



DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION NEEDS IMAGINATION:

Preventing identity-based violence through education

Research Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Citizens and young people around the world are calling upon governments to invest in education systems that build inclusion, fairness and equity – and that better reflect the complexities of living in an interconnected and rapidly changing world. These demands are reflected in everyday stories and movements: from moves to topple down statues and decolonise the curriculum,¹ to school strikes for climate action or against the dismantling of public education² and protests against school segregation,³ to campaigns against disinformation and calls for upskilling in political, digital and media literacy.⁴

Still, young people’s demands for an education which can better equip them for personal and social transformation have, for the most part, yet to be aligned with education-based laws, regulations, structures and institutions. Lack of prioritisation in teacher training, growing privatisation, lack of funding and human capital, and weakened social and fiscal health in the wake of COVID-19 have all played a role in adversely impacting the capacity of education systems around the world and, by extension, the societies within which they are rooted. Such systems and societies worldwide have been further undermined by rising risk factors for identity-based violence.

1. The Contested Histories Initiative. (July 2021) “Gandhi Statue in Ghana,” Contested Histories Case Study #72, retrieved from: https://contestedhistories.org/wp-content/uploads/Ghana_-_University-of-Ghana-Gandhi-Statue-in-Accra.pdf. See also: How Statues Are Falling Around the World, (2020) *The New York Times*. Abu Moghli, M. & Kadiwal, L. (2021) Decolonising the curriculum beyond the surge: Conceptualisation, positionality and conduct, *London Review of Education* 19 (1), 1-16.

2. For example, secondary level school students’ protests in Chile in 2006 and Brazil in 2015.

3. Lakik, M. (2018). Bosnian Schoolchildren Win Award for Fighting Segregation, *Balkan Insight*.

4. Feijao, C; Flanagan, I; Van Stolk, C. & Gunashekar, S. (2001). *The global digital skills gap: Current trends and future directions*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation.

In the last decade, citizens and institutions have grappled with growing debates around structural inequalities alongside a rapid increase in conspiracy and fake news. Exclusionary populist movements have grown in strength and confidence – threatening to upend democracies, human rights and the security of vulnerable and marginalised groups. While certain risk factors for social erosion have long-existed, they have been accelerated and further unlocked by contemporary challenges including the COVID-19 pandemic, worsening environmental crises and rapidly growing technologies, the full scale of impact of which is yet to emerge.

As these trends towards democratic backsliding and identity-based violence grow more acute, so too are we faced with the need to equip citizens with the tools to (re)build, and challenge their leaders to build inclusive, equitable, and resilient democracies. It is against this backdrop that, in 2020, the Auschwitz Institute for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities and Protection Approaches created the *Democratic Education Needs Imagination* (DENI) initiative.

Organized around a global two-week conference in November 2021, the initiative convened over 25 education professionals including policymakers, educators and civil society leaders from across the Americas, East Africa, West Africa, Europe, the Middle East and East and Southeast Asia to explore and reimagine how education can best serve as a tool for global violence prevention and for building more inclusive and democratic societies. In doing so the group found no shortage of ideas and this report is rich with their contributions along four key themes:

■ **Educative systems should adopt context specific and cross-cutting curriculum which reflects the realities of living in a rapidly changing world.**

Such a curriculum should address the interconnected agendas of human rights, democratic governance, social justice and sustainable development amongst other complex issues.

■ **Pedagogy should nurture collaborative and horizontal relationships between educators and students, rather than top-down ones.**

Relationships which start from a place of co-creation with – rather than control of – students are more likely to equip young people with the tools they need to build healthy relationships, engage in thoughtful debate, think critically and engage in civic action.

- **There must be greater investment in teacher training and teachers' social importance.** Educators must be strategically involved in the planning and policy of democratic education, both in terms of teaching methods and subject content, and be practically and emotionally supported in delivering such approaches.

- **The purpose of schools should be reimagined as social and civic communities rather than siloed spaces.** Rather than formal spaces where pupils absorb rote knowledge and pass assessments, schools and learning spaces must be seen for what they are: dynamic and social sites which are intrinsically connected to their local and global communities.

While the validity of many of these proposed interventions is supported by established evidence, many of them are not yet prized by governments worldwide. In seeking to better understand this gap, a number of obstacles facing democratic education were identified by the group. These include but are not limited to:

- **Lack of strong consensus on what democratic education can, does or should constitute.** An obstacle to consensus may be the rise of different movements with overlapping goals (e.g. civic, peace education and human rights education to name a few). It can also stem from conceptual disagreements around the role that education can or should play in promoting democracy – and the extent to which it should play this role.

- **Siloed policies and processes between states and schools.** Government, schools, local bodies and civil society which subscribe to democratic education too often lack an explicit shared vision or strategy for implementation. This results in approaches which are likely to fall between the cracks of actual policymaking or which lack shared accountability.

- **Poor accountability systems.** Because external monitoring, outcomes and results-driven approaches are the cornerstone of most education systems, it is not unusual for key stakeholders including teachers, families and young people to be absent from discussions on education programming, planning and evaluation. This goes against democratic approaches whereby a range of actors are able to collectively articulate their views in such a way that they are meaningfully taken into account.

■ **Uneven state funding and prioritisation of democratic education.** This can be seen in Global North contexts, whereby initiatives to fund education for ‘peace’ or ‘democracy’ are supported by foreign aid packages without being matched by funding for domestic education. Irregular funding is also linked to the expansion of private actors in many education systems globally – creating a ‘vacuum’ for uneven financial regulation and, by extension, inequalities across schools.⁵

Many of these obstacles flow out from one another and may point more widely to a general lack of political attention and/or will towards this issue. This is perhaps unsurprising given that democratic education is, at its core, incongruent with existing systems and norms – in other words, it hands citizens the very tools they require in order to challenge policies, structural norms and power asymmetries. This report argues that prioritising education for healthy and democratic societies is not just a moral duty for governments and states; it is a question of self-interest, smart strategy and survival.

Truly implementing democratic education rests heavily on a radical reorientation of what we mean by education and, by extension, how we articulate this meaning both inside and outside of the formal classroom. Such a reorientation cannot rely on educators and school systems alone. Rather, it requires multidirectional, multilateral and concerted action within and across government, civil society, businesses and funders. And as with any profound change, the process of reimagining our education systems can only take root if it is driven by inclusive, interconnected and sustained movement-building.

Such movements must necessarily be grounded in common entry points across diverse organised networks and movements – from climate and racial justice to post-pandemic recovery – in order to inform education systems which are genuinely civically-empowering, context-specific and intersectional.⁶ As governments and societies worldwide are presented with the opportunity to radically reimagine their education-based policies and practices, they must be intentional about making room for knowledge which has historically been excluded from classrooms and policy spaces and, importantly, be willing to be led by these perspectives.

5. Avelar, M. (2021) The dispute between democratic education and privatisation. *Working paper for the Democratic Education Needs Imagination Conference*. Auschwitz Institute for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities / Protection Approaches
6. As an example, the *Black Lives Matter* movement has amplified calls to centre racial justice within education systems as well as climate movements worldwide.

While there are common principles which underpin democratic education, both strategy and implementation will require contextualisation depending on the diverse – and sometimes conflicting – needs of respective societies and communities.

This process will require a number of steps:

- 1) Ongoing and active participation from governments and societies to ensure that school and system-level policies alike are genuinely fit for purpose in a complex and rapidly changing world.
- 2) Mechanisms must be (re)developed to ensure that local needs are fed upwards to help contextualise education policy at every level including primary, secondary and tertiary. National systems must feed down resources and support as guided by those specific, dynamic and diverse needs.
- 3) Horizontal relationships must be strengthened (and in some instances established) so that national and local bodies, civil society, educators, families/carers and young people are able to learn from one another, share resources and provide lateral accountability.

