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# Implementing Education for Democracy in Finnish Teacher Education

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## Introduction

Teacher education (TE) plays a key role in the educational system. Qualified teachers are the basis for implementing curricula successfully at all educational levels, from preschool to higher education. Alongside the social perspective, good and qualified teachers are important for an individual's growth and learning. Thus, when systemic changes are needed either at the social or individual level, the focus turns first to TE. Traditionally, TE has focused on the questions and disciplines of didactics, pedagogy, and psychology, but social science, especially sociology, has also been one of the subjects studied in TE. These traditions have roots in the history of school, which for a long time emphasized “banking” rather than “problem-posing,” similar to the way Freire conceptualizes the difference between traditional school teaching and his thoughts of new teaching based on critical thinking and understanding of the world and society. Thus, education for democracy has not represented the core of TE, for example, throughout Europe, including Finland, although democratic values are generally considered a communal necessity for successful individual student learning. In other words, school is focused on objectives of school subjects, not so much cross-curricular themes, including education for democracy. TE follows this priority (Raiker et al. 2020).

TE in Finland is based on strong university autonomy, including the right to decide the curriculum content and the teaching methods. Democracy and its values are generally seen as central principles for TE, and the normative

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basis for education that promotes democratic culture is strong. However, in practice, education for democracy is not at the core of TE. There are many reasons for this, such as the tradition of TE emphasizing didactics, the staff structure of TE including only few experts in education for democracy, or the school culture focusing on school subjects and not broader cross-curricular themes, among many others. Thus, building a culture of democracy and action with students is unsystematic and dependent on individual teachers (Kasa et al. 2021; Rautiainen et al. 2014). In other words, the normative basis for democratic education in Finnish TE and more broadly in education is strong, but practice has not been developed accordingly with objectives defined in curricula and education policies.

Nevertheless, to promote democracy education, different experiments have been implemented in TE in recent years. The largest one has been implemented at the Department of Teacher Education, University of Jyväskylä, since 2020. One study group ( $n = 18$ ) has focused on democracy education and an intense co-study phase over the first two years of the studies. This group, called DERBY, is built on the idea that teacher training plays a major role in how schools and teachers (and society as a whole) should prepare for the social and cultural challenges of today's world, such as climate change, extremism, and populism and their causes. From the perspective of developing democratic competence, the group selected as its key themes democracy as a way of life, education as a force for change in society, and the relationship between teacher, school, and society. All the activities carried out with the group focused on factors that enable meaningful learning, such as student engagement with learning projects and the authenticity of learning situations (Kostiainen and Pöysä-Tarhonen 2019; Kostiainen et al. 2018; Tarnanen and Kostiainen 2020).

In this article, we study and illustrate how the experiment of education for democracy has been implemented in the study group described here and analyze the teacher students' development in the group toward being democracy educators. With the help of the Competences for Democratic Culture (CDC) defined by the Council of Europe, our aim is to provide a clear insight about how working in the study group increased the students' democratic competencies. During this program, certain learning experiences were particularly meaningful when studying education for democracy. To understand our study and its results and before introducing the study group, it is essential to understand the context of the study. To that end, we first provide a brief overview on the context of our research subject: the Finnish TE and the orientation historically influencing its contents. To improve education for democracy in TE, it is vital to outline concrete pedagogical methods of

how we can strengthen the democratic agency of student teachers. By strengthening that agency, we also hope to emphasize the role and potential of the teachers to defend and support the general manifestation of democratic values and attitudes in the modern societies.

### **Teacher Education in Finland and Education for Democracy**

Strong pedagogical autonomy is an essential part of Finnish educational thought, ideology, and practice. According to this, initial TE has a special role in Finland because all qualified teachers are equal, and there is no hierarchy between teachers in school. The cornerstone of initial TE is to educate teachers who have strong moral and intellectual competences and who are highly committed to implementing these principles in their work. The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) results show that Finnish teachers are very committed to their work and feel that they are respected professionals in society. The results also emphasize that Finnish teachers focus in their work on their students' well-being and learning (OECD 2020). The teaching profession is still a very attractive profession in Finland. Class teacher and special teacher programs are among the most popular programs in many universities among applicants.

Radical educational reform was implemented in Finland in the 1970s. In basic education, the old parallel school system was replaced by nine years of comprehensive school, the same for all children. Change was part of the construction process of the Finnish welfare state, based on equality and fairness, to promote the same possibilities for all children regardless of their social status. At the same time, TE was reformed with the aim of academicizing TE, especially class teacher programs educating teachers for grades 1–6 (elementary level) to comprehensive school. In practice, academicizing meant that all TE programs became master's-level programs following new teacher qualifications for the MA degree in education (with subject teachers in their major). In addition, since the 1970s, all class teachers in Finland have studied according to the idea of research-based TE. In practice, qualified class teachers have a master's degree in education, and a reflection- and inquiry-based approach is at the core of their studies. One of the national units, the Department of Teacher Education at the University of Jyväskylä, has been implementing a phenomenon-based curriculum in TE since 2014. A phenomenon-based curriculum is structured according to phenomena, not disciplines, which all should be used when studying phenomena. In Jyväskylä, five phenomena are implemented from basic studies to advanced studies: (1) interaction and

cooperation; (2) learning and guidance; (3) education, society, and change; (4) scientific thinking and knowledge; and (5) competence and expertise (Department of Teacher Education 2022).

