

Education for Democratic Citizenship: Key Challenges Ahead

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Introduction

In this brief paper, I set out some key challenges facing Education for Democratic Citizenship (EDC), drawing on European developments and experiences. I am conscious that this is my perspective and another European may have a different take on EDC. I believe there are four key challenges facing Education for Democratic Citizenship (EDC) in Europe, and beyond (taking the challenge of maintaining policy interest as a given). They are:

1. Achieving a clear agreed definition and real focus on EDC
2. Building an evidence base and 'joining up' intelligence on EDC
3. Closing the 'implementation gap' between policy and practice in EDC
4. Ensuring sustainability and collaboration in EDC

I will focus on these challenges and their relation to research and development (R&D) activities. I want to make brief observations under each challenge to stimulate thought and discussion. The overarching challenge in Europe is consolidating and sustaining interest in EDC at all levels in society, including that of policy.

It should also be noted that context is vital for EDC. There are three important shifts. The first is the impact of the global recession and the subsequent cuts in public finances in countries. The second is the rise of Far Right and nationalist elements and the election of more right leaning governments in a number of countries, who may have a different take on democratic citizenship in society and the role of EDC. The third shift is the continued rapid movements of peoples and the pressures that it is bringing to social and community cohesion. The progress of EDC education in Europe needs to be seen against this shifting context: it contributes to but also is affected by this context.

Key Challenge 1: Achieving a Clear Definition of and Real Focus on EDC

The first key challenge is achieving a clear working definition of Education for Democratic Citizenship (EDC) and setting out its relationship to related areas notably: human rights education (HRE): global education: intercultural education: sustainable development: environmental education: and peace and values education. There are many definitions of EDC in operation. While this can be a strength it can also lead to real confusion among policy-makers, practitioners, young people and the general public who look for clarity and guidance when approaching EDC, particularly for the first time.

Perhaps the time has come to set out a clear working definition of EDC in Europe that can be agreed by all, as a starting point for a real focus on EDC in education institutions and in wider society. EDC needs to be properly understood before it can be successfully mainstreamed across society.

I believe that we need to apply the 'elevator test' to EDC. By this I mean that it should be possible to

explain to someone in an elevator, simply and clear, what Education for Democratic Citizenship is in the time it takes for the elevator to go from the ground floor to the top floor of a tall building. If we cannot succeed in this task then how can we get people to focus on EDC across society?

The definition of EDC in the [Council of Europe Charter on EDC/HRE](#) is a useful starting point. EDC is defined as:

Education for Democratic Citizenship means education, training, dissemination, information, practices and activities, which aim by equipping learners with knowledge, skills and understanding to empower them to exercise and defend their democratic rights and responsibilities in society, to value diversity and to play an active part in democratic life, with a view to the promotion and protection of democracy and the rule of law.

It will be important, in the coming years, to ensure the relationship between EDC and other areas is crystal clear. This is particularly so with the rise up the political agenda of the global dimension, sustainable development, environmental issues and climate change and the growing interest of young people in these areas.

Key Challenge 2: Building an Evidence Base and 'Joining up' Intelligence on EDC

The second key challenge is the need to develop a rigorous and comprehensive evidence base to support and promote Education for Democratic Citizenship. This is particularly important in a context where we are moving from 'input-based' to 'outcomes-based' policy making. The latter approach demands hard evidence concerning the quantity, quality and effectiveness of interventions. There are promising signs that efforts are being made to join up intelligence concerning EDC at national, European and international levels and build this evidence base. The network database ['Share&Connect'](#), that the European Wergeland Centre has launched facilitates links between experts in the field that may lead to more joint activities in the future. I am pleased that such efforts are underway. There are a number of interesting developments underway at national, European and international level which have the potential to add considerably to the EDC evidence base. These include:

- At national level - national initiatives and evaluations such as those in the UK concerning the [Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study \(CELS\)](#), which I direct at NFER and [UNICEF's Rights Respecting Schools Initiative](#);
- At European level - the new European Wergeland Centre and its planned programme of activities, including R&D;
- At international level - the new [IEA International Civic and Citizenship Education Study \(ICCS\)](#), which has 38 participating country from across the world and innovative regional modules for Europe, Latin America and Asia. This will provide the most comprehensive survey results concerning EDC to date

Key Challenge 3: Closing the 'Implementation Gap' and Making Policies and Practices More Consistent for EDC

The third key challenge is recognising and closing the 'implementation gap' that still exists between the rhetoric of policies and the reality of practices. There will always be such a 'gap' but the aim should be to make it as small and acceptable, as possible. The Council of Europe Charter for EDC/HRE and the supporting EDC/HRE Policy Tool should assist policy makers and practitioners in helping to address this 'implementation gap'.

There remain many gaps in our knowledge and understanding about policies and practices in EDC. Evidence of this is provided by the priorities chosen for the Fourth Phase, from 2010-2013 of the [Council of Europe's EDC/HRE Project](#). There are four main priorities for action.

- Capacity building within and across sectors, including schools, higher education, non-formal and informal education and society in order to ensure that EDC is provided in a lifelong learning perspective;
- More comprehensive and systematic training for teachers and educators
- Identifying areas where more work is needed in order to move policy and practice forward, such as assessment of student learning in relation to EDC – what it looks like, identifying and sharing 'best practice'
- Quality assurance, governance and sustainability procedures – ensuring there is a sufficient infrastructure that can underpin these areas. There are many R&D possibilities. The work of SICI around citizenship and the role of inspections/inspectors is an interesting case in point

All these developments aim to ensure that EDC has the same standards and quality of policies and practices as other areas and strives for even higher standards. Such standards are vital in terms of the status, perception and approach to EDC in Europe and elsewhere.

Key Challenge 4: Ensuring Sustainability and Encouraging Cooperation and Collaboration

The fourth challenge is ensuring sustainability and encouraging cooperation and collaboration in EDC. The [Compendium of Good Practice on HRE in School Systems](#), produced jointly by OSCE, ODIHR, CoE, OHCHR and UNESCO is an excellent example of how regional and supra-national organisations can collaborate effectively. There is also considerable potential for existing and new networks to assist in maximising cooperation and collaboration and contributing to the sustainability and longevity of EDC at a number of levels in Europe.

It will be important that R&D is to the fore in some of these networks. They include existing networks such as the [Council of Europe's EDC/HRE Coordinators Network](#) which has a representative from each of the 48 countries that are represented at the Council. New networks, such as those involved with the European Wergeland Centre will also be helpful in the coming years.

Finally, in relation to this challenge, I believe that the rapid advances in information and communications technologies (ICTs) provide many opportunities to network, cooperate and

collaborate. We need to ensure that we understand their potential and make the most of them, particularly given children and young people use such new communication channels – web, texting, social networking sites, blogs, e-mail – as part of their daily lives. The medium used for getting messages across about EDC is likely to be as important as the messages in the coming years.

Education for Democratic Citizenship (EDC) has come a long way in Europe and beyond in a short space time. However, there are considerable challenges, particularly in relation to R&D, still to be overcome. I am confident that the progress that has been made in EDC bodes well for the progress that will be made in the coming years.

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