While there is no singular ‘right way’ in how this work should be taken forward we hope that the contributions of the diverse group of education professionals from around the world that have guided this report – and the DENI initiative more broadly – can serve both as a useful framework for future policy development and a signpost for additional research and analysis on democratic education.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated years of democratic backsliding worldwide, accelerating existing drivers of division and undermining social cohesion around the globe while at the same time demonstrating that the world is more interconnected than ever before.⁷ Meanwhile, the ongoing destruction of the natural environment and the effects it is already having is guaranteed to threaten lives and livelihoods in every country over the next century, with disproportionately adverse effects on vulnerable and/or minoritised communities.

We live in a world of increasing complexity and uncertainty marked by a rise in nationalist sentiment and disinformation. There are notable inequalities between individuals, groups and nations, especially when it comes to access to system-level resources and decision-making power of global affairs. As such, our societies, independently of where they are and what form of government they have, are confronting several interconnected challenges that raise serious concerns about the future we are building.

As the authors of the recently published UNESCO's *Futures of Education* final report have noted, this rise of "authoritarianism and exclusionary populism, and political extremism are challenging democratic governance precisely at a time when we need strengthened cooperation and solidarity to address shared concerns that neither know nor respect political borders."⁸

An established lesson of identity-based violence and mass atrocity prevention is that moments of political, economic, or social crisis amplify existing structural

7. Such backsliding is inextricably linked to the 2007-2008 economic crisis See: Levitsky, S. & Ziblatt, D. (2018). *How Democracies Die*. New York: Dieroadway Books; and Reynié, D. (2019). *Democracies Under Pressure. A Global Survey*. 2 vols. Paris: IRI and FONDAPO.

8. International Commission on the Futures of Education (2021). *Reimagining our Futures Together. A New Social Contract for Education*. UNESCO: Paris, 9.

risk factors which make societies more vulnerable to various/myriad divisive and hate-based behaviours that cause violence.⁹ Structural risk factors can include **society wide conditions** – such as widespread scepticism towards democratic processes, normalisation of hate speech, economic deterioration, or widespread perceptions of grievance, threat, or inequality between groups – as well as **individual risks** – such as not feeling represented by those who make decisions affecting your life, believing that certain groups are responsible for problems and/or that they pose a threat to your security or prosperity, and not feeling in control of your life or its direction.¹⁰

Moments of acute crisis, environmental disasters and health threats can play a decisive role in triggering events that can lead to open violence. As we know from how these processes unfold over time – for mass atrocities do not happen overnight but rather are the result of sustained and long-term actions¹¹ – scholars and practitioners around the world are raising awareness around measures to prevent these atrocities: seeking to mitigate risk factors for mass violence while also promoting societal resilience to those risks. It is well-understood that the most effective preventive policies should be implemented at early stages and, rather than short and medium-term courses of action, that they should be underpinned by long-term structural (i.e. prevention) efforts, such as education.¹²

Education has long been seen as a positive socialising force that can play an important role in violence prevention and in building more cohesive, inclusive and democratic societies. This knowledge is not new. As the UN Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights has pointed out “human rights education (...) contributes to the long-term prevention of human rights abuses and violent conflicts, the promotion of equality and sustainable development and the enhancement of participation in decision-making processes within a democratic system.”¹³ This same idea was restated by target 4.7 of the 2030 Sustainable

9. Staub, E. (1999). The Origins and Prevention of Genocide, Mass Killing, and Other Collective Violence. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 5(4), 303-336.

10. To learn more about these classification of risk factors, see Protection Approaches' own risk analysis framework and global best practice; including the Office of the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide (OSPAG) Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes: A Tool for Prevention, United Nations, 2014; UNDP Preventing Violent Extremism through Inclusive Development and the Promotion of Tolerance and Respect for Diversity, United Nations Development Programme, 2016, and Waller, J. (2016). *Confronting Evil. Engaging Our Responsibility to Prevent Genocide*, New York: Oxford University Press.

11. Meyerson, D. (2010). On the Timing of Genocide. *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, 5(1), 20-38.

12. See the Secretary-General's 2009 report *Implementing the Responsibility to Protect*, United Nations General Assembly, A/63/677, 12 January 2009, 19-20.

13. Plan of Action for the third phase (2015–2019) of the World Programme for Human Rights Education.

Development Goals.¹⁴ More recently, UNESCO's Futures of Education final report posits that "knowledge and learning are humanity's greatest renewable resources for responding to challenges and inventing alternatives."¹⁵

As we outline in this report, however, it is not sufficient for global discourse on education to focus primarily on access and quality; it must also speak to diverse – and sometimes conflicting – ways in which education has been, and continues to be, instrumentalised for all sorts of means. Indeed, history has shown time and time again that mass atrocities can be enabled or perpetuated by—and rooted in—formal education. As noted by Edward Kissi, one of the contributors for the DENI initiative, "the Young Turks in the Ottoman Empire, the Nazi Youth in Nazi Germany, the European Settlers in Colonial America, the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and the Interahamwe militia in Rwanda have all been educated products of the classroom."¹⁶ In places such as Australia, Canada and the USA, schools were used to assimilate the original populations and destroy their cultures, with devastating consequences both at the individual and community levels.

This reality forces us to accept that education – if not done well – is not just counterproductive to social cohesion but can also be actively harmful and violent.¹⁷ Thus, when reimagining the role that education can play as a preventive, restorative and resilience-building tool for the world, we must consider not just the extent to which education can and should play this role but crucially the different ways in which it can be positively leveraged and weaponised – whether intentionally or not.

Such considerations are therefore all the more important given both new and historical challenges that are adversely impacting education systems and democracies around the world. The demands of preparing young people for the job market and pressures to meet stringent academic deadlines have cut

14. According to Goal 4.7 of the SDG Framework "all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development." (UN SDG Goals, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4>).

15. UNESCO. (2022). *Futures of Education initiative*, <https://en.unesco.org/futuresofeducation/>.

16. Kissi, E. (2021) Working paper for the Democratic Education Needs Imagination Conference. Auschwitz Institute for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities / Protection Approaches.

17. King, E. (2013). *From classrooms to conflict in Rwanda*. Cambridge University Press; Burde, D. (2014). *Schools for Conflict or for Peace in Afghanistan*. Columbia University Press. See also: Ramirez-Barat, C. & Duthie R. (2015), *Education and Transitional Justice. Opportunities and Challenges for Peacebuilding*, New York: ICTJ and UNICEF, Bush K. & Saltarelli, D. (2002). *The Two Faces of Education in Ethnic Conflict: Towards a Peacebuilding Education for Children*. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Center; and Smith, A. & Davies, L. (2003). *Education and Conflict: Complexity and Chaos*, London: Routledge.

into educators' capacity to promote their personal and social transformation. Moreover, efforts to provide a 'quick fix' or pacify citizen demands for new forms of teaching and learning may result in educational approaches that address symptoms but ultimately exacerbate underlying causes of violence.

As one example, while there is growing interest in digital literacy as a response to the alarming rise of disinformation, solutions often focus on safer internet, without necessarily questioning the causes behind the need for such safety, and forgo necessary interpersonal skills, such as enabling learners to engage in positive dialogue. Similarly, otherwise well-intentioned curriculums may normalise hegemonic views of identity (thus further marginalising minority groups); seek to avoid conflict (thereby forgoing opportunities to engage students in critical thinking and conflict resolution skills); or oversimplify resources, a process which may reinforce stereotypes (rather than debunking misconceptions or building common ground).

This report makes the case that a deeper and altogether more sophisticated understanding of education is paramount if we are to avoid 'quick fixes,' meaningfully address risk factors of identity-based violence and build more inclusive, equitable and resilient democratic societies.

In this report, we refer to this type of education as 'democratic education.' Such an education is founded on critical and transformative pedagogy through which students, and, in turn, societies are nurtured to be kind, compassionate and more capable to confront current and future crises. It equips learners with the necessary analytical and interpersonal skills to read and think critically when evaluating sources, analysing arguments, and engaging in positive dialogue.

