



European Education Area Strategic Framework

Working Group on Schools: *Learning for Sustainability.*

Learning for Sustainability and Citizenship Education: issues and opportunities



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Learning for Sustainability and Citizenship Education: issues & opportunities.

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1. Introduction

This input paper offers an initial analysis of the links between citizenship education and learning for sustainability for the Working Group peer learning activity on 16-18 Oct 2024. It presents observations on some of the insights, discussions, and inspirational practices found in the literature and examples of EU and other projects and programmes in this area.

2. Background and context

Both *Learning for Sustainability* and *Citizenship Education* are areas of policy priority for the EU. Sustainable development is noted as a core principle of the European Union and delivering on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals is seen as a priority objective for the Union's internal and external policies. The EU's Council Recommendation on learning for the green transition and sustainable development of June 2022 details how sustainability can be integrated into all aspects of education and training to provide all learners with opportunities to learn about the climate crisis and sustainability. The EU's commitment to *Citizenship Education* (CE) is similarly framed in the 2018 Council Recommendation on the promotion of common values, inclusive education, and the European dimension of teaching.

This Recommendation emphasises that Member States should promote 'active citizenship and ethics education as well as an open classroom climate to foster tolerant and democratic attitudes and social, citizenship and intercultural competences'. It also urges that teachers be 'supported and empowered through measures to create an open learning culture and environment and deal with diverse learning groups in order to teach civic competences, transmit Europe's shared heritage, promote common values and act as role models for learners'.¹

Active/participatory education – both at schools and within the wider life – features strongly in both agendas, suggesting possible synergies between the two. Despite GCE [Global Citizenship Education] and ESD being contested fields' researchers urge looking beyond contestation to see unexpected connections, and opportunities to progress in these fields, 'particularly experimenting with collaborative education and knowledge generation in situated contexts' (Khoo and Jørgensen 2023; see also Sund and Pashby 2020; Lotz-Sisitka 2017).

The discussions that follow below reflect this perspective but note also that published works in this area are still surprisingly scarce – although those that do exist tend to align in their focus on broadly shared understandings of both value to the learner and educational approach.

3. Learning for Sustainability/Citizenship education; identifying the shared space

The activities of our Working Group focus on mutual learning and exchange on sustainability education in schools, including the development of sustainability competences² and represent an expansive view of sustainability, including aspects such as whole school approaches, teacher education for the green transition, curriculum design, assessment of learning, the role of school leaders, sustainable infrastructure, eco-anxiety, student engagement, the twin digital and sustainability transitions, and local learning partnerships. Much of this connects to the foundations provided by the European Sustainability

¹ See Working Group on Equality and Values in Education and Training (2023) *Issue paper on Citizenship Education*. ISBN 978-92-68-07532-6 doi:10.2766/306946

² <https://wikis.ec.europa.eu/display/EAC/Learning+for+Sustainability>

Competence Framework 'GreenComp' (Bianchi et al., 2022) and is rooted in progressive pedagogies that encourage task-based, collaborative and situated learning experiences (see Khoo and Jørgensen 2023).

Agreeing a succinct definition of Citizenship Education can prove more contentious – especially when the global aspect is considered. Definitions of Citizenship Education and Global citizenship education from the European Commission's Working Group on Equality and Values are particularly helpful here.

Citizenship education: 'the aspects of education at school level intended to prepare students to become active citizens, by ensuring that they have the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes to contribute to the development and well-being of the society in which they live. It is a broad concept, which encompasses not only teaching and learning in the classroom, but also practical experiences gained through school life and activities in wider society'.³ Citizenship education has been compared to moral education. Moral education tends to emphasise *values* and *values development*, while citizenship education tends to focus on *participation in society*⁴. (p.3)

Global citizenship education: 'aims to empower learners of all ages to assume active roles, both locally and globally, in building more peaceful, tolerant, inclusive and secure societies... it is 'based on the three domains of learning - cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioural' ⁵.

