future generations with the competencies needed to thrive in dynamic, democratic societies. The actions can include for instance *scaling localized successes, empowering teachers, and fostering real-world participation*.

They should address both structural and pedagogical dimensions, ensuring that educational systems not only impart knowledge but also cultivate critical thinking, participation, and democratic resilience.