Since John Dewey first wrote *Democracy and Education* back in 1916,¹⁸ much has been said about this topic. Indeed, scholars, educators, and activists have written thousands of pages about what democratic education is, could be and should be.¹⁹

18. Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York: Macmillan.

19. For some literature reviews, see: Mutekwe, E. & Sedibe, M. (2015). South Africa's quest for democratic education through a language in education policy perspective. *Creative Education*, 6, 1076–1085; Ho, L. C. (2012) Sorting citizens: Differentiated citizenship education in Singapore. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 44, 403–428; Haav, K. (2008). Civic education in Estonia: Democratic or authoritarian. *Journal of Social Science Education*, 7(1), 121–130; Sant, E. (2019). Democratic Education: A Theoretical Review (2006-2017). *Review of Educational Research*, 89(5), 655-696; and Abowitz, K. & Harnish, J. (2006). Contemporary discourses of Citizenship. *Review of Educational Research*, 76(4), 653-690.

And while this rich literature is by no means monolithic (rather, it is full of conflicts and tensions) there is ultimately a consensus on the fundamental relationship between democracy and education. That is, that critically educated citizens are key for societies to function and thrive; that education must be understood both as a right and a public good; and those choices about how to craft educational policies are inherently political in nature.

In this respect, beyond merely teaching facts about how institutions work, democratic education is a principle in which democracy is both a goal and a way of teaching. It is a form of interconnected civic and social participation at the individual, institutional and systemic levels which is grounded in indigenous knowledge and wisdom.²⁰ It is about lifelong learning as a means of positively transforming societies; an inherently anti-authoritarian concept which at its heart is a challenge to asymmetrical forms of power.

In the pages below, we first outline the methodology that has guided this report. This includes details on the DENI initiative proper, the contributors who have so richly informed this analysis, and the ways in which we have sought to integrate and frame their perspectives into this document. The next section focuses on those education-based policies and practices that the group proposed as a preventive and restorative tool for stronger democracies. The report ends with some of the obstacles that we believe need to be overcome in order to implement democratic education across diverse local contexts and, linked to this, a suggested framework for change.

In bringing these reflections together, this report ultimately argues that societies have collectively reached a turning point; one wherein we no longer need to keep asking ourselves the basic questions of 'what works', but rather how we can shift our focus and efforts from principles to policy and practice. As with any effort to create systems change, we believe this pathway will be made stronger through greater collective engagement and would welcome feedback, challenge and reflection on this work.

20. Okoth, G. O., & Anyango, C. (2014). The crisis of democratic education: Building on African Indigenous principles and social science studies in developing sustainable democratic education in Kenya. *International Journal of Education and Research*, 2(3), 1-10.

METHODOLOGY

Democratic Education Needs Imagination (DENI) is a collaborative project launched in 2020 by the Warren Educational Policies Program of the Auschwitz Institute for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities (AIPG) and Protection Approaches (PA). As civil society organisations that work to prevent identity-based violence and mass atrocities, this project was created in order to explore how school-based practices and policies could best contribute to building more inclusive, vibrant, and resilient societies in light of current democratic backsliding trends and to think practically about how we can collectively move the needle. The project itself was organised around three phases.

Phase I

We commissioned a group of twelve education experts from all over the world, including academics, public officers, and practitioners, to produce papers outlining evidence and best practice from their various local contexts. Each paper was structured around one of the four themes or ‘pillars’ of investigation (below).

- 1) The competencies – that is, **knowledge, attitudes and skills** – that will enable young people to understand and interpret the complexities of the societies in which they live, and thus confront the rising challenges of polarisation, identity-based divisions and democratic backsliding.
- 2) The **classroom-based strategies and methodologies** that have effectively enabled students to think critically about their immediate environment, respect the plurality of worldviews that exist in a society, and feel that they belong to a diverse political community.
- 3) The ways in which **school culture and connections with the wider** community in which schools are located can contribute to promoting stronger, more resilient societies. Understanding schools as communities

can help to integrate learning objectives outside of the curriculum and foster collaboration between schools and community organisations.

- 4) The **educational policies and planning** we require to promote the prevention of identity-based discrimination and violence in light of current global challenges of rise of populism and intolerance.

Phase II

Building on the insights of the papers that AIPG and PA commissioned, the DENI initiative convened a global conference that took place between 16-21 November 2021. Over the course of two weeks, this conference brought together a group of 25 global experts with the aim of deepening our understanding of locally-owned education strategies and pedagogies which can effectively overcome system barriers and promote social cohesion, democratic values and a kinder, more cooperative world.

Phase III

This report, which brings together the accumulative insights of the DENI group, constitutes the third project phase. We hope it will serve as a practical, evidence-based tool for practitioners, policymakers and funders alike on the types of possible mechanisms for leveraging education as a preventative and restorative tool in democratic societies, while also being clear about the gaps which we believe first need to be overcome if we are to genuinely implement democratic education.

DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION: PRINCIPLES AND BEST PRACTICE

This section of the report outlines some of those best practices around democratic policies and processes in education, as identified by the DENI conference and the group of global educators, many of which are not new, but which rearticulate important principles and build on decades of educational practice. Following the structure of the discussions, the sections focus on three topics which, while separate, ultimately build upon one another: knowledge, attitudes and skills; classroom-based pedagogy and teaching methods; and schools as communities.

This discussion is not intended to be exhaustive but rather to supplement an existing (and growing) pool of evidence on approaches to education. As every education system is underpinned by its own unique set of characteristics and complexities, we welcome further discussion on how the proposed approaches can be best tailored and adapted to different contexts and levels of education (i.e., primary, secondary, tertiary).

Knowledge, attitudes and skills

It is commonly accepted that for young people to understand and navigate the complexities of the societies within which they live, they must first be equipped with the knowledge, attitudes and skillsets they need in order to grow as healthy and civic-minded individuals. Responding to this intuition, a growing consensus has recently emerged in the educational field in favour of what has been called a competence-based approach to learning. From this perspective, several institutions have designed a variety of competence frameworks that aim to lay out a set of competencies that learners should acquire in order to engage with, and shape, democratic societies.²¹

21. The Council of Europe's 20 *Competences for Democratic Culture* scheme is one of the most widely recognised such frameworks.

Building on these ideas with the participants in the conference, but also adopting a critical perspective, a consensus emerged around a possible set of core competencies which all societies – regardless of which corner of the world they are rooted in – could aspire to (summarised in table below). These include an understanding of human dignity and civic processes; critical thinking and independence of thought; conflict resolution and the ability to respectfully disagree; kindness, curiosity and empathy; and respect for oneself, others and the environment.

COMPETENCIES OF DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION		
KNOWLEDGE	ATTITUDES	SKILLS
human dignity and human rights	respect for self, others, and the environment	self-awareness and self-knowledge
civic processes and institutions	kindness, curiosity, and empathy	relational perspective
history including diverse, contested, oppressed and marginalised narratives (including both identity and inequality related discourses)	valuing diversity and inclusiveness	critical thinking and imagination
local and global sustainability	personal and civic responsibility to promote change through democratic means	positive disagreement and dialogue
		conflict resolution and collaborative skills
		digital and media literacy

Although this list of competencies is valuable in guiding the design of more emancipatory educational projects, the DENI group agreed that there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ that pupils can or should subscribe to. Translating these schemes into practice must be context-specific and must reflect the learnings that are relevant for students’ real lives in the societies in which they live. Likewise, we must not fall into the trap of conceptualising the “ideal democratic citizen,”

nor of placing too much emphasis on student attainment, rather than on the very teaching practices and processes which we know can organically lead to and nurture competencies. This means acknowledging that competencies are complex, interconnected, context-dependent and that they change with time.

