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Discussion paper

Sub-Theme 1: Teachers as Builders of Democratic Culture

DISCUSSION PAPER

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The New Democratic Pact for Europe aims to respond to democratic backsliding, declining trust in institutions, growing polarisation and societal fragmentation across Europe by strengthening democratic resilience, reinforcing institutional integrity and restoring citizens' confidence in democratic governance.

Education is central to this endeavour. Democratic culture is not sustained by institutions alone; it is cultivated in classrooms, all learning environments and communities and learning communities. Teachers and education professionals are therefore indispensable actors to promote education for democracy. They shape critical thinking, nurture pluralism, support inclusion and prepare younger generations for active and responsible citizenship.

The European Space for Citizenship Education (ESCE), which ministers are set to launch, should be regarded as a direct response to this democratic backsliding by enhancing quality of citizenship education across Europe. Based on some 30 years of Council of Europe acquis in education for democratic citizenship, the European Space is composed of a set of principles, a quality framework and co-operation mechanism. It promotes a truly enabling environment in which education for democratic citizenship is not only taught, but experienced, practiced, and embedded in a culture of democracy.

This discussion paper invites Ministers to reflect on how teachers can be supported, protected and empowered to act as builders of democratic culture in education within coherent, resilient and future-oriented education systems. When considering these questions, it is also important to acknowledge the crucial role of school leadership and governance.

1. Why Teachers Matter

Teachers in early childhood, general, vocational and adult education play a decisive role in developing Competences for Democratic Culture (CDC). Through their daily practice, they cultivate critical thinking, empathy, civic responsibility, respect for diversity and the capacity for dialogue.

The Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC) has been used and integrated by many national education systems. However, implementation remains uneven across sectors, particularly in vocational education and training (VET), higher education, early childhood and adult learning. Moreover, competences for democratic culture are often present in policy documents but less systematically embedded in classroom practice and assessment.

Teachers operate in increasingly complex environments marked by:

- digital transformation and misinformation, including AI-driven content;
- curriculum overload and accountability pressures;
- societal polarisation and contestation of democratic values and citizenship educational approaches, such as teaching controversial issues;
- heterogeneous multilingual and multicultural classrooms, with many learners lacking competences in the language of schooling;

- crises situations (conflicts, climate events, health emergencies) affecting educational continuity;
- declining attractiveness of the teaching profession and workforce shortages.

The ESCE provides a common European framework to codify principles, strengthen quality assurance, and foster cooperation. Within this framework, teachers must be recognised not only as transmitters of knowledge but as trusted facilitators of democratic dialogue, capable of addressing controversial issues constructively and strengthening social trust.

2. Key Systemic Challenges

The Council of Europe's recent work identifies structural challenges that directly affect teachers' ability to fulfil their democratic mission.

1. Uneven and fragmented implementation of Competences for Democratic Culture (CDC)

While progress has been made, CDCs are not systematically integrated across all education levels and sectors. In VET and higher education in particular, integration remains partial. Greater coherence between policy, curriculum, pedagogy and institutional culture is required across all educational sectors.

2. Assessment of Competences for Democratic Culture (CDC)

Assessing competences for democratic culture remains complex, and even contested in relation to assessing values. Many systems lack appropriate tools to evaluate competences for democratic culture in ways that are pedagogically meaningful and aligned with quality assurance frameworks.

3. Digital transformation

Digital technologies can expand opportunities for learning and participation but also amplify misinformation and manipulation. Teachers need robust preparation in digital citizenship, AI literacy, and critical media literacy to sustain education for democratic culture both online and offline.

4. Sustainability and civic engagement

The integration of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) with competences for democratic culture offers strong potential to empower learners. However, teachers require support to address environmental challenges, eco-anxiety and controversial sustainability debates constructively.

5. Professional sustainability and attractiveness

Teacher shortages, ageing workforces and declining societal recognition undermine the democratic mission of education. Without clear mandates, autonomy, adequate working conditions and recognition, teachers cannot fully assume their civic role.

These challenges indicate that strengthening democratic culture requires systemic alignment — connecting curriculum reform, teacher education, assessment, digital governance, quality assurance and crisis preparedness within a coherent democratic framework.

3. Issues for Ministerial Discussion

1. *Enabling and Protecting Teachers*

Teachers need policy clarity, professional autonomy and institutional safeguards to address controversial issues, digital risks and societal tensions confidently.

2. *Attractiveness of the Teaching Profession*

The sustainability of quality education depends on a respected, well-prepared and motivated teaching workforce.

3. *Teacher Education and Professional Development*

Initial and continuous professional development should systematically integrate democratic competences, digital citizenship, sustainability education and crisis preparedness.

4. *Democratic School Culture*

Schools should provide authentic opportunities for participation and shared decision-making through a whole-school approach. The role of school leadership and governance is key in supporting teachers to build a democratic school culture.

4. Key Guiding Questions for Ministers

Ministers are invited to consider:

1. What concrete national commitments can be undertaken to support teachers as beacons of democratic values and how can the European Space for Citizenship Education contribute to this?
2. What measures at system and school levels can better support teachers' professional autonomy and creativity while ensuring accountability and transparency?
3. How can education systems ensure that teachers are well prepared to uphold democratic values and principles, including in times of crisis and rapid societal transformation?