

## Developing Democracy in Ukrainian Teacher Education: Current Challenges and Trends

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### Abstract

This article is devoted to the presentation and analysis of the „Democracy in Education” all-Ukrainian study results aimed at highlighting the challenges arising in Ukrainian teacher education on the way to its democratic transformation. The analysis revealed the following challenges: The ambivalence of the definitions of democracy and its reduction to a „thin” understanding, the presence of rudiments of the Soviet system, distinguishing between active citizenship and political participation, lack of knowledge of the methods of integrative learning and cross-cutting skills among teacher educators. The research findings are significant for educational policy-making at the institutional and state levels.

**Keywords:** *teacher education, educational reform, democracy, citizenship*

### Introduction

The relevance of democratic transformations in education is caused by the procedural and contextual features of transitive Ukrainian society. The rapid development of social phenomena and the structural changes of recent decades (information revolution, humanization, intensification of intercultural communication, globalization, etc.) have had a tremendous impact on the foundations of social systems and initiated the profound transformation of the essence of social institutions and practices. These changes contribute to the formation and development of new architectonics of social relations, provoke new challenges to

the democratization of the education system and actualize new research in the field of democratic education.

In the context of the constant production of variability, education is key to the emergence of a global civil society and its citizens as „holistic”, autonomous and responsible subjects capable of thinking transversely, finding moral solutions in conflict situations and being able to „unite not united” (Gorbunova, 2019).

The relevance of the study of this problem is also caused by the absence of a single universal definition of democracy that could explain different historical and contextual conditions (Karumanchery & Portelli, 2005), and the often superficial and vague vision of the phenomenon of democracy (Gandin & Apple 2002). This uncertainty is also characteristic of the implementation process of the concept of democracy in the training of school teachers (Zyngier, 2012) and university teachers (Biseth, 2018).

Democracy is more than a form of political order. This is first and foremost a way of engaging in social life, communication and experience (Carr, 2010a; Dewey, 1916). The pervasive performativity of the phenomenon of democracy needs further explication. According to Larry Diamant (2004), democracy has four key elements: (a) a political system of electing and replacing government through free and fair elections; (b) active participation of people as citizens in politics and civic life; (c) protection of human rights for all citizens; (d) the rule of law, in which laws and procedures apply equally to all citizens. The Council of Europe defines democracy at three different levels: 1) as a way of political governance (legal system, electoral rules, governing institutions); 2) as a way of organizing society (how to live together in a modern pluralistic society peacefully); and 3) as a way of life (to be an active citizen on the basis of values such as solidarity, justice, self-determination) (Biseth, 2014).

The school is considered to be a key factor in promoting and developing democracy as a basis for coexistence in society, as education systems encourage, support and cultivate students’ democratic experiences (Banks et al., 2005). According to Y. Waghid (Waghid, 2014), „democratic education is an educational ideal in which democracy is both the purpose and the method of learning”. It brings democratic values to education and can include self-determination in a society of equals, as well as values such as justice, respect, and trust. Democratic education is often emancipatory, and students’ voices are equal to those of a teacher. Western discussions on the development of democracy in education are dominated by two main topics: providing teachers with vocational training that promotes democracy in schools and the development of democratic education by empowering all those involved in the educational process, including teachers, administrators, and children (Guyton, E., & Rainer, 1999).

## **Problem of Research**

This study aims to identify the peculiarities of understanding democracy and citizenship among teacher educators in Ukraine to develop more effective programs for the dissemination and implementation of ideas of democracy in the educational process. The research is primarily focused on providing an answer to the following questions: Which understanding of democracy „thin” or „thick” is dominant among teacher educators and students of pedagogical Universities? How teacher educators understand the place and role of civic competence in the educational process?