New forms of media and communication are both a conduit for and a driver of the growing divisions we see in almost every democracy and fragile state worldwide. In this context, digital literacy has become both a core competency in and of itself, as well as a means of embedding competencies within the curricula. In an era of rapidly accelerating technology, it is vital that students are able to evaluate sources of information, recognise harmful content and challenge divisive narratives (including rising forms of hate speech) while learning to engage in positive debate and disagreement. They also need to understand how social media works, including its relationship with algorithms and commercial profit – and the ways in which such practices can silo (rather than positively support) diverse perspectives and generate polarisation. Cyberbullying digital harassment and, relatedly, the impact of social media on mental health are additional areas which young people must be better equipped to understand and navigate. Thus, a curriculum which emphasises both digital and media literacy is more likely to encourage critical and nuanced thinking within young people.

Research on civic literacy also shows that online participation holds a strong, positive correlation with civic and political engagement.²² This may be because young people who spend more time online are more likely to be exposed to diverse political viewpoints and are to be more likely to be incentivised to engage with them, but also because they are more likely to be united around common goals. Curiosity towards others and exposure to diversity may in turn serve as a vehicle for students to reflect on their own positions and privilege and allow them to situate these within a wide historical and societal context.

Finally, curricular approaches to democratic education should also provide young people with the opportunities to engage in dialogue and ensure meaningful interactions with the ‘other’ so as to break down stereotypes and find common ground. Making space for the teaching and learning of different cultures as well as

22. Hobbs R. (2021). Digital Citizenship and Education for Democracy: Definitions, Pedagogies and Approaches. *Working paper for the Democratic Education Needs Imagination Conference*. Auschwitz Institute for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities / Protection Approaches. See also, Kahne, J., & Bowyer, B. (2019). Can media literacy education increase digital engagement in politics? *Learning, Media and Technology*, 44(2), 211-224.

historical knowledge, including narratives which have historically been oppressed or marginalised, can encourage students to situate themselves within these movements and consider the tools and models they might require for preventive action within their own societies. Relatedly, embedding the teaching of human rights violations – past and ongoing; at home and abroad – can help to sensitise students to the dangers of indifference, intolerance, racism and dehumanisation of the other.²³

Of course, such teaching and learning can only be made possible through a holistic and intersectional curriculum; one which addresses both abuses and challenges (climate injustice, societal inequalities and oppression) as well as opportunities for transformation (human rights, anti-racism, gender equality, resistance and social change). This supports previous research which shows that a coherent cross-curriculum which encompasses local and global challenges is more likely to strengthen young people’s ability to positively engage with issues that matter to them and to wider society in an increasingly global world.²⁴

Yet many of today’s formal curricula fail to reflect the continual struggles of democratic politics, recognition and redistribution claims in a world that is in constant change. The DENI contributors worldwide noted that students keenly perceive the gap between what they learn at school and the challenges of the world in which they are growing. Accordingly, they may feel a sense of disconnection and even cynicism that the education system is failing them.

Classroom-based pedagogy and teaching methods

While subject knowledge is an important foundation for fostering critical thinking skills, *how* the material is taught is equally important to – perhaps even more so than – *what* content is taught. Building on topics outlined above, this section outlines democratic pedagogies, strategies and methodologies which might effectively enable students to develop the knowledge, attitudes and skills they need in order to think critically about their immediate environment, respect the plurality of worldviews that exist in a society and feel that they belong to a diverse political community.

23. Ramírez-Barat, C. & Duthie, R. (eds.). (2016). *Transitional Justice and Education: Learning Peace*. New York: Social Science Research Council. UNESCO. (2017). *Education about the Holocaust and preventing genocide: a policy guide*. Paris: UNESCO.

24. Zwart, D. (2021). *Building stronger communities through critical and compassionate schooling*. London: Protection Approaches.

Democratic education stipulates that pedagogy and process (i.e., how young people are taught) is just as critical as content-based knowledge in ensuring that democratic values are truly 'lived' inside and outside of the classroom. These pedagogies equip young people with the critical thinking skills, personal relationships and cognitive and socio-emotional skillsets they need in order to achieve equity-based change within their own lives and communities.

Moreover teachers are facilitators that create space for students to learn about their own and other identities. Studies on curricular approaches have shown that this can positively impact students and educators alike, namely through helping both parties to develop 'their cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal abilities which help them adapt to an ever changing, super-complex world.'²⁵

25. Lubicz-Nawrocka, T. (2020). *Exploration of how Curriculum Co-creation Advances Student and Staff Aims for Scottish Higher Education*. University of Edinburgh.

Case study 1: Pedagogical practices for civic and democratic education in Ukraine

“What learning activities can help nurture a democratic environment? The first step is realising that whatever the topic, whether it is teaching history, maths, science, language, etc. there is a core set of learning outcomes that are the same in each area e.g. values (diversity, human dignity, freedom etc.), cross-curricular skills (cooperative skills, communicative skills, autonomy learning skills, critical thinking skills etc.)”

Natalia Kodolova’s working paper shares some lessons on pedagogical practices that come from her experience working as a teacher for 25 years in a public secondary school in Ukraine and as an instructor of workshops for teachers on how to better involve school community members in education. All these educational practices are mainly value-driven, rather than outcome-based, which means that the process of teaching and learning aims to encourage students to become responsible citizens in intercultural society, respect human rights, think critically, take personal responsibility for their life and become aware of the importance of civic participation for solving challenges in the local community.

Such approaches to education focus on developing pedagogical processes that promote curiosity, reflection, autonomy and critical thinking among students. As one example, critical thinking can be encouraged through cooperative learning (as it helps to develop the students’ capacity for listening, reviewing their positions and positioning themselves more accurately) or projects that adopt a whole-school approach (projects that encourage students’ participation in decision-making issues in the school). Autonomy, in turn, can be developed by practices such as teaching students to give and receive feedback, implementing formative assessment and carrying out project-based learning. Finally, inquiry-based activities might include different activities for formulating questions such as the Socratic method of questioning and the Socratic walk methodology, self-questioning activities and the teaching of controversial issues. All of these are effective strategies for promoting curiosity and reflection among students.

KIDALOVA, N. (2021). *Working paper for the Democratic Education Needs Imagination Conference*. Auschwitz Institute for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities/ Protection Approaches.

Rather than framing learning as a competition or outcomes-led framework, pedagogical strategies should allow more space for students to explore the importance of collaboration and co-creation; namely, by creating the spaces they need in order to think deeply, collectively and meaningfully about the people they want to become and the kind of society they want to live in. Communities of inquiry and dialogic pedagogy are both examples of classroom-based approaches which can help foster a sense of belonging among young people, enable them to develop their critical thinking and foster dialogue with people whose perspectives and values are different from their own.

Moreover, pedagogies which specifically seek to question and transform power dynamics and nurture positive growth in young people have significant potential to help them learn about – and participate in – healthy democracies. Encouraging student and youth-led approaches to civic engagement can be a powerful vehicle for this type of pedagogy. Besides equipping young people with the tools needed to become active and compassionate agents within their communities, youth-led approaches place an expectation on educators to be civically engaged in order to effectively facilitate and support civic projects. Educators are therefore given the opportunity to interrogate their own world views, develop their own citizenship and socioemotional skills and to role-model the behaviours, attitudes and skills that they strive to engender within their own students. In this sense, democratic values are ‘lived’ inside and outside of the formal classroom.

Case study 2: History, agency, and civic engagement in Massachusetts, USA

In the Cambridge Public School District, fifth grade students (aged 10-11) begin to investigate difficult histories, including enslavement. To support younger learners in processing this information in a developmentally appropriate way, educators begin by creating community agreements to build trust and safety. When a difficult history is presented, educators co-process the history with students by identifying prior knowledge and validating the diversity of feelings that disturbing histories evoke.

Teachers support students in engaging in historical inquiry by examining excerpts from primary sources documents, especially first-hand accounts of enslavement, such as those written by Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs. Students investigate how enslaved people used their agency in a range of ways, from intentionally working slowly to self-emancipation. Students investigate the antebellum abolition movement and learn that abolitionists were from different races, genders and classes. Later in the year, students study the Civil Rights Movement and make connections between enslavement and racism in the United States today.