The European Union's Key Competences Recommendation from 2018 define citizenship (one of the eight key competences for lifelong learning) as:

the ability to act as responsible citizens and to fully participate in civic and social life, based on understanding of social, economic, legal and political concepts and structures, as well as global developments and sustainability⁶.

From these definitions, it is clear that educating for citizenship primarily concerns preparing students to become active citizens by equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to contribute in a meaningful way to the development and well-being of society. In terms of learning experiences, combining more traditional classroom learning with practical experiences – so emphasising participation as a mode of values development – is seen as optimal. Similarly, (global) citizenship education, seeks to empower learners to take active roles locally and globally in building peaceful, inclusive societies, emphasising opportunities for cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioural development.

In sum: the spaces and learning most associated with Learning for Sustainability and Citizenship Education share considerable overlaps. This is also reflected in high-level initiatives such as the EU *Strategy on The Rights of the Child and the and the European Child Guarantee* (2021), which commits the EU to actions to empower children to become active citizens and members of democratic societies by 'involving schools in sustainable climate, energy and environment education' and so supporting children 'to become agents of change in the implementation of the Climate Pact and the European Green Deal'⁷.

³ Eurydice (2012). Citizenship Education in Europe, pp. 8-9.

⁴ Geboers, E. et al. (2013). Review of the effects of citizenship education. *Educational Research Review* (9):158-173.

⁵ UNESCO – What is global citizenship education? <https://www.unesco.org/en/global-citizenship-peace-education/need-know>.

⁶ [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604(01))

⁷ https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/rights-child/child-participation-political-and-democratic-life_en

4. Exploiting shared spaces between Learning for Sustainability and Citizenship Education – examples from research and practice

Some recent reports and papers and a number of ongoing projects funded by the European Commission and others offer valuable insights into the spaces where Learning for Sustainability and Citizenship Education overlap.

For instance, the *FutureSIM* Erasmus+ project⁸, which ran between May 2022 and July 2024, showed how the more formal spaces of a school can be used to help secondary students become global citizens and enhance their commitment to the 2030 Agenda. This project focused on educating secondary school students (ages 14-19) about sustainable development through an interactive online simulation which addressed the UN's SDGs by placing students in realistic decision-making roles where they had to navigate complex global challenges. The project also provided a learning and teaching programme, including materials for students, teachers, and other stakeholders, aiming to promote critical thinking and active participation in sustainability.

In a recent report on *Harnessing the potential of non-formal education for sustainability*, Gonçalves and Tilbury (2024) highlight how *non-formal education spaces* play a crucial role in fostering innovation and enhancing competitiveness as environmental and sustainability challenges become more frequent and complex. They note that the knowledge gained through formal education can rapidly become outdated or insufficient and fall short in cultivating the creative and innovative mindsets necessary to tackle climate and environmental crises.

To leverage this strength, the Erasmus+ project *Walk the Green Talk – Better methods to engage youth on greenwashing*⁹ seeks to exploit non-formal education spaces by working with youth leaders and young people outside of more traditional education settings to empower them to engage in the fight against climate change through active citizenship. Through the development of an online toolkit and workshop, the project seeks to ensure young people feel capable of influencing policymakers, companies, and local communities to adopt more sustainable practices..

Providing opportunities and resources for learning about global citizenship and supporting a just transition to more fair and sustainable futures includes both the use of conventional traditional spaces and materials for learning and also informal and non-formal ones. This points to a number of key themes:

- **Resourcing interdisciplinary learning and active participation:** For both learning for sustainability and citizenship education, active learning approaches are critical but often under-resourced. Moving beyond "one size fits all" approaches and materials is essential when educating about citizenship and sustainability issues. However, this can be challenging due to limited resources, including insufficient time and the quality and availability of appropriate teaching and learning materials. Parry and Metzger (2023) note:

... [teachers can] feel unprepared in both the content and student-centered pedagogy of ESD, and not adequately supported in terms of resources, materials, time for collaboration and ongoing professional learning opportunities.

