SC (Democratic Education in Schools) is a European project funded by the Erasmus+ Programme (Key Action 2 - Cooperation for Innovation and Exchange of Good Practice). The project aims to promote the integration of the democratic education approach in European education systems as a way of fostering life and citizenship competences in schools.

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To achieve this goal, the DESC project is divided into four main project outcomes: PR1 Research report; PR2 Teacher training; PR3 PLATFORM PR3 DESC REA; PR4 Guidelines and policy recommendations.

This guide responds to PR4.1, based on the qualitative analysis of partner institutions' responses to two interviews on national policies and vision on democratic education. This report captures the diversity around the two topics and makes recommendations aimed at facilitating the ESCR paradigm in European schools, being aware of the diversity of the starting point, efforts are also made differently in each educational context.

Autoría

María Inmaculada Fernández Esteban
Ana Luisa Sanabria Mesa
Cecilia Verónica Becerra Brito
Anabel Bethencourt Aguilar
Sara González Pérez
Ainoa Escribano Miralles

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Colaboraciones

Go! Scholengroep Brussel (Belgium)

- Henrique Juca

Omnimundo Basisschool (Belgium)

- Kenny Vrancken

QUEST (Quality Education in Europe for Sustainable Social Transformation)

- Martina Paone

IC Carducci Busca Cn Italy

- Davide Antonio Martini

- Nadia Torino

- Grazia Lovera

Universidad de La Laguna

-Talía Cristina Morillo Lesme

Community for Democratic Education (Bulgaria)

- Magi Blagoeva

Nicola Vaptsarov Primary School

- Ivalina Rusinova

Albero della Tuscia. Associazione culturale "io vivo dentro di me" (Italy)

- Matteo Sturlese

- Valeria Mincione

Varstu School (Estonia)

- Kadi Määr

- Ele Raha

Leiutajate Külakool

- Hendrik Noor.

1. Definition of Democratic Education.

Democratic Education in the European Union

Differences among participating countries

2. Policy recommendations of the macro context

Contextualization of democratic education in each country

Establishment of guidelines for political action in the short, medium and long term

Promotion of social research and educational innovation in the context of democratic education

Transferability and impact on the different practices of the agents involved.

Evaluation of the measures undertaken and sustainability of the proposal.

3. Policy recommendations towards the micro context

Policy implication for democratic education at regional and center levels

Providing resources and infrastructure for the development of democratic education

Training of educational agents in democratic education

Democratic principles in the organization of schools

Democratic principles in educational practice strategies

4. Analysis Tool for democratic education reflection on aspects of educational policies.

Democratic education reflection tool on elements of education policy

There is no consensus on the definition of Democratic Education, since each of the schools and learning communities that define themselves as democratic has its own way of interpreting and living some basic ideas, in which priorities may vary in a wide range of ways. What they have in common is that they are schools or learning communities in which democratic education is the central philosophical and pedagogical approach.

In Europe there have been experiences of democratic schools for centuries, and every year small, private, democratic schools, possibly regarded as socially and economically elite, emerge. These schools are pioneering vanguards, "pioneers of possibilities", as Derry Hannam defined them (2020). Small, private, community-based schools, which despite great success in terms of children's well-being, tend to remain marginalized and fail to reach the majority of children. They are often on the fringes of the state school system, have no public subsidies and no legal framework to recognize them, but aim to be inclusive and affordable.

The Resolution of the 13th International Conference on Democratic Education, which took place in Berlin 2005, adopted the principles of the right of learners, summarised in two parts:

- they can make their own decisions about learning and all other areas of daily life. In particular, they can individually determine what to do, when, where, how and with whom, as long as their decisions do not infringe on the freedom of others to do the same.

- have an equal say in making decisions about how their organisations, in particular their schools, are run and what rules and sanctions, if any, are necessary. (EUDEC, 2024)

Based on these premises, in 2021, a group of professionals, researchers and enthusiastic teachers decided to draft a project with the ambition of spreading democratic education in public schools: Project DESC (Democratic Education in Schools).

Features:

1. It promotes self-directed learning, to the extent that learning should not be standardized by a curriculum or a strategy that children have not chosen.
2. Learning is based on free play as a teaching methodology that provides the necessary ground for independent exploration.
3. The multi-age environment allows for the amplification of formal and non-formal learning, fostering autonomy in the youngest children and learning to care for the older ones.
4. Environmental factors in children's development are fundamental.
5. Adults are mentors and facilitators, called companions.
6. Assemblies as an activity in which conflict resolution and decision-making are encouraged and in which children and adults participate in equal measure.