When students inquire deeply into difficult histories and narratives of agency and social change, they are well-positioned to explore questions of justice and to engage in difficult conversations. This critical historical work prepares students to engage in non-partisan, student-led civic engagement projects in grade 8 (ages 13-14) and in high school, as required in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Older students continue to develop their historical understanding, as well as civic knowledge and skills. The marriage of history and civics supports students in identifying, researching, and proposing solutions to community concerns.

Stang, A. M. (2021). Truth and agency: co-processing histories of racism. *Working paper for the Democratic Education Needs Imagination Conference*. Auschwitz Institute for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities / Protection Approaches.

When implemented well, democratic education empowers teachers and students to be co-designers of their learning experiences. Linked to the notion of educators as 'co-creators' rather than 'guardians' or 'authorities' of knowledge, co-processing is a powerful pedagogic tool for democratic teaching and learning, especially when confronting the painful legacies and realities of racism and other forms

of oppression.²⁶ Through trust-building, educators establish a caring classroom environment ahead of teaching any content, ensuring that students feel listened to, safe and valued.²⁷ This may involve alerting children that they might feel intense emotions and that the teacher will be there to guide and support them.²⁸ Such practices, in turn, are more likely to reduce the risk of curriculum violence – a process whereby curricula and teaching “damage or otherwise adversely affect students intellectually and emotionally.”²⁹

Central to the idea of such teaching methodologies is emotion and discomfort: for classrooms to truly function as a safe environment, educators must learn how to be comfortable with their students’ discomfort as well as their own. However, such pedagogy can place extra labour on teachers without necessarily equipping them with the resources, time and space they need.

In order to prevent these pitfalls, “teachers must be at the centre and their profession revalued and reimagined as a collaborative endeavour which sparks new knowledge to bring about educational and social transformation.”³⁰ We all have an active role to play in recognising the inherent value of teachers, if only to comfortably ask ourselves, “what is the kind of person we want our children to learn from?” [*sic*]. As we collectively seek to mobilise democratic education worldwide, we must be mindful of placing too great a burden on educators while denying their right to shape and lead education-based approaches. Moreover, schools and states alike must be capable of providing motivation and satisfaction to teachers – and of compensating them fairly through pay and benefits. Such support can only be granted through greater political commitment and investment.

In the absence of more formal support, informal networks – such as online professional learning communities – have served as a practical resource for educators navigating social and emotional learning approaches to education. These networks may be particularly useful for teachers who feel they lack the personal knowledge and/or lived experiences to facilitate honest and candid conversations

26. Stang, A. & Allen, D. (2021). Truth and Empowerment: A Framework for Teaching About Enslavement. *Education Next*. <https://www.educationnext.org/teaching-about-slavery-forum-guelzo-berry-blight-rowe-stang-allen-maranto/#stangallen>

27. For a discussion about teachers’ authority based on Hannah Arendt’ theory, see Fonseca de Carvalho, J. (2015). Autoridade e Educação: o desafio em face do caso da tradição. *Revista Brasileira de Educação*, 20 (63), 975 – 993.

28. Stang, A. M. (2021). Truth and Agency: Co-processing Histories of Racism. *Working paper for the Democratic Education Needs Imagination Conference*. Auschwitz Institute for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities / Protection Approaches.

29. Jones, S. P. (2020). Ending curriculum violence. *Teaching Tolerance*, 64, 47-50. See also Ighodaro, E., & Wiggan, G. (2010). *Curriculum violence* (Education in a Competitive and Globalizing World). New York: Nova Science.

30. International Commission on the Futures of Education (2021). *Reimagining our Futures Together*, 87.

about oppression. While such networks cannot be a substitute or panacea for lack of formal investment, they can support educators who feel daunted by the prospect of navigating the complex emotions that their students may naturally experience in being taught violent histories and encourage the teaching of these subjects in the classroom.

Case study 3: Plataforma Global, El Salvador

‘Education is often confused with knowledge. Not all education is knowledge and not all knowledge is acquired in an educational process.’

Founded in 2008, Plataforma Global is an activist support network. Through capacity building and support to ‘movements, networks, organisations and individuals who promote the agenda of progressive youth-led change’, the initiative seeks to support young people with the practical tools and skills they need in order to drive forward social change.

Collaboration is central to the initiative: young people are brought together with indigenous, urban and rural communities and international activists in order to learn from each other and collectively mobilise social and civic action. Also central are the principles of public action learning, which stipulate that ‘learning by doing’ and the street (rather than the formal classroom) are key starting points for providing youth with the knowledge, skills and attitude they need in order to be active global citizens.

Argueta, A. (2021). Learning from public action in El Salvador. *Working paper for the Democratic Education Needs Imagination Conference*. Auschwitz Institute for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities / Protection Approaches.

Schools as communities

As Osler and Starker have pointed out, “education in schools doesn’t take place in a vacuum. Learners bring with them their experiences of daily life and are often influenced by their families and experiences in communities.”³¹

Indeed, schools are much more than buildings where individuals come to acquire knowledge and the academic learning that takes place in those sites.

31. Osler, A. & Starker, H. (2006). *Education for Democratic Citizenship*, 11.

They form part of a wider ecosystem of teachers, students, staff and families/ carers embedded within local neighbourhoods and wider communities. When conceptualising schools as communities, it becomes essential to unpack the social and civic roles – and responsibilities – of schooling for democracy.

Principles for building positive school communities

- Co-creation of shared school values
- Space for democratic participation of students in school and community issues
- Intersectional and assets-based approaches to community and parental outreach

Schools that build positive communities internally as well as connections with surrounding neighbourhoods can have a transformative ripple effect on societies. In this respect, schools can be ‘spaces of encounter’ and social connection where students from different backgrounds can meet one another, learn about and celebrate differences, and form pluralistic worldviews and friendships.

Accordingly, our own schooling experiences may enrich our social circles with people from all walks of life whom we may otherwise never have met. When schools work with community organisations, they can break down the artificial barrier between classrooms and ‘the real world’ and can have long-lasting positive impacts on democratic societies, including fostering plurality and social cohesion. In other words, schools as communities can help to integrate learning objectives outside of the curriculum and foster collaboration between schools, community organisations and wider societies.

There are a number of practical school-wide strategies that can create stronger, more democratic and more inclusive school communities. Every school has values, implicit or explicit. By openly discussing and striving towards shared school values, schools can create spaces of dialogue that foster plurality. This can be a complex process to navigate as members of school communities may hold different personal values including religious or political views. When school members with different views do interact through a poorly managed process, it can contribute to tensions and polarisation. Mindful and intentional facilitation is

therefore essential. This process is never linear or finished but must be ongoing because communities and mindsets are dynamic and change over time.

Strong school communities create time and space for resolving conflict in positive ways. In many schools, behaviour policies tend to be punitive; those who cause disruption or harm are quickly labelled as 'perpetrators' and sanctioned. Often there is a culture of silence where children are expected to be quiet except when asked to speak. Such practices repress student's social, emotional, and civic development and often tend to further marginalise students from minoritised backgrounds. The importance of making conflict resolution part of the pedagogical process in and out of the classroom is therefore integral to creating strong school communities. Peer mediation programs have proven to be successful models for empowering young people to find positive solutions to conflict together.

Youth leadership and involvement in school issues and decisions are a key component of democratic approaches to education. Youth clubs can create a safe space for children and adolescents to talk about all issues that matter to them, from social services to healthy relationships, and for their concerns to feed into school governance. Student forums can enable young people to question the assumptions of those in power, including their head teachers, thereby building their own self confidence to address issues that matter to them. As it is damaging when students' voices are heard at school but not at home, it is essential for there to be ongoing dialogue between schools, parents and communities.

Case study 4: Democracy in practice, Bolivia

Founded in 2013, Democracy in Practice is a non-profit organisation focused on reinventing student government.

Three pilot projects of Democracy in Practice's student government program ran February through November of 2014 in three schools in the Cochabamba area of Bolivia.

