**Council of Europe Standing Conference of Ministers of Education**

**"The Transformative Power of Education: Universal Values and Civic Renewal"**

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**Questions for discussion**

# SUB-THEME 1

## Renewal of the civic mission of education

Europe is experiencing democratic backsliding. It faces threats that undermine the culture of democracy and its values and principles, such as the return of war, radicalisation, a weakening commitment to freedom of expression, increasing discrimination, online hate speech and discontentment with governmental efforts to tackle climate change.

The recent crises on the European continent have exacerbated some of the existing shortcomings of education systems. Learners do not have sufficient opportunities to benefit from an inclusive, flexible and empowering education that prepares them to become active and informed citizens in democratic and diverse societies. In this context, the democratic values of respect for human dignity and human rights, cultural diversity and democracy, justice, equity, equality and the rule of law remain essential.

In the current climate education needs to address directly the dissatisfaction with the quality of democracy and to engage in the renewal of its civic mission. It must prepare learners to live as active citizens in a democratic society, where democratic values and competences are increasingly recognised as an important element of personal and professional development and as key to the democratic functioning of institutions, including schools and universities themselves. This means encouraging more engaged approaches to the provision of quality civic/citizenship education at all levels of education and strengthening the cooperation among member States in order to build a truly European space for citizenship education based on the achievements and the strong acquis of the Council of Europe and on commonly shared democratic values and principles.

In their final Declaration adopted at the 4th Summit in Reykjavík the Heads of State and government of Council of Europe member States underlined the importance of education to give children and young people the necessary references to grow up embracing democratic values in culturally diverse societies and take an active part in the protection of [the European] cultural heritage". On the same occasion the Reykjavík Principles of Democracy the 46 leaders also committed to "invest in a DEMOCRATIC FUTURE by ensuring that everyone is able to play their role in democratic processes. Priority will be given to support the participation of young persons in democratic life and decision-making processes, including through education about human rights and core democratic values, such as pluralism, inclusion, non-discrimination, transparency and accountability".

# Questions for discussion

1. What policies and frameworks can member states implement to enhance the acquisition of values, skills, attitudes, and critical knowledge, as well as the practice of democratic culture in formal education settings at all levels?

2. In what ways can educators receive support in identifying and harnessing the capacity of a given subject to foster the growth of democratic culture proficiencies, in conjunction with subject-specific proficiencies?

3. What measures need to be implemented to ensure that educational institutions adhere to democratic culture and are considerate of the diverse backgrounds, needs, and abilities of learners?

4. What is the role of the Council of Europe and its Steering Committee for Education (CDEDU), and what prospects would the creation of a European space for citizenship education open up with a view to further strengthening the cooperation and commitment of Member States in this field?

# SUB-THEME 2

## Education in times of crises and emergencies

The COVID-19 pandemic has confronted public authorities with an emergency of unprecedented scale and scope, affecting education in three main ways: endangering children's well-being, impeding access to inclusive and equitable quality education for all, and exacerbating inequalities in learning outcomes. The return of war to Europe following the Russia Federation's aggression against Ukraine has had a significant impact on education, not only for the country itself, but also for other European countries, with millions of people fleeing their country. Furthermore, the impact of climate change on access to and provision of quality education is becoming increasingly a relevant issue.

The consequences of these crises on education are serious, ranging from damage to school infrastructure to a reduction in the number of teachers and threatens the enjoyment of education as a fundamental right which is inextricably linked to the effective enjoyment of other rights.

To ensure the effectiveness and continuity of education systems and ensure that education remains a public good and a fundamental right in times of crises, public authorities must be prepared to address the key challenges to the provision of quality education. These include challenges related to governance of education, to teaching and training, and learning, to systemic linkages between institutions, integration of education into local and national disaster preparedness plans, protection of educational assets, reconstruction and adaptation to crises situations in addition to the preparation of education actors themselves to face future crises.