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7. Humanistic approach. Children are seen as unique, competent individuals, endowed with the curiosity and motivation necessary to be themselves.
8. Human nature is naturally benevolent and children have the capacity, in addition to being curious and motivated, to be altruistic.
9. School as an open system. Intentional collaborations are established between schools and their wider communities.

1.1. Democratic Education in the European Union

The European Commission advises the member states to carry out educational reforms in order to unify the main aims of education: The development of a broad knowledge base, preparation for the labour market, preparation for life as active citizens and personal development.

In order for member states' education systems to align or respond to the development of 21st century skills needed for learners to become active and fulfilled individuals, the EU has adopted in May 2018 the Recommendation on eight key competences for lifelong learning which updates the 2006 Recommendation, taking into account the requirements of the world we live in today, and provides guidance and examples of good practice. The updated Recommendation defines eight key competences for lifelong learning: Literacy, Multilingualism, Mathematical competence and Competence in science, Technology and engineering, Digital, personal, social and learning to learn citizenship, Entrepreneurship and Cultural awareness and expression.

1.2 Differences among participating countries

The politics of each country and its democratic trajectory condition to some extent aspects such as the degree of economic and curricular autonomy, teacher training and the participation of students and families, and, in general, of the entire educational community.

Countries such as Bulgaria, which underwent a political transition to a model of representative democracy just over thirty years ago, include an education system that has undergone few changes in recent years. In this sense, the pedagogical model that transcends this system is the traditional and logocentric one, without autonomy of the centers towards the curriculum, but with autonomy in the administration of resources, which falls to the management of the educational centers without representation of the student body and with the participation of families limited to supporting the school through the Parents' Council, without this Council being compulsory in all schools. However, as a curious fact, Primary Education is governed by the achievement of 8 key competences, among which digital competence is not included.

In Belgium, we find an education system based on 9 competences in Primary Education and although each region has its peculiarities, the Education System is based on inclusion, participation, evaluation (internal and external) and the participation of families and teachers in decision-making in the field of school management and curriculum.

The Italian education reform of 2015 is characterized by an increase in the degree of autonomy of schools, so that each school has the initiative in decision-making on

curricular aspects. The educational community is made up of teachers, students, families, school leaders and local government. It is considered to be the competence framework recommended by the EU.

Estonia is in the process of education reform and decrees for the different stages were published at the beginning of this year. The curricular direction of education is based on the European competence framework, although it does not include multilingual and entrepreneurial competence.

Policy recommendations of the macro context

2.1. Contextualization of democratic education in each country.

Democratic education must be defined and understood in the context of the country in which it is to be promoted or further strengthened. Governments must understand democratic education as an indispensable element for a society that is coherent with its approach. Considering the importance of this construct, and depending in turn on the historical context of each country and its achieved rights, the basic pillars of the democratic principles of education may already be fulfilled by the identity mechanisms promoted and achieved in a given context. The trajectory of strengthening public and open education for all is already a widespread democratic principle in many countries and a visible reality of democratic principles in national contexts.

However, comparative policy shows divergences in democratic education actions in different countries, so that in other contexts, on the other hand, efforts must continue to be made to consolidate these democratic principles in the school education system itself, grounding these principles in the general curriculum itself and establishing national action measures for democratic attention in education.

Despite possible divergences between countries in the democratic actions undertaken, their importance and consolidation must continue to be maintained. The consolidation of these democratic efforts and their continuity should be considered in each country, ensuring ways for their deepening, extension and strengthening, taking into account their idiosyncrasies and the cultural, social and pedagogical trends of the different education systems.

2.2. Establishment of guidelines for political action in the short, medium and long term

In countries where democratic education has not been a sufficiently well-established principle, it is necessary to consider profound curricular reforms and changes that strengthen or revert towards the public, free and comprehensive principles of democratic education.

In this sense, the very purpose, as well as the general objectives of the school system in its different stages must favour democratic education, superimposing the development of competences, pedagogical models and educational approaches

towards education in ethical-democratic principles. Modality. The mode of participation and evaluation must be coherent with these pedagogical approaches to the understanding of education and its multiple curricular elements for democratic education.