Building on both innovative and classic models of social participation, the organisation is dedicated to transforming and improving democracy, putting schools and student bodies at the heart of the process. Such work is part of a growing movement of democratic innovation that is challenging traditional approaches to governance all around the world.

According to Democracy in Practice, the first and most important step in reinventing student government has been replacing competitive elections with voluntary lotteries. Because lotteries don't disadvantage shy and less popular students, they form student governments that are far more diverse and representative than those formed through elections. Traditional positions such as 'school presidents' are swapped out for rotating leadership responsibilities, so that every student representative learns to set agendas, facilitate meetings, and speak in front of the school. Finally, student governments are further empowered through extensive capacity building and educator support programmes, such as: facilitation training, public speaking workshops and help with project management.

Read more: <https://democraciaenpractica.org/panorama>

Strong school communities work to bridge the gap between school and the home such as through after-school activities, graduations, summer initiatives and special events for the whole community. As communication is a two-way process that can and should look different in different places, schools should find a number of ways to communicate with parents such as emails, text messages, newsletters and one-on-one meetings. Similarly, these approaches to parental engagement will necessarily be context-specific. For instance, in the African context, parent-teacher associations may focus on school infrastructure whereas in North America school boards may be much more involved in school curricular content.

Families may be resistant to certain changes at the school level especially when dealing with controversial issues or conflicting narratives. Schools could offer interactive history lessons for parents that create space for them to overcome their fears and anxieties as well as learn about topics they might not have had

the chance to during their own schooling experience. Thus, school can be seen as a place where parents are able to bring their own histories and identities into the school not as the only one, but as one of many. Approaching education as an interactive, dynamic and iterative relationship over which schools and families have shared ownership can have a positive impact on students, with research showing that strong family-school partnerships are linked to higher test scores, grade point averages, home and school behaviour and adaptation to school.³²

Multi-sectoral approaches to community building can also be important in reimagining democratic education. For example, sectors such as agriculture and healthcare are closely related to the needs of school populations including access as well as the relevance of education to the lived experiences of diverse communities. To create effective multi-sectoral approaches to strengthening schools as communities, various strategies can be employed. Community or educational leaders can engage in actor mapping in order to identify who may be supportive and who may need to be engaged with in order to receive support. Engaging as many actors as possible – such as families, policy makers, and even the police – can create strong coalitions. In the long-term, such engagement can change community attitudes as well.

32. Lasater, K. (2016). Parent-Teacher conflict related to student abilities: The Impact on students and the family-school partnership. *School Community Journal*, 26(2), 237-262.

Case study 5: Working with pastoralist Maasai community in Tanzania

“Education is not just a promise for girls now but for entire communities including adults. It is change that affects everyone.”

The Pastoral Women’s Council (PWC) works with the pastoralist Maasai community in Tanzania and provides an example of working in partnership with communities to promote gender inclusion and equitable education access. As an Indigenous and rural community, the Maasai have been historically marginalised by public services including education and are often excluded from decision making bodies. Through a whole-of-society approach, PWC worked with mothers and other women in the Maasai community as well as local government, district councillors, head teachers, and parent committees. At the heart of their approach was working to mobilise and empower women as decision makers and partnering with schools to put in place inclusive and equitable practices, including teacher training as well as creating youth clubs so that young people themselves have a stake in school decisions that affect them.

Pastoral Women’s Council (2021). Co-creating inclusive pathways to quality education for pastoralist children in Tanzania. *Working paper for the Democratic Education Needs Imagination Conference*. Auschwitz Institute for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities / Protection Approaches.

OBSTACLES TO DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

This paper has so far outlined that education can in fact be leveraged as tool or fostering resilience and preventing violence. Yet, while it is important to identify and amplify what has worked, it is not enough to create systemic change. This is partly because there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach – what works well in one context may not translate well to another – but also because focusing solely on ‘what works’ clearly has not been enough to catalyse positive and sustainable shifts.

This section outlines some of the key barriers that underpin democratic education, as they emerged in conversation with the participants of the DENI conference and argue that they must now become our collective focus if we are to succeed in unlocking systemic change.

Lack of consensus and shared language

As a concept, education for democracy tends “to provoke controversy and heated debates, with various proponents adopting different approaches and certain critics even questioning whether schools should be engaged in this area of learning at all.”³³ This is perhaps unsurprising given that democratic education is not a neat monolith and there are myriad ways in which it can and should look. An education model that promotes democratic values must speak to the diverse – and sometimes conflicting – needs of the context within which it is rooted and will therefore by nature be marked by disagreement and debate. In recent years, we have even seen the rise of movements around the world that are questioning

33. Osler, A. & Starker, H. (2006). Education for Democratic Citizenship, 5.

and demanding to control or censor what children learn at school.³⁴ However, such moves to control – rather than co-create – the curriculum can result in a weakening of the school as a civic space.

In some contexts, the argument for democratic education can be hindered by perceptions of democracy as a Western agenda and, linked to this, a weapon of cultural hegemony and imperialism. These perceptions are not unfounded. We know from cases across colonial Africa, the Americas and Asia, for example, that education can all too easily serve both as a tool for ‘democratic’ knowledge production and the destruction of indigenous knowledge and culture alike; in fact, these two missions have long been intertwined.³⁵ In other cases, this claim, however, can also be used as an excuse not to promote certain kinds of reforms to democratise the educational space in favour of authoritarian approaches.

Conversely, nation states that do openly subscribe to the principles of (and language around) democratic education often skew heavily towards one specific methodology or approach. The end result is campaigns for distinct but overlapping types of education – for example, restorative education, citizenship education, peace education and/or human rights education.

Advocates for democratic education will be aware that such educational approaches share more similarities than differences, not just in terms of their pedagogical and curricular approaches but also in respect to their desired outcomes i.e., more inclusive and resilient democratic societies. However, their interconnections can be lost on the general public and policymakers alike due to a wider lack of shared identity. This in turn makes it significantly harder for educational movements to gain traction and ultimately build the momentum that is needed to achieve their shared goals and effect system change.

Siloed policies and processes

It seems obvious to state that coordination lies at the heart of effective policy and practice. However, we often see government ministries, schools, local

34. Moves to shrink the school as a civic space are currently defended by some extreme-right parties and religious conservative groups in many countries around the world e.g. “Escola Sem Partido” in Brazil; “Con mis hijos no te metas” (Peru and Argentina); and the *No Indoctrination*, movement created by Education Action Group Foundation in the US. In Europe, parties such as VOX in Spain defend a similar agenda.

35. Nwanosike, O. F. & Onyije, L. E. (2011). Colonialism and Education. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 2(4), 41.

bodies and civil society subscribe to principles of democratic education without developing an explicit shared vision or strategy for implementation. Without this strategic coherence, such principles – while pleasant to the ear – are simply likely to remain ‘bubbled’ and fall between the cracks of actual policymaking.

As noted by the group of DENI contributors, disjointed education policies are not just ineffective; they can also have harmful consequences. There is a risk that, rather than connecting communities and societies, schools serve as institutional barriers between them.

The impact of such barriers can play out in multiple ways – from the physical exclusion of people of certain identities within schools proper, to the absence of their histories, needs and perspectives within the curricula, to the harmful pedagogies that can play out in the classroom such as the forced re-enactment of slavery auctions in US history classes.³⁶ In such cases, only students from similar backgrounds interact with each other; in others, students will be exposed to a homogenous presentation of national history and identity, thus erasing the lived experiences of minoritised groups; in the third situation, students may experience harm and trauma. Each situation contributes to learning spaces that are regressive and reactive rather than positive, encouraging, and transformative.

Disconnects in policy and process also teach that states are more likely to operate on principles of hypocrisy than democracy – resulting in the simultaneous commitment to, and undermining of, education as a tool for stronger democracies.³⁷ Such paradoxes are well-illustrated by governments which express support for social and democratic participation while rolling out guidance on political impartiality in schools, as in the case of the UK,³⁸ but also by those democracies in which education has been used to normalise militarised approaches to education, as in the case of Israel or Bolsonaro’s Brazil.³⁹

36. Duffy, G. & Gallagher, A. (2016). Shared Education in contested spaces: How collaborative networks improve communities and schools. *Journal of Educational Change*, 18, 107.