International organisations and other education stakeholders have already developed programmes to ensure the right to education in emergencies. The concept of resilience and community resilience is at the core of this approach. Physical robustness alone is not enough to constitute a resilient community, and education systems, their preparedness and their rapid recovery in times of emergencies and crises play a key role. Competences for all education actors from children to students and adults, such as values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and critical understanding can promote and strengthen the resilience of educational ecosystems and the community itself.

In their final Declaration adopted at the 4th Summit in Reykjavík the Heads of State and government of Council of Europe member States devoted specific attention to the situation of Ukrainian children and underlined the need to intensify efforts, at all levels of governance, to guarantee the effective protection of the rights of children of Ukraine in the current context and resolved, in full compliance with the applicable Council of Europe standards, to ensure the protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms of the children of Ukraine including education.

# Questions for discussion

1.  How should Member States improve their emergency and crises preparedness and response capacity to ensure the continued provision of quality education in times of emergency and crises?

2.  How can we ensure that government action at the national, regional, and local levels is structured in such a way that quality education is provided in times of emergency and crises?

3.  How should civil society actors be integrated as co-producers of this process to ensure long-term partnerships?

4.  What is the role of the Council of Europe and its Steering Committee for Education (CDEDU) in this area, and what would be the impact of the proposed new initiatives, in particular the toolbox of Principles for Resilience in Education, in increasing cooperation and participation of Member States in this area?

# SUB-THEME 3

## Harnessing the potential of digital transformation in and through education

The digital transformation, largely supported by Artificial Intelligence (AI), has dramatically changed the educational landscape the last couple of years. Digital technology has enabled learners to build knowledge and skills going from digital literacy to AI literacy and digital citizenship, and concerted efforts have been made to empower learners to acquire the competences necessary for such learning.

While national authorities and institutions as well as international organisations have addressed several of the challenges posed by the digital environment and emerging technologies, the ethical implications of digital technologies including recently AI for humanity and, to a very limited extent, the ethics of AI in education, none have yet taken a holistic approach to the wider implications (particularly in terms of human rights, democracy and the rule of law) of the application and teaching of AI in education.

This is part of the Secretary general's new Digital Agenda as well as the Committee of Ministers' Recommendation of 2019 in which the application of artificial intelligence in educational contexts was a key issue. AI offers many opportunities but also carries many threats, which make it necessary to take into account human rights principles in the design of its application.

AI is being introduced in national education systems with little guidance or specific regulation and limited policy. It has been argued that there is a need to consider the broader implications of AI tools on teaching and learning processes, learners' developing cognition, mental health and human rights to facilitate the development of ethical guidance (addressing the ethics of data, algorithms and education) and targeted regulation before AI is deployed more widely in classrooms.

In addition, to protect and promote digital citizenship, AI literacy could be promoted for learners of all ages and across society, not just for tomorrow's AI engineers, focusing on both the human dimension of AI (the potential impact of AI on people and the environment) and the technological dimension of AI (how AI works and how it is created). In particular, effective and ethical AI in education also depends on teachers, administrators and other stakeholders having an appropriate level of AI literacy, which is best achieved through professional development.

The organisation of a European Year of Digital Citizenship Education (in 2025) in all Council of Europe member states, and other initiatives related to the further development of regulatory frameworks on the use of AI systems in all levels of education in Europe, would contribute to formulating positive and constructive responses to all these issues, while advancing education and promoting a human rights-based approach to the digital transformation of education.

# Questions for discussion

1.  What measures are necessary to guarantee that the implementation of digital transformation in the field of education fosters learning and democratic principles?

2.  What measures are educational institutions implementing to address the effects of digital transformation on learners and teachers?

3.  How can we fulfil the ethical responsibility of guaranteeing that all members of society attain a suitable degree of AI literacy, encompassing comprehension of AI's functionalities and limitations, its operational mechanisms, and the ethical and societal implications it poses?

4.  What are the requisite policies to ensure the incorporation of human rights principles during the initial stages of AI implementation in educational settings?