The establishment of measures towards democratic education affects the materialization of concrete and planned actions that safeguard democratic principles or enhance them at different strategic levels of short term, medium or long term from the earliest stages to the most advanced ages of the educational system.

2.3. Promotion of social research and educational innovation in the context of democratic education

Democratic education, even in contexts in which it is already understood as assumed and achieved, must be studied and studied in depth. On the one hand, in order to be able to notice its importance and to redirect when democratic principles in education may be being abandoned or faltering, making sure that democratic principles continue to be a principle to defend because of the educational and social contributions and implications they offer for democratic citizenship. On the other hand, continuing to deepen democratic education through social research and efforts towards educational innovation in this area makes it possible to achieve it and the real impact of these research and innovation projects in different contexts and in the integral development of people.

The ambiguity of the term democratic education must be materialized in the contexts of each country and delimited in the concrete actions that each country must establish. The approach towards research in democratic education and educational innovation in these spheres makes it possible to continue dialogue, substantiating and consolidating research with an impact on the community in which it researches, and returning the results of this research and innovation for public, transparent and ethical purposes to a democratic community committed to and responsible for its own results.

2.4. Transferability and impact on the different practices of the agents involved

Democratic education, although ambiguous in its understanding and definition, requires continuous involvement and momentum for democratic education. In this sense, the political impetus towards this democratic subject must be a priority task for policy makers in education, national governmental bodies, educational networks of teachers and schools, communities and families, among others. The agents involved must strengthen democratic values in each community in order to develop the integral education of all people belonging to the same country, community, autonomy or region.

Democratic education must attend to all people, supporting and facilitating the progress of the people who need the most help and, at the same time, be able to transfer and expand its educational and social approaches and strategies for the

creation and implementation of different democratic initiatives for a solid culture capable of (re)learning from its own progress.

2.5. Evaluation of the measures undertaken and sustainability of the proposal

The measures undertaken for democratic education must be reviewed and evaluated, with the dual purpose of examining policy actions that require updating or modification and the action of attending to the review and evaluation of the efforts made.

In order to carry out this evaluation, it is necessary to extract indicators in each country that, based on the definition of this approach in the national political strategy, show sufficient coverage and indicate the solvency, applicability and realization of the sustainability of democratic principles in current education systems.

The materialization and realization of these indicators must be accompanied by ways of measuring and collecting sufficient empirical evidence to allow us to see compliance or non-compliance with the definition of these verification instruments. The actions following these evaluations should promote routes to continue making action plans to improve democratic education, its applicability and transferability to other and new contexts. In other words, it is necessary to establish mechanisms to measure the consequences of these actions in terms of social and public impact, based on solid data with which to verify the expected and achieved results.

3. Policy recommendations towards the micro context

3.1. Policy implication for democratic education at regional and center levels

Democratic education requires close collaboration between governments, organizations, communities, families and students in order for decision-making to be sustained by different sectors and sustainable over time. This political involvement should not be limited to mere political good intentions for the development of democratic values, but requires commitment and real actions that have an effect on democratic culture from national legislation to the softest and most subjective practices of educational practice.

3.2. Providing resources and infrastructure for the development of democratic education

One of the main initiatives to be undertaken by the institutions, is the necessary funding for institutions that promote research and innovation projects and the implementation of these practices, which will allow them to maintain a public, fair, ethical and democratic quality education for and by society.

Likewise, in order to facilitate the transferability and exposure of results, the implementation of measures for the creation of support materials and analogue and digital tools should be promoted in order to foster the digital literacy of society as a form of ethical development and as a palliative measure for generational or gender gaps.

3.3. Training of education agents in democratic education

Democratic education must be present in the training agenda of all proposals for initial qualifications for educational agents. Initial, as well as permanent and continuous training in democratic values, will allow for more sensitive learning of educational professionals for shared decision-making, close collaboration between agents and the good action of democratic educational practice that will result in historical, social and formative justice awareness for the work of subjectivating students.

3.4. Democratic principles in the organization of schools

In schools, it is relevant to foster the same need for collaboration and sharing of democratic education. School organizations should be able to create and share experiences among their own teaching staff for good democratic practices. At the same time, it should create and generate networks of communication and collaboration with schools and organizations sharing these same principles, and be able to generate strong democratic networks to strengthen relationships and mutual enrichment for local democratic and formative justice.