37. Brunsson, N. (1989). *The Organization of Hypocrisy: Talk, Decisions and Actions*, Copenhagen: Copenhagen Business School.

38. *Political Impartiality in Schools: Guidance*, Department for Education, UK, 2022.

39. See Gor, H. (2011). Education for War in Israel: Preparing Children to Accept War as a natural Factor of Life. in Saltzman, K. J. & Gabbard, D (eds.). *Education as Enforcement: The Militarization and Corporatization of Schools*, New York: Routledge. See also: Adwan, S., Bar-Tal, D. & Wexler, B. E. (2016). Portrayal of the Other in Palestinian and Israeli Schoolbooks: A Comparative Study. *Political Psychology* 37, 201-217. Almeida Santos C., Alves M.; Mocarzel, M. & Moehlecke, S. (2019). Militarização das escolas públicas no Brasil: um debate necessário. *Revista Brasileira de Política e Administração da Educação*, 35(3), 580-591.

Case study 6: Design and implementation of joined-up educational public policies: perspectives from Colombia

“Education for the exercise of citizenship must allow children and adolescents to be recognized as citizens at all times and must train them to build societies that know how to coexist peacefully based on differences.”

In 2017, the government of Colombia asked itself this question: “*what is it that does not allow children and young people to transform their attitudes, behaviours and improve knowledge regarding democracy, participation, peaceful coexistence, respect, and appreciation of diversity?*”

In order to find alternative solutions, the Ministry of Education designed a training programme for citizenship, collecting the local experiences of NGO cooperation organisations, academia, the most outstanding and evaluated practices around the world and the learning that the country had been accumulating in this regard. Following this training, the implementation of the pilot program within a group of 88 selected educational establishments located in dispersed post-conflict rural areas was carried out in 2018 with the accompaniment of the Secretaries of Education. This experience served as the fundamental basis for the design of public policies that Colombia is currently executing to promote socio-emotional development and the exercise of citizenship from early childhood to high school.

Colombia’s experience also indicates that evidence-based educational policies should also include constant teacher training, solid pedagogical materials, and an explicit single curriculum as a way of permeating the institutional policies that reproduce imaginations on what mean participation, democracy, diversity and rights.

Zárate Mantilla, O. (2021). Citizenship education: imagination and evidence that challenges school environments *Working paper for the Democratic Education Needs Imagination Conference*. Auschwitz Institute for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities / Protection Approaches.

Fighting for a more joined-up approach to policy and process alone is not a panacea for democratic education, particularly where such divisions are politically motivated. However, it can be a pathway to enabling greater knowledge exchange, collective priority-setting and shared steering between governance bodies, schools and civil society – all of which are key for ensuring the democratic accountability of education and the wellbeing of young people. As the next few paragraphs outline, such accountability (or lack thereof) is fundamental to the relationship between healthy schools and societies.

Poor systems of accountability

It is commonly understood that more inclusive and resilient democratic societies are supported by robust systems of public accountability.⁴⁰ Conversely, in areas where these systems are weak, states and institutions are more likely to run ‘the risk of failure – whether financial mismanagement, the collapse of services or chronic underperformance increases.’⁴¹

It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that some of the key obstacles to democratic education flow out from poor structures of accountability and – increasingly linked to this – a heavy focus on ‘educational excellence’ and test-based assessment, often conducted by external actors, as a means of benchmarking and monitoring educational effectiveness.

DENI contributor, Marina Avelar, linked the emergence of such measurement systems to the growing privatisation, marketisation and commodification of education.⁴² In highlighting these trends, she argues that teaching and learning is instead being refocused on competition, profit and the development of human capital, including skills that are neatly measurable for economic development. Consequently, “new unelected and in many ways *unaccountable* voices, including donors and funders, are having a growing and significant say in determining the methods, contents and purposes of education.” Drawing on case studies across Bolivia, Ecuador, Namibia, Vietnam and Brazil (see below, case study 7), Avelar instead points to effective accountability systems that are not test-based, but rather which are locally relevant, co-created across schools and communities, and which recentre young people as key actors for social change.

Because external monitoring, outcomes and results-driven approaches are the cornerstone of most education systems, it is not unusual that “largely absent in discussions of such accountability are the voices of stakeholders who work, learn, and teach in schools and other educational institutions.”⁴³ These views were widely echoed by the DENI conference group. Practitioners worldwide noted

40. Avelar, M. (2021) The dispute between democratic education and privatisation.

41. Institute for Government (2018). *Accountability in modern government: what are the issues?* Discussion Paper.

42. Avelar, M. (2021) The dispute between democratic education and privatisation. See also Verger, A., Lubienski C. & Steiner-Khamsi, G. (2016) *World Yearbook of Education 2016. The Global Education Industry*, New York: Routledge; and Croso, C. & Modé Magalhães, G. (2016). Privatização da educação na América Latina e no Caribe: Tendências e riscos para os sistemas públicos de ensino. *Educação Social*, 37 (134), 17-33.

43. Smith, W.C. & Benavot, A. (2019) Improving accountability in education: the importance of structured democratic voice. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 20, 193–205.

that the demands of preparing young people to meet stringent externally-driven assessments and prepare for the job market have cut into educators' capacity to support young people's personal and social transformation. Moreover, they noted that they had little to no say in how such assessments were formed. Instead, standards for education are overwhelmingly defined and set by a select handful of bodies (all of whom are both physically and symbolically distanced from the classroom proper) and are grounded in a top-down evaluation approach.

Case study 7: Reimagining educational policy agenda and governance beyond colonial and economic models: the cases of Bolivia and Vietnam

“In its many forms, the privatisation of education has profound effects, changing the ways and meanings of education work. The private approach to education re-works it, fostering a focus on competition, profit and/or the development of “human capital”, or skills that are measurable and can contribute to economic development.”

Different researchers have pointed out that the phenomenon of privatisation and marketisation of education systems have represented obstacles to civic and democratic education, given its focus on human capital outcomes, investment in a supposedly neutral education, and deficit of democratic governance in educational policies. Despite the dominance of privatisation and marketisation in education throughout the economy, there are alternative experiences that show it is possible to imagine other forms of conceiving, managing, and practising forms of education that have “social purpose, are locally relevant and commit to social change.”

The inclusion of *Buen Vivir* indigenous principles as a normative basis for the formulation of policies in Bolivia, including educational policies, is an inspiring case for reimagining educational agendas that go beyond prevailing colonial and economic paradigms. This includes not only new curriculum content related to environmental education but also strengthening community education practices. In this same direction, the Vietnamese educational system has an inspiring governance and accountability model, which they refer to as a paradigm of “social and self-responsibility.” This model has allowed local governments to have more investment and responsibility through popular councils with members of the educational community with decision-making power, including in the resource allocation process. Naturally, these are not the only valuable alternative experiences for reimagining education systems, but they represent some of the cases that serve as lessons in terms of educational governance.

Avelar, M. (2021). The dispute between democratic education and privatisation. *Working paper for the Democratic Education Needs Imagination Conference*. Auschwitz Institute for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities / Protection Approaches.

Uneven state funding and investment in education

Political systems play a crucial role in defining education policy and – relatedly – the economic resources which are needed to put such policies into practice. In this respect, education policy and planning are both a practical choice and a symbolic decision; they present an opportunity for societies to demonstrate how seriously they take their democratic futures.