Didactical and psychological approaches to educational questions, rather than broader sociological or social sciences approaches, have traditionally been at the core of TE. This has been changing, especially in the 2000s, and TE today aims to promote exploratory, communal, and transformational professional development, which starts in initial training and continues throughout the career, resulting in a professional with a wide-ranging understanding of societal, ethical, and global questions and a willingness and skills to develop the working culture and cooperation in the school culture (Fornaciari 2019; see Finnish Education Evaluation Centre 2018). These expectations are supported by the standpoint of the current national core curriculum for basic education (Finnish National Agency for Education 2016), which emphasizes students' participation in and education for democracy in school culture from individual learning via classrooms to a broad school context. All in all, during the past two decades, issues of democracy and education for democracy have become more strongly part of the discussion in education as well as in TE for several purposes.

The results of the teacher survey carried out by the Finnish National Agency of Education (OPH 2011) revealed that 73 percent of the respondents who work in comprehensive schools and 63 percent in upper-secondary schools answered they had not reached a sufficient level of understanding about education for democracy. These results indicate that the Finnish teachers' historically shaped orientation of "societal disjointedness" does not change rapidly even if the TE is changing. Likewise, Fornaciari and Rautiainen (2020) demonstrated that in the teaching profession, the level of understanding and interest in social and societal issues does not easily develop into preparedness or willingness to participate or act. The same kind social quietness of Finnish teachers and schools is also reflected in the youth, and interest in societal actions is relatively low among young people (see, e.g., Männistö 2020; Mehtäläinen et al. 2017; Schulz et al. 2017). Especially after the first International Civic and Citizenship Education Study results in 2001, public discussion among different stakeholders and politicians was extensive, and the national government and the Finnish National Agency for Education launched several projects to promote education for democracy. The promotion of education for democracy and human rights is also listed in the program of the 2019–23 national government of Prime Minister Sanna Marin.

The situation in TE is similar to that in schools; there have been projects in TE during the 2010s and 2020s aiming to strengthen the democratic

culture and contents of democracy in TE. TE values and principles are based on democracy, and there are also some specific contents in TE curricula. Compared to the situation 10 years ago, minor progress has been made, especially in class teacher programs, where different pilots and experiments have become part of the curricula and teaching. However, education for democracy is implemented in TE unsystematically and is still dependent on individual teachers in many units (Kasa et al. 2021; Rautiainen et al. 2014). In addition, although education for democracy in TE is recognized as a key factor when strengthening democracy in society, the new Teacher Education Development Program in Finland (active in years 2022–26) does not emphasize democracy and democratic citizenship at the core of teachers' work, although inclusion and active citizenship are mentioned as major challenges stemming from society (OKM 2022).

The way we understand democracy and its role in education has also become more diverse in Finland. John Dewey's (1966) image of school as a minor society, a place where pupils can grow into democratic citizens by practicing it in school and where they have many rights and duties in the school community, has been developed, for example, in Gert Biesta's (2006, 2019) thinking toward the idea where school represents a way of living connected to equality, justice, participation, and communality. Liberal and deliberative democracies are examples of attributes that occur in today's definition of democracy, which, on the other hand, deepen our understanding of democracy but also challenge us always to redefine these definitions.

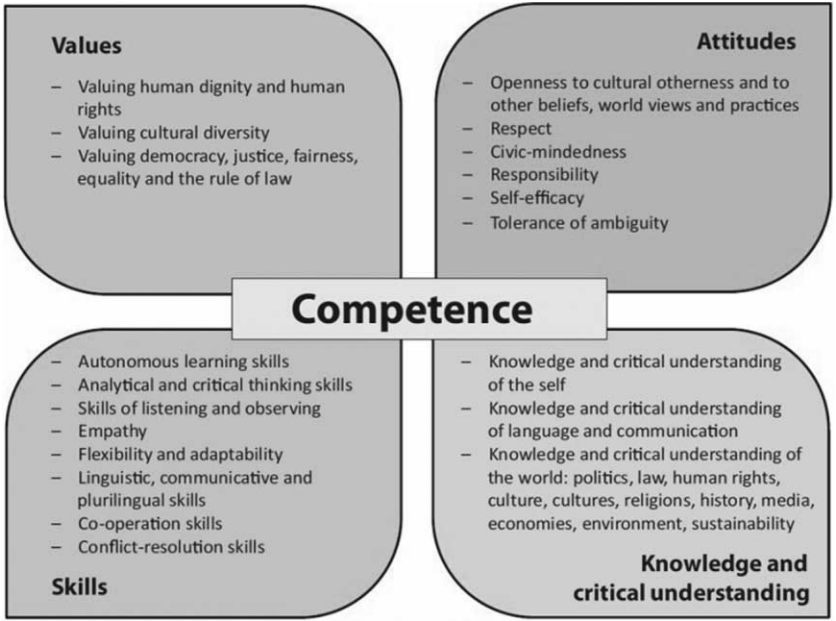
### **Council of Europe's Competences for Democratic Culture**