3.5. Democratic principles in educational practice strategies.

Furthermore, among the measures of action and training within the same school context, the role of families is fundamental for the integral development of pupils and for their involvement in their learning; on the other hand, the involvement and participation of the community outside the school is also relevant for the development of the local context and for the approaches to the cultural offerings of the environment.

A democratic education must establish mechanisms and resources for student participation, enabling their expression and opinion as good educational practice and making joint decisions with educational professionals

4. Analysis Tool for democratic education reflection on aspects of educational policies.

Educational policy factors are relevant not only because they define the educational model and the structure of the school system but also because they provide the framework from which strategies for the design and integration of processes of change and innovation in education are established.

Therefore, identifying the educational policy factors that characterize public school education systems allows, on the one hand, to define the strategies that can facilitate the transferability of the innovative educational experiences of Democratic Schools, but is also very useful to establish which are the common elements with the educational models of public education, and also from which elements and/or structures can start to achieve the recognition of democratic schools within the public school system.

The most coherent strategy is to elaborate and design an innovation project based on the educational model of democratic schools and to present it in the different public educational institutions, both in the macro-political institutions of the Ministries and

Departments of Education and in the micro-political institutions represented by the educational centers/schools.

However, it is necessary to consider that designing and developing the Democratic Schools model as an educational innovation project must be based on the political factors that define and characterize the model and structure of the School System in each country and/or region.

School Systems are defined by the following educational policy factors:

1. **The social (political, economic and educational) reasons for the need for change: Explain and disseminate the relevance of the changes that are needed, the reasons for these needs and the socio-educational effects they will have.**
    I.   *What are the characteristics of the democratic schools model of education? Why are they important? What educational achievements can be made? What are the benefits? The integration of the democratic schools model of education into the public education systems of different countries, What benefits would it bring to society?*

2. **Strategies for disseminating and integrating the proposed changes: What needs to be changed and how? What curricular elements can be built upon?**
        Curriculum: contexts, actors and elements

Education macro-policies: Political institutions with responsibility for decision-making on the school system and curriculum design (ministries, education departments, etc.).

What levels of curriculum concreteness are decided in macro-political contexts?

        II.   *What minimum level of curricular concretion is necessary to elaborate the innovation project towards democratic education?*

What are the educational principles, competencies, objectives, methodological and assessment principles of the curriculum designed by macro-political institutions that are akin to the democratic school model?

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III. *What are the established curricular elements from which we can start to elaborate the innovation project on democratic education?*

Micro-policies: Defined by the decision-making made by educational agents (teachers, families and students), especially the type of decisions they can make, and how they affect teaching and learning (curriculum) and the functioning of schools and classrooms.

Do public administrations establish a closed curriculum to be applied in schools or, on the contrary, do they establish an open curriculum to be specified and adapted to the socio-educational characteristics of schools? Do schools design their curriculum on the basis of the minimums established by macro-political institutions?

IV. *What elements and characteristics of school curricula can we start from in order to design the innovation project on democratic education?*

Can educational agents (teachers, families and students) make decisions about what and how to teach and learn? Which agents can make such decisions?

V. *In the decision-making on what and how to teach, the participation of all educational actors is needed? What actors do we need to design and develop the educational innovation project on democratic education?*

3. **Models and strategies for the dynamisation and promotion of processes of change, innovation and improvement in education: Calls for innovation projects by macro-political institutions and the participation of schools in educational innovation projects.**

What macro-policy strategies are used to encourage change and improvement in school education? Are there calls for Educational Innovation Programmes? On what themes? Under what conditions of participation? How do schools and different educational agents participate? Are they funded? How are they disseminated and transferred to other schools?

VI. *In order to present and disseminate the model of democratic schools as a project of change and innovation for the improvement of education, what characteristics and elements of these strategies can we take as a starting point?*

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What characteristics and elements are required and not
contemplated in current educational policies?

4. Organizational structure of educational centers:

Schools as socio-educational institutions. The governing structures must be open and representative in order to encourage the participation and engagement of all educational agents, and these structures must develop a horizontal and collaborative leadership in the educational community of the school.

What is the organizational structure of schools that is defined at the macro-political levels?

> VII. *Is it possible to start from some of the characteristics of the organizational structure established for schools? What organizational structure would be necessary to be able to develop the innovation project on democratic education?*

What level of autonomy do schools have?