## **Research Focus**

The theoretical basis for the development of the model and the research program have become „thin” and „thick” understanding of democracy (Barber, 1984/2003; Gandin & Apple, 2005). A „thin” understanding of democracy implies giving the most attention to the elections and institutions of liberal democracy, providing teachers with the skills and knowledge to teach democracy. Reducing democracy to elections and institutions minimizes the role of citizens and education for social justice, separating democratic processes from social processes that affect communities and daily life (Biseth, 2018). A „thick” understanding of democracy goes beyond electoral and legislative processes, the rule of law and fundamental civil rights, and seeks to develop students’ understanding of collective citizenship and civic action. A „thick” understanding of democracy implies the emergence of a „social citizen”, an individual who is constantly interacting with others and capable of reflection (Zyngier, 2012). The teachers of pedagogical specialties should develop in their students a deeper understanding of what it means to learn for democracy and through democracy for social justice and sustainable development of society (Biseth, 2018).

Also, the design of the research program should take into account the understanding of democratization of education as being deployed in three contexts (according to I. Postolenko’s classification):

- the socio-political context is to preserve the democratic orientation of the socio-political development of the state and society, as well as to recognize the priority role of the education system in the hierarchy of social institutions;
- socio-pedagogical context – creation and development of mechanisms of mutual influence of society and school, the democratization of all levels of government;

- pedagogical context – partnerships between all participants in the educational process, equality of all citizens in the right to education, accessibility to quality education, building the content of education on the basis of human values, democratic principles (Postolenko, 2007).

## **Methodology of Research**

This paper uses data collection from the survey „Democracy in education: examining the experiences, perspectives, and perceptions of democracy in primary teacher education in Ukraine” focusing on the teacher educators’ part and aimed at studying the prospects and ideas about democracy in education for the development of strong democratic education in Ukraine.

The data were collected by a questionnaire based on a template developed by the international Global Doing Democracy Research Project (GDDRP). The GDDRP questionnaire to be used internationally was developed as a set of questions that can be used anywhere in the world. The original was constructed as an instrument in GDDRP for research with teachers in the USA, Canada, and Australia. It contains four sections: 1) an introductory section requesting demographic information; 2) questions on democracy and education; 3) questions on citizenship and education; and 4) a final section allowing respondents to add any additional comments on democracy and citizenship, or on the questionnaire itself (Zyngier, 2009). Detailed research instruments containing open- and closed-ended questions have been further refined, for several different groups, and have been contextually adapted for use in Ukraine.

The SPSS program was used for data processing. The total number of respondents is 110 teacher educators of specialty 013 „Primary education”. In accordance with the conceptual framework, in this research data were collected from teacher educators from six Ukrainian Pedagogical Universities which represent all main regions of Ukraine.

The passport part of the study allows us to describe the average portrait of a modern teacher educator at the specialty „Primary Education”. Thus, according to the obtained data, the vast majority of teacher educators are women (93.6%), aged from 41 to 60 years (59.1%), who have the degree of „candidate of science”/ PhD (80%).

## **Results and Discussion**

Summarizing the answers of the teacher educators, it should be noted that democratic changes in the educational system of Ukraine since Independence are obvious and are recognized by the participants in the educational process. The linkage between education and democracy at the educator level is important as it may have far-reaching implications for the delivery of teaching and learning that subsequently influences how students relate to, and do, democracy (Lund & Carr, 2008; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) within the classroom, the school and, more broadly, at the societal level.

The study showed a positive dynamic of democratic transformation of the educational space. The questionnaire for teacher educators asked about the level of democracy in the education system in which they studied and in which they are teaching now. Thus, 16.4% of teachers believe that the level of democracy was very low, 21.8% – low, 33.6% – medium, 22.7% – high, 5.5% – very high at the time when they were educated. And now, the educational system in which they work has the following level of democratization: very low -8.2%, low – 11.8%, medium – 29.1%, high – 38.2%, very high 12.7%. The assessment of the democracy of the education system in which the youngest teachers (up to 30 years old) are trained is higher than all those who are older.