Democracy has manifold faces. In a broad sense, it represents a way of living where all human action is seen through democratic principles and actions. In a narrow sense, democracy is a way to organize communal life. Finnish democracy is based on a strong showing of representation, which is also present in schools. Student councils are mandatory in all comprehensive schools, and members of the council usually represent one class. The system has been criticized from two viewpoints. First, interaction between council members and other students in class is not regular, mostly because the school structure does not contain time slots for this. Second, the student council is seen as sufficient for students' participation in school, and some parts of the school community do not see a need to develop education for democracy.

Finland is not an exception in the European context. Although the cultural roots of education have their own national characteristics, other countries are struggling with the same questions as Finland: how to support young people

in school to become active democratic citizens. In addition, European societies are facing social phenomena, such as hate speech and extremist political movements, that threaten democratic values and routines in democratic societies. Thus, both the European Union and the Council of Europe (CoE) have been focusing on supporting stronger democracy. The CoE is an organization focusing on work in the field of human rights and democracy. In 2016, it launched the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC; CoE 2017) to support democratic development via education.

The RFCDC (CoE 2017) was developed for use in primary and secondary schools, higher education, and vocational training institutions to strengthen the culture of democracy in education. It was constructed and coordinated by the CoE using many experts in the field of education and social sciences. Thus, it represents a framework based on scientific research and theory concerning the culture of democracy in education. RFCDC’s 20 competences are divided into four categories: values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge and critical understanding (see fig. 1). The framework enables a culture of democracy in general upper-secondary school from different perspectives at the school level, starting from the policy level through to classroom practices.



**Fig. 1.** The Competences for Democratic Culture (CDC) “butterfly.” Color version available as an online enhancement.

It also facilitates guidelines on how to strengthen the culture of democracy in education (Lenz 2020).

The basic idea of the Competences for Democratic Culture is to provide individuals and different communities with a framework and model for developing their operations toward an increasingly democratic way of life together with other actors. It has a special role in education and teaching, as it aspires to strengthen the commitment of those being educated to the democratic way of life by creating growth environments where democracy can be realized. In this article, the CDC butterfly functions as an analysis tool for our data. In real life, democracy is more than competences defined by CoE, which represents one frame for education for democracy. Member states, like Finland, are committed to implement CoE's competences in their county via curricula and other activities. Thus, we are interested in how student teachers understand their role as an educator of democracy at the beginning of their studies and how it develops during the studies.

### **Home Group for Democracy Education (DERBY) in Finnish Teacher Education**

Primary teacher training at the University of Jyväskylä takes place in so-called home groups. The home group is a relatively permanent group in which students complete most of their studies in the first two years of study. Every home group has its own theme that is addressed in addition to the phenomena mentioned in the phenomenon-based curriculum of the Department of Teacher Education. Students can choose their home group themselves at the beginning of their studies, and working in them is holistic. In this way, the home group forms an essential frame of reference and a peer network in which teacher studies are conducted, and the student's daily life is lived outside of study.

This article examines a home group (DERBY) focusing on democracy education and societal thinking based on the view that schools, and therefore TE, have a significant role to play in how society can meet the challenges of the future. Modern democracies are corroded by, for example, various extremist movements, an inability to tolerate diversity, a culture of debate that emphasizes confrontation, and a questioning of the role of traditional party politics, especially among young people (see, e.g., Bauman 2000; Puuronen and Saari 2017). These trends have destructive effects if expanding among the people, especially toward attitudes and values concerning democracy. At the same time, the entire planet's future is under threat due to ever-accelerating climate change. At best, schools could provide students and teachers with



an arena for democratic action and social thinking where the knowledge and skills needed in the future, and in particular the desire to put them into practice, can be practiced and lived. In such a democratic ideal, the school would become a “school for all,” where everyone can influence the organization and implementation of school activities. All of this requires future teachers to have an understanding and knowledge of and an attitude toward both democracy education and the wider conditions of society (Tomperi and Piattoeva 2005). From the perspective of the development of the mentioned skills and attitudes, the key themes in the study group were democracy as a way of life, education as a force for change in society, and the relationship between teacher, school, and society. These principles were cultivated primarily through various projects in schools and examination of these projects.