As we have outlined above, however, an unprecedented expansion of the influence of private actors in Global North and South sectors has resulted in worrying trends where education for democracy is concerned. Students are increasingly seen as “clients” instead of learners whereby factors such as personal – rather than public – wealth determine their access to (and quality of) education.⁴⁴ Such trends mark a shift of the state from service provider to *market-maker* and service commissioner or provider. This can easily create a ‘vacuum’ for uneven financial regulation and reinforce (or altogether create) wealth inequalities across schools and, by extension, their communities.⁴⁵

While it is well-understood that poor school financing can adversely damage students, it also has damaging consequences for teachers. This is particularly the case where, ironically, they are pressured to embed key societal topics within the curriculum and teach subjects outside of their expertise. These demands have been exacerbated by the rapid pace of technology, which has placed a greater emphasis on upskilling in digital and media literacy, as well as the climate crises which curricula are increasingly expected to address.

While this report calls for such a sophistication within the curriculum, it also urges states to invest in teacher training and professional development accordingly. A curriculum cannot be held up as an example of democratic practice if educators do not feel they are equipped with the skills, support, and/or knowledge they require in order to teach about complex, controversial and sensitive issues in a way that is safe for their students and if the profession is not socially valued.

Finally, it is important for states – particularly those in the Global North – to strive for greater harmonisation across their domestic and foreign policy priorities⁴⁶.

44. Abowitz, K. & Harnish, J. (2006). Contemporary discourses of Citizenship. 662. Sant, E. (2019). Democratic Education: A Theoretical Review (2006-2017).

45. Avelar, M. (2021). The dispute between democratic education and privatisation.

46. Zwart, D. (2021). *Building stronger communities through critical and compassionate schooling*.

Too often the notion of ‘education for peace’ and opportunities to fund education are supported by international development packages without being matched domestically.⁴⁷ This mismatch in funding across Global North states ultimately stems from the logic of colonialism and must be redressed if schools are to genuinely play a role in building peaceful, equitable and empathetic societies.⁴⁸

Case study 8: Teacher training in Finland

“There is an urgent need for education to find ways of imagining possibilities. Critically informed democratic and human rights education holds potential in advancing common goals in our times.”

Finland is often framed as a country with a high appreciation of democracy and human rights, concepts which were emphasised in the country’s last national curricula reforms. However, specialists consider that – as is the case with many other democratic states – these commitments have not been reflected in Finland’s teacher training practices.

As a result, teachers and educational staff overwhelmingly do not have the knowledge and resources to practice human rights education at time when issues such as polarisation and immigration impact Finnish society. Research here shows that different factors contribute to this issue, ranging from teachers’ work overload to the perception that teachers are not well-placed to address democracy and human rights issues in the classroom.

However, research also indicated overwhelming student support for democracy and human rights education to be inbuilt into teaching training. The central observation of the research was that students emphasised that human rights and democracy in teaching training is not just necessary or a ‘nice to have’ but urgent. In previous studies there was no signs of such an urgency.

Such a shift in perceptions around the need for a more sophisticated approach to teacher training – one which reflects the salience of contemporary challenges, including human rights issues – is a signal of a broader societal and global need for the principles of democracy and human rights to be better reflected in our daily practices.

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CONCLUSION

Societies around the world are grappling with rising austerity, growing inequalities, political polarisation, populism, civic disempowerment, identity-based forms of discrimination, disinformation and environment related disasters. Linked to these challenges, COVID-19 has shone a light on new and deep-seated structural issues alike which are adversely impacting communities around the world.

As we face the fallout of acute social division and dislocation, it is all the more crucial that we make space to truthfully reflect on our current educational systems and, accordingly, to reimagine their role in helping us to build resilience and withstand shocks.

The opportunities for democratic education have never been stronger. In bringing together the reflections of diverse and global education experts, this report – and the DENI initiative more broadly – has sought to present those opportunities as well the shifts needed for transformational change. Several core findings have emerged from this process.

A key finding is that democratic education is first and foremost a way of thinking and doing. This means that regardless of whether a school is located in Uganda or Argentina, democratic education does not have to be cost-heavy for states nor schools, so long as its key principles are embedded in the curriculum, pedagogy and daily school practices. While we have shared concrete examples of how different regions have contextualised and converted these principles into best practice, particularly in section II of this report, our intention is not to be prescriptive. It is instead up to national governments, local leaders, staff and students to act on the principles of democratic education and work to co-create practices that speak to specific local needs and nurture empathy, mutual respect, and civic responsibility.

This report also shows that, in order to implement and uphold such practices, efforts must be buttressed by adequate systems of accountability. We know from our engagement with global experts that democratic accountability – including horizontal and bottom-up, rather than externally and/or assessment-driven – is universally important to the strength and sustainability of democratic education. This is because when a variety of stakeholders, including educators and young people, can meaningfully participate in defining what democratic education means to *them* – and influence benchmarking accordingly – they are more likely to remain accountable to those democratic principles inside and outside of the classroom. Such an approach is not just the ‘right thing to do’ but also has clear efficiency gains.

However, despite the evidence of ‘what works’ where democratic education is concerned, the persistent need for such an approach demonstrates that there is significant work yet to be done, including where global policy and post-pandemic priorities are concerned. This report has therefore outlined the key obstacles to democratic education as they emerged in discussion with our community of experts and which, although marked by their own set of challenges, are inherently connected.

Such obstacles include a lack of shared language and, relatedly, little or confusing consensus on what exactly is meant by democratic education. While these issues are grounded in conceptual or semantic differences – or sometimes both – the myriad campaigns for education as a restorative and societal tool point to greater overlap than incongruence in desired objectives. This report therefore calls for a sharper and more strategic approach to education lobbying in order to focus policymaking on those goals which *are* shared.

Relatedly, there is all too often a disconnect between government commitments to democratic education and policies (or trends) at the national, regional, and international levels. Such inconsistencies are not merely ineffective; they can also lead to harmful outcomes for young people. For example, policies that speak to the need for decolonisation of the curriculum without accompanying investment in diversification or training of education staff can lead to a shut-down of disagreement in the classroom – undermining key opportunities to engage students in critical thinking and conflict resolution. Accepting the rise of privatisation of education as innovative and a ‘force for good’ can backslide into learning models which favour hard measurable skills, economic profit and competition over social and emotional learning, critical thinking and collaboration.

We therefore argue that a more holistic understanding of the purpose of education is paramount to avoid policy inconsistencies, and to meaningfully address risk factors of identity-based violence for more inclusive and democratic societies. For reasons already outlined, it is essential that this endeavour should form the basis of a cohesive and inclusive movement. This means that it must weave in the voices of different actors and sectors, rather than a select handful of ‘experts’, and collectively speak to those areas which educating for the future pertains to: climate action, media and digital literacy, economic well-being, racial justice and social equity more broadly.

Finally, the case for democratic education must be approached with the explicit goal of shifting mindsets and – relatedly – challenging the vested interests of those who hold power in contemporary societies. As the Institute for Public Policy Research and Runnymede Trust noted in their work on effective movements, these must include ‘fossil fuel companies, through those who determine and enforce the rules of financial markets, to the vast power imbalances at the heart of the global economy.’⁴⁹

Challenging power also means taking an unflinching look at the ways in which our own individual behaviours and institutions – including those which proudly proclaim to be democratic – may serve to uphold and perpetuate structures of violence. Such interventions will be particularly valuable in light of the disruptions and inequities that our world is facing and will continue to face in the decade ahead.


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The Auschwitz Institute for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities (AIPG) long-term goal has been to build a network of key actors who are educated about contemporary approaches to genocide prevention and who effectively work as a community to build a functional global architecture for prevention and response to genocide and other atrocity crimes. Our programs offer knowledge, training and technical assistance to these actors, with the aim of furthering the development of preventive policies and practices domestically, regionally, and internationally. This work also aims to create a shift in how institutions and societies approach the prevention of genocide, recognizing it as a process.



Protection Approaches is the leading organisation in the UK committed to ending identity-based violence around the world. Protection Approaches does this through their work with decision and policy makers, as well as through grassroots engagement with young people and communities. As part of their core programming, Protection Approaches offers expertly designed and facilitated school workshops to equip young people with the understanding and strategies they need to be more active and responsible citizens. A key part is recognising and challenging the processes that can lead to identity-based violence.



P A Protection Approaches