**Table 1.** Comparison of teachers' answers of different ages to the question „How democratic do you consider the educational system in which you received your education?“

Age	Average value	Median	Number
up to 30 years	3,57	4,00	7
31–40	3,13	3,00	32
41–50	2,44	3,00	36
51–60	2,72	3,00	29
61 and above	2,71	3,00	7

However, the “thin” notion of democracy and teaching “about” democracy dominate in the Ukrainian pedagogical education. During our study, we found that the vast majority of respondents – 61% of teacher educators understand the concept of “democracy” as a form of government/power of the people. For 29% of teachers, democracy is associated with freedom of speech/expression. A small group of respondents – 5.5% of teachers – characterize democracy as equality. That is, teachers mostly reduce the phenomenon of democracy to a “thin” understanding

of the importance of electoral processes, not realizing the importance of a “thick” definition of democracy as participation and social justice. “Thick” democracy goes beyond the championing of electoral and legislative processes, rule of law and basic civil rights (Howard & Patten,2006). It encourages and facilitates the legitimacy of collective citizen and civil action. “Thick” democracy envisages a ‘social citizen’– an individual always in relationship with others – capable of reflexive agency (Giddens, 1994).

The next research finding is distinguishing between active citizenship (which is close to Giddens’ definition of “social citizen”) and political participation by teacher educators, which is demonstrated by the answers to the questions on political participation (Table 2) and active citizenship (Table 3), where the vast majority of respondents state that they are not politically involved, but consider themselves active citizens.

So comparing the answers of teachers of different age groups (Table 2) we concluded that the older the teacher, the more he\she is involved in political life, with up to 40 years political activity is rather low, from 40 to 60 years it is almost unchanged and is average, and for people over 60, political activity is well above average. Correlation analysis (according to Spearman) showed a weak direct correlation at a high level of significance ( $r = 0.25$ ;  $p \leq 0.01$ ) between age and level of political activity. And in accordance, the civic activity of teachers increases with age: from the activity of the average level to 30 years and to rather high activity at the age over 60. Correlation analysis (according to Spearman) showed the presence of weak direct correlation at a sufficient level of significance ( $r = 0.21$ ;  $p \leq 0.05$ ) between age and level of civic engagement.

**Table 2.** Comparison of teachers’ answers of different ages to the question “Are you politically involved?”

Age	Average value	Median	Number
up to 30 years	1,71	2,00	7
31–40	2,00	2,00	32
41–50	2,33	2,00	36
51–60	2,24	2,00	29
61 and above	4,00	4,00	7

Our data confirmed the general trend in Ukrainian society – despite the profession, Ukrainian youth shows passivity in public life, which turns into political absenteeism, as evidenced by the All-Ukrainian survey “Youth of Ukraine 2017”

**Table 3.** Comparison of teachers' answers of different ages to the question "Do you consider yourself to be an actively engaged citizen?"

Age	Average value	Median	Number
up to 30 years	2,86	3,00	7
31–40	3,09	3,00	32
41–50	3,11	3,00	36
51–60	3,41	3,00	29
61 and above	4,00	4,00	7

(Ukrainian "Generation Z": Attitudes and Values, 2017), conducted by the Center "New Europe" and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation together with the sociological company GfK Ukraine. Young people vote little in elections, thus not creating an electoral mass, according to which politicians should be considered in their actions, unlike older people.

The level of personal civic activity influences the process of teaching democratic citizenship in the training of future teachers. We found a statistically significant difference between the distribution of responses of teachers with low and high civic activity ( $p = 0.003$ , Mann-Whitney U-test). Half of the low-activity teachers chose an intermediate answer (3 points) to the question about the amount of attention they paid to citizenship education. Teachers with a high level of activity often gave 4 and 5 points, i.e. highly appreciate their attention to this issue.