We examined this study group during its first two academic years. During the examined period, the group completed basic and subject studies in education and other studies in primary TE, such as interdisciplinary studies in the subjects taught in primary education. The courses in the first two years of teacher training were largely the same as those completed by other home groups during that time, but the emphasis in the DERBY group’s studies was on democracy and social education. Especially in the first year, this emphasis was strong. In addition, the courses were integrated as much as possible so that they formed large-scale entities that transcended subject and phenomenon boundaries, enabling long-term work on democracy education and related issues. Whenever possible, efforts were made to integrate some form of hands-on project in an authentic school environment. In addition to the educational science, the group completed an extensive (10 credits) “State of the World” course in the autumn of the first academic year, organized in collaboration with the Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy. The course was tailored to the group so that it focused on issues between school, education, and society, further strengthening the group’s emphasis. The aim was also to encourage students to choose to study social sciences more broadly as a minor subject to deepen their understanding of society. The members of the group seized this opportunity with varying intensity.

During the first two academic years, different themes emerged in the group within the themes of the courses and the home group. These themes and incidents were handled according to the group’s needs. In the autumn semester of the first year, important and challenging themes were group formation and interaction within the group. The teachers’ aim was to create an equal and open interaction environment for the group. This aim challenged the interaction skills of both the teachers and the students and led to conflict, which compromised the security of the group, which was still in its infancy. The

handling of the conflict with the students and the team of teachers emphasized the fact that democracy education is basically about cooperation. During this period, the students also designed and implemented a democracy education project at a partner school, which, on the one hand, created stress and thus could increase conflicts within the group but, on the other hand, provided a context for collaboration, during which the theoretical models offered in other studies could be tested in practice (Hiljanen et al. 2021).

The students' perceptions of their own roles in learning and teaching were also questioned during the first year. The challenge of TE is the so-called illusion of familiarity, in which a student, a future teacher, already has years of experience in school from the perspective of a pupil. This was reflected, for example, in the emphasis on instructions and formalities for different tasks, but especially in the student–teacher relationship. The students perceived the student–teacher relationship mainly as traditional, where the teacher is an informational authority and directs learning from this position. From the perspective of democracy education, this setup is problematic. Therefore, in the group, the teachers also focused on deconstructing this perception and making the students responsible for their own learning and studying. In the spring, the students carried out a second democracy education project at a partner school.

After the first year of intense experience, the home group deepened its knowledge of the phenomena of interaction and learning, as well as of the work community and society, in the second academic year. In addition, the group, like all the other groups in the Department of Teacher Education, took subject-based studies and other courses according to the curriculum. Due to this, we, the home group teachers, did not participate in the group's work so intensively. Therefore, compared to the first year, other teachers guided the group, or the work of the group was more independent. At the same time, the studies that the group completed during the second year were not tied so intensively to the group's focus (democratic education and the relationship between education and society). One course that focused on the societal part of education was a course called "Community and Society," where students had the opportunity to cooperate with students studying to become special education teachers. During that course, some students shared their experiences of TE courses and how thin the social perspective was in their studies.

## **Data**

Our point of departure—and thus the core of the DERBY study group—was "autostudying" our working and the group itself. Our aim was to find

some answers to the two general research questions generated in the early stages of the study. These questions were as follows: (1) How does the students' understanding of good democracy education change in the first two years of the study? (2) Does the DERBY homegroup succeed in promoting agency toward active democracy education? This meant that, on the one hand, from the beginning, we collected data from the group, and all the tasks and writings that the students wrote were planned so they could be used as source material for examining the growth of the group's students as democratic educators. On the other hand, we encouraged the students to take part in the research process and tried to implement inquiry-based learning.

In our interview transcript, we asked two open-ended (written) questions regarding the students' views about democratic education and their studies. We thought that through these two questions, it was possible to capture students' thinking and especially changes that occurred during the time of study. At the same time, we wanted to keep the questions as broad as possible so that the questions themselves would not over-direct the answers. First, we wanted to know what the students thought about what makes a good democratic educator. We asked this question twice: the first time when the students started their studies and the second time at roughly the half point of the first study year (for the results of the analysis, see Hiljanen et al. 2021). The idea behind repeating the question was to find out how the studies affected the students' ideas about democratic education.