> VIII. *Do schools have sufficient autonomy and what level of autonomy is necessary to be able to develop the innovation project on democratic education?*

What management boards do schools have, how are decision-making processes carried out, what decisions are made by each of the educational agents: teachers, local authorities, administrative staff, families and pupils?

> IX. *Can we start from the decision-making organs and processes that are used in schools? What management organs and what level of participation would be needed in order to be able to develop the innovation project on democratic education?*

How are schools organized: top-down and hierarchical or cross organizational and collaborative?

> X. *What organizational model is required to be able to implement the Democratic Education Innovation Project? Can we start from the current organizational model of schools?*

What kind of leadership is usually developed in schools belonging to the public school network?

> XI. What kind of leadership is necessary to be able to develop the Democratic Education Innovation Project? Can we start from the leadership that is developed in schools?

What relationship is established between school and family in public schools?

> XII. What kind of relationship with families is important in a democratic school? Can we build on the family-school relationship that is already developing in schools?

5. Initial and in-service teacher training:

Teachers as educational agents in the general sense of the word: social and cultural agents. Teachers as critical and reflective subjects. Teachers as change and innovation agents.

What competencies must a teacher develop and attain?

> XIII. Which of these competencies can we start from? What competencies are necessary for teachers to integrate and develop the educational principles of an innovation project on democratic education?

What areas of knowledge should teacher training influence or focus on?

> XIV. What fields of knowledge (disciplines) should a teacher have in order to participate in an innovation project on democratic education?

Initial teacher training: How and what should teachers be trained in? By who/whom? Where?

> XV. What aspects of initial teacher training are useful for the initial training of teachers in a democratic school? What training should a teacher have in order to understand the principles of a democratic school?

In-service teacher training: Training in educational action at school and in the classroom? Training by experts in the disciplines of sociology, psychology and

pedagogy? Training strategies: courses, workshops, conferences and/or training at school and in the classroom?

> XVI. *What elements and characteristics of in-service training are useful for in-service teacher training in democratic schools? What didactic strategies should be developed in in-service teacher training in a democratic school?*

Should in-service training be linked to initial and in-service training?

> XVII. *What links should exist between initial and in-service teacher training in order to facilitate the appropriation and development of the educational principles of democratic schools?*

How do teachers gain access to schools in order to carry out their functions as teachers?

> XVIII. *Are the forms of access of teachers to public schools valid for the development of the model of democratic education? What ways of access to teaching practice are necessary to be able to develop the innovation project on democratic education?*

6. ***Economic support as a pillar underpinning the functioning of schools in their global dimension: infrastructure, human and technical resources.***

Which institutions are involved in the financing of schools?

> XIX. *Are public school financing institutions valid for democratic schools? Which institutions are necessary to fund the implementation and development of an education innovation project on democratic education?*

What is the nature of the funding: public funding (Ministries of Education, Ministries of Education, local authorities), private funding (private schools: families), social funding (other social institutions)?

> XX. *What kind of funding does a democratic school need and can it be the same as for public schools?*

Which educational actors and/or school management board decide on the use of funding? Are decisions on how and on what the funding received is to be distributed and why and how to proceed informed?

> XXI. *Is the public school management model valid in democratic schools? Who should manage and decide on the distribution of funding in a democratic school?*

7. ***Impact evaluation of proposals for change and innovation for educational improvement:***

The proposals for change and innovation must make explicit the educational elements (indicators) which are intended to improve, as well as the processes (when and who evaluates) and the instruments (with what) to be used to gradually demonstrate the progress and achievements made in accordance with the proposed design which has guided and oriented its implementation in classrooms and educational institutions; but also those aspects on which it must continue to have an impact and those which require modifications in order to continue making progress in improving education. The educational model of democratic schools as a proposal for change and innovation should also be subject to analysis and evaluation.

What evaluative indicators identify the innovation project in its framework of understanding democratic education within the what, why, what for and how of these proposals for change and improvement in education?

> XXII. *What are the elements that are characteristic of the educational model of democratic schools, for which evidence is available to show improvements in education?*

What instruments have been or should be used to collect information on progress in the improvement of education?

> XXIII. What instruments have been used in democratic schools to show the strengths and weaknesses of the educational model that defines them?

Which educational actors should evaluate the educational process designed and developed in educational innovation projects? Should the innovation project be subject to internal and external evaluations?

> XXIV. *Which actors have evaluated and evaluate the processes and achievements in the educational practice of democratic schools?*