**Table 4.** Comparison of answers to questions "How much attention do you pay to teaching citizenship in teacher education?" teachers with high and low civic activity

Level	Average value	Median	Number
Teachers with low civic activity	2,94	3	24
Teachers with high civic activity	3,54	3	41

  

Score	teachers with low civic activity %	teachers with high civic activity %
1	8,3	2,4
2	20,8	14,6
3	50,0	36,6
4	8,3	19,5
5	12,5	26,8

Research showed the presence of some alienation of knowledge about democracy and narrowing it down to a separate discipline – the introduction of a separate subject, additional hours for teaching. The survey showed that for 16.5% of teachers the introduction of democracy in the educational process is associated only with the introduction of a separate subject, additional hours, and their teaching. Only 4.5% of teachers see improvements in the implementation of democracy through an interdisciplinary approach. That is, in Ukraine, as in the vast majority of transitive societies, we see a tendency to teach “about” democracy – understanding of what democracy means, and what human rights they enjoy, in which documents they have been laid down, and how they may be protected and enforced (Gollob, Krapf, 2010). Given the implementation of the New Ukrainian School curriculum, the Ukrainian educational community is only taking the first steps towards learning “through” democracy (methods of teaching and learning that allow them to exercise their human rights, such as freedom of thought and expression), but the issue of learning “for” democracy (learn how to participate in their communities and how to exercise their human rights) now remains open.

Moreover, there is a lack of awareness of integrated learning and cross-cutting skills. Despite the considerable attention given by educational scholars and functionaries to integrated learning, according to empirical data, only a small number of teachers and students have used the concept of “integrated approach”, “cross-cutting skills” in answering the questionnaire. Insufficient level of awareness of the possibilities of using integrated learning and cross-cutting skills. Thus, only 2.7% of teachers noted the difficulty of implementing a cross-cutting approach to teaching democracy, advised to create and develop a democratic educational environment both during the teaching process and in everyday communication.

## **Conclusions**

Higher education, in our case teacher education, is a strategic way to build long-term social change. And the challenges to democracy development present in teacher education will influence the quality, consistency, vitality and sustainability of this change dramatically.

Research shows, that democratic transformations that have taken place in recent decades in Ukraine are changing not only the educational environment at the level of training, but also at the level of communication between all participants in the educational process. But the echo of the Soviet system rudiments and the consequences of the transitive state of axiological sphere of Ukrainian society are still



present in the modern educational environment. These problems are represented in the respondents' answers to questions about the challenges of implementing democracy in the teacher training program. A large number of the teacher educators (46%) consider the various organizational barriers as the major challenges in the process of improving future teachers' curricula with the goal to improve the teaching of democratic citizenship in pedagogical institutions of higher education. These issues require further study and close attention from management at the university and state levels.

Distinguishing between active citizenship and political participation shows a lack of understanding by teachers of the complexity and completeness of the phenomenon of democratic citizenship, in which political participation is one of the key rights and responsibilities of the citizen. Revealed correlation between age and level of civic engagement of teacher educators should be investigated more deeply and become the subject of further research. The issue of a certain controversy lies in the fact that young people from transitional states, on the one hand, are not really experiencing what real democracy is, but on the other hand their knowledge of what totalitarian/authoritarian state is comes only from books. The danger leveling the values of democracy, losing faith that anything they do might affect public policy exists both for societies with developed democracies (Foa & Mounk, 2017) and for transitional ones, as the previous generation (which are currently teaching future teachers) developed their values during the authoritarian regime.

Consequently, the study revealed a lack of understanding of democracy as an educational paradigm that encompasses all components of the educational process (educational philosophy, educational institutions, educational environment, teaching methods and educational practices) among participants of this process. Ukrainian teacher educators mostly reduce the phenomenon of democracy to a "thin" understanding of the importance of electoral processes, not realizing the importance of a "thick" definition of democracy as participation and social justice. And these gaps are directly transmitted to all education process participants, as the study revealed the correlation between the level of personal civic activity and attention paid by teacher educators to teaching citizenship. Thus, further research, educational and political interventions are needed to understand and employ democratic procedures and tools in their "thick" mode.

The ambivalence of the definitions of democracy and its reduction to a "thin" understanding, the presence of rudiments of the Soviet system, distinguishing between active citizenship and political participation, lack of knowledge of the methods of integrative learning and cross-cutting skills among teacher educators

create new challenges to the educational community. Nevertheless, overcoming any challenges requires their initial identification and study of the anamnesis; an attempt at such an analysis was made by the authors of this research.

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