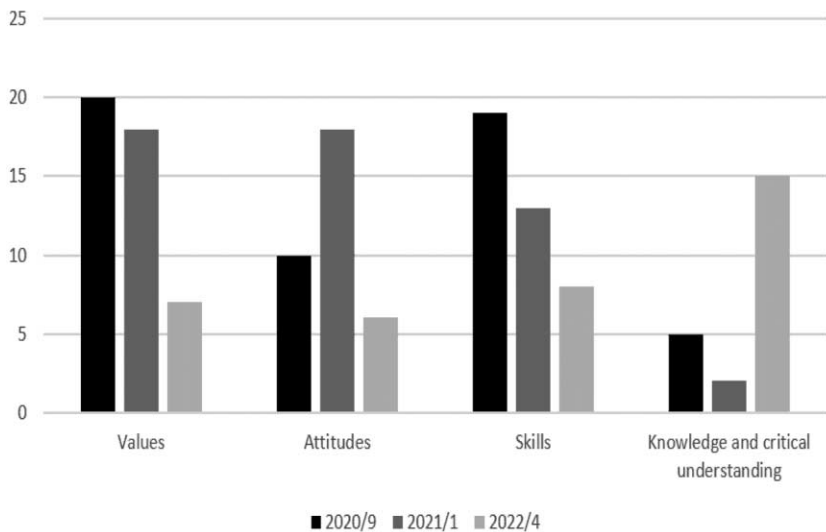
The second question—"Considering the last two years of study, what was the most relevant moment regarding your view about democracy education?"—was asked for the first time during the data collection for this article. The point of departure for this question was to find out what kind of activities (books or articles read, lectures listened to, discussions had, projects completed in the school, etc.) the students considered most important when they thought about their development as democracy educators. This question is particularly important for planning the future of democratic education. If there turned out to be a consensus about what kind of activity the students find effective, we could concentrate on it in the future and develop it further.

Altogether, 13 students answered the second question at this point. At the beginning, the size of the group was 17 students, but a few dropped out, and some did not want to answer the questions. Spring 2022 turned out to be quite busy for the students, and thus it was not a good time to collect the data. We hit a wall during the data collection. First, we tried to collect the data by sending an email to the students, but this did not work, and just one student answered. After that, we decided to collect the data as part of the course that was taking place at the time. We took 15 minutes during one meeting to ask if

the students could answer the questions. This was effective, and almost all returned the answers at the end of that time. Some of the students wanted to continue writing at home, and they sent the answers afterward.

The answers varied considerably in length. While the shortest answer was about 10–15 lines, and the longest was two pages long. Most students wrote just the answers to the questions, but some decided to take the time to freely reflect on their thoughts. It is important to note that even though the students did not answer the questions in the first place, they were willing to participate in the study when we offered the time to answer the questions. This is seen in the quality of the answers. We assume that everyone really concentrated on writing the answers and freely expressed their thoughts about the topic and did not, for example, write things that we, as teachers of the group, wanted to read. Of course, this possibility cannot be absolutely excluded.

The answers were analyzed in two separate phases. A qualitative content analysis approach was used to group the answers in a meaningful manner. Because the objective was to gather information related to the students' path toward "democratic educational teacherhood" and the development of their progress, the first analysis was made based on information gathered from previous questionnaires and analyzed through the CoE's Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (see fig. 2). Therefore, to analyze the first question, we used theory- or model-driven content analysis (see Hsieh and

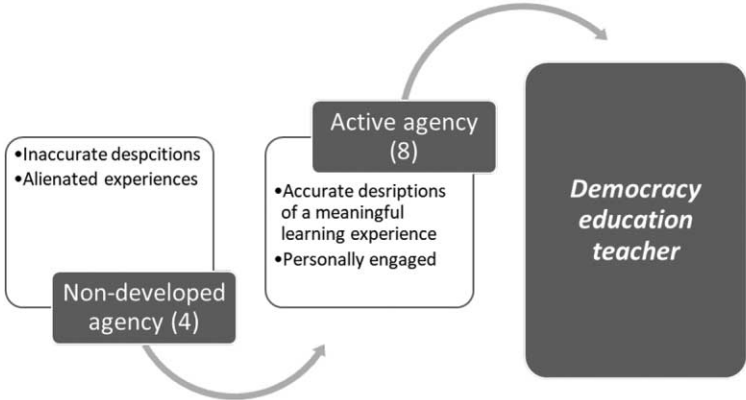


**Fig. 2.** Students' concepts of good educators for democracy from September 2020 to April 2022. Color version available as an online enhancement.

Shannon 2005) to examine the data, placing our students with respect to the CoE's framework. When analyzing the second question (coding the relevant moments regarding democracy education), we noticed a significant division in whether the student could or could not describe a meaningful moment during their studies and could set out and construct ideas and thoughts deriving from this significant learning experience (see fig. 3).

After careful reading and summarizing of the data and the two questions, two clear conclusions were generated. The first, based on the CoE framework, showed that among the students, a significant development toward understanding the concept of democracy as a way of living had occurred. Another clear notion, which the second question resulted in, was that most of the students (not all) might also actually be on their way to active democracy educator teacherhood.

This study's limitations must be acknowledged. Because it focused on only 13 students from a single university, generalizations to larger populations cannot be made, nor would it be the purpose. In addition, the primary data sources were one-off written answers, so potential shortcomings in the material must also be considered. Another source-critical notion is that we, as the teachers who had participated in almost all of the group's meetings, especially during the first academic year, could identify the situations that the students were writing about. However, two of this article's authors did not participate in the meetings, thus viewing the answers from without. This is important when evaluating the results of the study. We believe that this is a sign of the fact that we lived our everyday lives together in the sense that



**Fig. 3.** Significant learning experience in the field of democracy education and agency. Color version available as an online enhancement.

we—as a group of people—shared meaningful situations together in such a way that we—the teachers—can afterward say that some of the situations and activities might have been more meaningful to some of the students than others even though we could not identify right away to whom the situations were meaningful and why.

## Results

### Students' Concepts of a Good Educator for Democracy

We asked all the students what kind of teacher is a good educator for democracy three times during their first two years of study. The first data were collected at the beginning of their studies in September 2020, the second data in January 2021 after the first semester, and the third data in April 2022 at the end of their second-year studies. The data were analyzed by theory-driven content analysis using the CoE's RFCDC (CoE 2017).

At the beginning of their studies (September 2020), the students emphasized a safe learning environment and an equal, fair, and nondiscriminatory atmosphere. “A teacher who is a good educator for democracy is permissive and equal toward all children. A good educator for democracy does not indoctrinate education with their own political opinions or religious views” (September 4, 2020).<sup>1</sup> First, the students' answers represented typical ideal features of a Finnish comprehensive school. In the 2020s, the Finnish comprehensive school is seen as a basis for the welfare state, promoting, for example, equality, justice, and hope. This school ideal is strong in students' mindsets and connected to schoolwork promoting democracy and democratic citizenship. In contrast, diversity among the student's answers was broad when compared as individuals.

After the first semester, cohesion between the students' descriptions was stronger than at the beginning of their studies. At the core of their answers were now values, attitudes, and critical thinking. In addition, the students' concepts were now representing more the idea of democracy as a way of living, which was at the core of their studies since the beginning. “A good educator for democracy creates possibilities for learners to become active and participatory owners of their own learning processes. A cornerstone of education for democracy is democracy in learning and teaching, not just knowledge distributed by the teacher. The teacher is not only an organizer of

1. To identify the citations, we use the date when the answer was given. All the citations used in a single stage of the analyze are from different individuals.

teaching and learning but also an active member of the learning community, as a participant sharing opinions and thoughts. Only this way can a teacher foster democracy in his/her classroom” (January 2, 2021).

The interaction between teacher and students changed radically compared to their answers at the beginning of their studies. At the end of January, the students saw their role as a teacher but also as a learner in the classroom with pupils. According to them, schoolwork’s aim is to foster the pupils’ democratic citizenship but also the teacher’s own democratic citizenship. This trend developed more strongly during the first two years of study. At the end of their second study year, the students argued more than earlier that the role of democracy was connected to all schoolwork. “Education for democracy is not only a manner or issue but also a holistic way of living and thinking. A good educator for democracy has an open mind to reflect and learn anew and face different opinions. In addition, good educators for democracy respect, listen, and encourage every pupil to live as a democratic citizen in a society” (April 7, 2022).

The students’ critical reflection at the core of their professional thinking and development was greatly strengthened when comparing the situation between September 2020 and April 2022. One of Finnish TE’s cornerstones is the objective of developing critical reflection as a basis of teacher identity, and it supports much of the identity of democratic teacherhood when themes of democracy are implemented in TE. Knowledge and critical understanding, especially of the self and of the world, were the most common competences mentioned in the students’ writings. Compared to the students’ previous writings, this change was significant but logical when thinking about the studies undertaken. Alongside critical reflection, students approach the content of their studies via a phenomenon-based approach. In practice, they study to understand different phenomena of education by exploring them using different disciplines when constructing a holistic understanding of phenomena. In our opinion, phenomenon-based approach supports the professional development of educators for democracy. Understanding democracy as a way of living needs a similar kind of holistic approach as a phenomenon-based approach. In addition, the students studied more content during the first two years, which also stresses the need for knowledge and critical understanding when analyzing changes in students’ thinking.

In summary, the students’ concepts emphasized critical reflection, learner-centeredness, openness, and discussion at the core of education for democracy after two years of study. The change compared to their concepts at the beginning of their studies was a significant development toward democracy as a way of living.

## Active and Democratic Teacher Agency in Progress

In the second stage of the analysis, we took a closer look at the question regarding a significant learning experience in the field of democracy education during the second year of TE (Spring 2022). The descriptions for this question were divisible into two experiential categories through the forcefulness of the learning experience and also through the level of subjectivity that the answers transmitted. More than half of the students in the study group were able to provide a description of a distinct moment during a certain study course or lesson in the academic year when a forceful learning experience happened. The form of this “distinct moment” varied among the students. Some students described a significant discussion (in a distinct place and at a distinct time) regarding democratic values or lifestyles. In these descriptions of meaningful situations, the students themselves had an active role in the situation, and many students also delineated a personal and even emotionally involved relationship with the topics in these discussions. The contents of these discussions were, for example, how to tackle societal faults or injustices in educational work or how to react in an appropriate and pedagogically practical way to cultural and social phenomena appearing in the students’ world. In the descriptions, the transitions and transformations in the thinking of the respondents were also detectable:

For me the most meaningful moment was in the POMM1083- course (Finnish language and literature pedagogy) when we discussed the clothes and make-up of the students and also discussed misogyny and cancel or call-out culture. In particular, a discussion about the question of if a single student can dress in a manner she/he exactly wants stayed in my mind. This question raised thoughts regarding situations where other students comment in an inappropriate way on somebody’s clothes (in a sexually suggestive way, for example). In this discussion, I spoke out strongly on behalf of the idea that the problem is not in the girls’ clothes themselves (we spoke about young girls’ clothes) but in societal structures. We have always sexualized girls and women. (April 6, 2022)

In the descriptions of a clearly distinguishable learning experience (most typically a discussion), the role of the teacher/lecturer was mentioned or emphasized:

Another of the two lecturers (women) introduced a standpoint that she herself as a female gender upholder feels that opinions or thoughts



she presents have to always be somehow greatly analyzed and “ready” when presented (in the academic context), whereas she feels that the other gender (male) can speak in a more deliberate way. These words remained in my head, and after this moment, I dared to bring out my own non-perfect or half-baked thoughts and opinions into the public discussion. On the other hand, the statement of this female lecturer raised thoughts on the importance of understanding and consciousness about societal structures and cultural limitations (and inequalities). A good democracy educator rouses and encourages her/his students to raise [points] freely. (April 6, 2022)

Conversely, four of the responding students found it difficult to mention or point out a clear moment or discussion regarding a significant learning experience regarding democracy education. In these descriptions, democratic questioning did not occur, and democracy education was out of touch and not clearly linked to the current student teacher position or the future teacher position. In these answers, the democratic ideal was still placed outside of the students’ own subjective thinking and beyond more specific societal topics. Some answers expressed one-dimensional and nonabstract standpoints of democracy and the teacher position. “Is a teacher a leader? [This] was at the core of the discussion. There were many contradictory opinions, and some thought that a teacher as a leader is even against the whole concept of democracy education” (April 6, 2022).

Most of the students described development and expansion of their “democracy thinking” in general, but many also illustrated personal pondering about what it meant from their own point of view to become a democratic teacher agent. This ambivalence, which was illustrated also in the answers to the first research question, showed an enhancement of the students’ self-knowledge, autocriticism, understanding, and interest in democratic society’s structure and culture. In particular, the more specific descriptions of a significant learning experience regarding democracy education can be interpreted as implications for an active democracy educator. At the least, these interpretations are examples of raising interest in the questions about the connection between democracy and school relevant to the elementary school teacher position.

## **Discussion**

According to our study and the previous analyses made concerning this study group (three between the years 2020 and 2022), it seems evident that

the home group DERBY, in which the democratic educational standpoints and objectives were stressed, managed to launch significant pondering to understand the concept of democracy as a way of life and, most importantly, to see that the continuum or realization of the democratic way of life requires support and action from teachers—in other words, in the future from themselves. For many of the students, understanding democracy education as an important part of the school syllabus and, more broadly, in educational questioning in general was evidently launched during the DERBY group sessions. When pondering the values, attitudes, and understanding of democracy in the future teacher role, many of the students translated complicated societal and cultural questions into pedagogical “language.”

Methodologically, asking the students to point out a single moment or discussion where meaningful learning experiences occurred clearly opened a path for some students to split the vast standpoint of “democracy and education” into a more digestible dose, such as gender equality or minority rights. This individually and even emotionally experienced smaller phenomenon regarding democracy and education was clearly a meaningful eventuality for many of the students and for us teachers and unquestionably an educational process worth reaching for in the future. Evoking emotions, both negative and positive, is the impetus for democratic agency. Feelings motivate us to take action and to become interested in something in the first place (e.g., Husserl 2001; Kekki 2022, 228). Thus, the method to detect significant moments during the studies works also as a path toward transformational learning where the *meaningful experience* can serve as the “other” of the dialogue between the *learning experience and the individual* in the reflections of the students. This requires an authentic and confidential relationship with the instructors in the situation, which enables the students’ security and self-confidence to work at the affective level, where emotions, fears, and uncertainty are part of the learning process (Matikainen 2022, 191–92; Taylor 2009). In the DERBY meetings, some students presumably experienced this transformation process.

The students’ concrete thoughts about their own responsibility as teachers to act and improve democratic culture throughout their positions can be interpreted as premonitions of real actions taken once they are real teachers. The aspect of teacher agency or subjectivity is important because democracy eventually becomes vibrant and alive through action and active members of society (Biesta 2006). The educational objective to reach for teacher students to create subjective active agency toward democratic educational goals must be highlighted in Finnish TE because tradition and the cultural teacher figure do not stress these teacher qualities or orientation (Fornaciari 2022,

147; Fornaciari and Rautiainen 2020). Interaction with society and consideration of societal issues have always been difficult to fit into the Finnish school system syllabi and pedagogical objectives. Due to a century-long political disagreement about the contents of public schools' teaching, the result has been consensus or "a non-societal curriculum," which is a typical feature in Finnish society (Rautiainen and Raiker 2020, 3). Accordingly, Lieberkind and Bruun (2021) describe Nordic youth as reserved citizens who are relatively active but, at the same time, also relatively passive. Nordic youth prefer nonpartisan, indirect, and value-based forms of engagement (Lieberkind and Bruun 2021, 38). Particularly in Finland, nonconventional ways to participate in society (such as radical social movements) are not popular. Interpreting the nature of "Nordic citizenship," the political and democratic conditions of Nordic countries must be taken into consideration. Characteristic cultural factors (tolerant, emancipative, and Protestant values), a relatively uncorrupted public sector, and a high degree of social capital from membership of civic organizations have shaped the Nordic citizen's political and societal behavior (see Lieberkind and Bruun 2021, 21).

To achieve democratic education goals, it is still evident that TE needs to offer more learning processes where students' individual conceptions of democratic questioning become connected with wide-ranging societal pondering, and thus students might become more emotionally and personally engaged in democratic education and in TE studies in general. "DERBY as a TE home group is a perfect ambience for democratic education questioning—can you imagine a better environment for open, constructive, critical, and data-generating discussions? I don't consider the DERBY group as a work community but a Petri dish for the ideal of democracy education where everyone is genuinely participating in collective construction of knowledge and understanding" (April 6, 2022).

One point of departure of studying in home groups in the Department of Teacher Education at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, is that the students can thus really concentrate on some phenomenon of education. In our case, the phenomenon was democratic education and the interaction between society and education. As mentioned, during the first academic year, democratic and equal interaction within the group and the students' (free) role in learning and teaching were particular concerns in the group. At the same time, planning and executing two projects took much time and energy during that year. In this light, the second academic year seemed calmer; the group did not have as many courses together as in the first year. In addition, during the first year, the participants had become familiar with each other and the culture of the group, so those questions were not relevant

in the second year. Instead, some of the participants in the group started to question the courses in the Department of Teacher Education because they felt that these did not offer democratic education content.

Keeping this in mind, we analyzed the students' writings to find out how their meaningful experiences spread over the studied period. Roughly speaking, one-third of the meaningful experiences happened during the first half of the first academic year, which highlights the importance of the start of studies. However, another third of the meaningful experiences occurred in later times and courses. It is also noteworthy that the last third of the meaningful experiences cannot be traced in a timeline of the studies, which means that there were no particular activities or phenomena that the students wanted to highlight, but the studies as a whole or working in such a group itself were relevant to these students. Thus, overall, it seems to us that there were no single points or themes that produced ideas or experiences about democratic education. Instead, one could argue that these situations are almost completely individual and tied to one's own experience of life.

With this analysis, we want to highlight the fact that even though we, as the teachers of the group and researchers and experts in democratic education, had ideas on how to implement a democratic way of living and had chosen the activities and contents using our experience and knowledge, the things that students brought up in their writings did not correlate fully with the instructors' ideas. In other words, some questions, tasks, conversations, and so on that could seem to have no special meaning during that time might turn out to be relevant to some of the students on their way to becoming democratic educators. This suggests that democratic education requires long-term education, not just single courses. In our case, this was done by implementing and supporting a democratic way of living, so that democracy was one of the most important things that was practiced together in the group. Still, the fact that the students felt that some of the activities or conversations were relevant that did not seem so important to us was surprising. It reminds us of the self-evident fact that teaching and learning are full of surprises, and the biggest one is life itself. It cannot be neglected during the studies, but it must be at the center of everything.

This study also shows the utility of the framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (CoE 2017), which is valuable when studying democratic education goal-setting or contents but also from the larger perspective of TE. To become a teacher and to achieve an understanding of a pervasive professional in the educational and pedagogical field, one must adopt many kinds of know-how and understanding. A teacher must develop their own thinking regarding the education goals of today in general but also accumulate

the ever-increasing knowledge base needed in the profession. In addition, a teacher must have interactive sensibility and the capability to resolve complicated situations in everyday schoolwork (e.g., Husu and Toom 2020, 5; MacLellan 2017). The relationship between public schools and TE is close but also dichotomic. On the one hand, TE has to offer students a realistic and pragmatic insight into the authentic school environment they are heading to. On the other hand, TE then has to promote an outlook to the future where teachers are critical interpreters of social and cultural phenomena and are also capable of changing the school system's customary habits. The conservative function of public schools constantly needs to be balanced with the transformational and innovative "power" the school and teacher should offer. Development of the abilities needed in the teaching profession systematically and in a goal-oriented way requires adequately organized TE that supports the holistic, societally relevant learning of teacher students. With systematic education toward a strong conceptualization of "teachers as democratic/societal agents," it is presumed that TE can promote a teacher who sets being an active and societally participative democratic individual as the primary objective of their pedagogical and educational work.

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