⁸ <https://www.oefse.at/bildung-vermittlung/bildungsprojekte/futuresim/>

⁹ <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/projects/search/details/2023-2-SE02-KA220-YOU-000178612>

Similar observations are made also in relation to citizenship education (e.g. Leite, 2021) with some commentators (such as Pais and Costa, 2020) taking a very critical view on the nature, quality and intentions of available material.

Nevertheless, providing resources and spaces for intersectional teaching and learning can benefit both areas greatly. A number of ongoing projects help demonstrate how combining sustainability and citizenship education can encourage an interdisciplinary approach that allows learners to develop critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaborative skills that are applicable to both civic engagement and sustainability issues. *GrACE - Green Europe. Active Citizenship and the Environment* seeks to provide professional development for secondary teachers that combines *climate change insights with methodological expertise*¹⁰. The project focuses on equipping secondary school teachers with the knowledge and methodologies to foster environmental awareness and active citizenship in their students. Through 12 online webinars and a residential course, the project integrates climate change education, citizenship and pedagogy.

Moreover, a number of the Erasmus+ Teacher Academies projects focus on the intersection of sustainability and citizenship. The SYNAPSES Teacher Academies project¹¹, in particular, focuses on developing pre- and in-service teacher training programmes on Sustainability Citizenship by developing enquiry-based, project-based and game-based learning methods. Teaching for Sustainability Citizenship can stimulate and lead to actions, including “decreasing consumption and demand, developing sustainable food and energy sources, exploring nature-based solutions for current challenges, using school buildings as teaching tools, and the greening of school grounds.

Similarly, the *Friendship for Climate* – an EU-funded Jean Monnet Initiative project, provides resources and training to support those working with young participants aged 13 to 18, who come from highly urbanised areas, often from low-income families affected by migration, and struggle with academic challenges. This project addresses the promotion of active citizenship, personal development, and concrete environmental initiatives, in order to generate positive, long-term changes in the behaviours, perspectives, and abilities of the young participants. This means placing considerable emphasis on resources and interdisciplinary learning experiences and modes of learning that align with its core social and educational aims.

The active and transdisciplinary nature of such projects and initiatives helps participants to become not only more aware of environmental and sustainability issues but are also motivated and equipped to advocate and act for change. Building capacity for climate activism – which both the *GrACE* and the *Friendship for Climate* projects feature can be viewed as both a form of environmental responsibility and democratic engagement, where individuals participate in public discourse as well as personal and collective learning.

- **Building capable and confidence practice:** Having a strong knowledge base, good understanding of the issues, and the confidence to mediate these for learners is essential for effective educational practice, especially in complex learning areas. Educating for sustainability is regularly characterised as needing to move beyond providing scientific and technical skills to develop also the ability to motivate and support individuals wanting to pursue and apply their learning for a sustainable future (e.g. Kidman et al., 2019; Scoones et al., 2020). Similar claims have been made in relation to educating for active citizenship. For instance, Lewis-Spector

¹⁰ <https://cjm.unitn.it/grace/webinar-series-2024-2025>

¹¹ <https://synapses-academies.eu/>

(2016) emphasises the need to see such education as promoting learners as *confident and creative individuals*, as well as *active informed citizens*.

This promotion of an *enabling approach* to education and training is clearly another space where LfS and CE interests overlap and can provide valuable mutual opportunities as demonstrated by a number of projects and initiatives in the area. The Erasmus+ Jean Monnet project *EU GreW* - EU The Green Wave¹² (2023-24) puts a central focus on building capacity to teach about combatting climate change and promoting democratic values. To foster a deeper understanding of the European Union and shape a European identity the project focuses on training a transnational group of educators. The project promotes a better understanding of democratic principles, fundamental rights, and intercultural understanding, with a special emphasis on environmental policies and sustainable development.

While the work of the *EU GreW* project is directed primarily towards the formal sector and could be seen as relatively modest in scale, the much larger, longstanding *iLegend Project*¹³ – a joint initiative of the European Union and the Council of Europe – also takes as its central focus the idea of enabling capacity and confidence to lead change. *iLegend* is one of a group of projects funded under the EU Development Education and Awareness-Raising (DEAR)¹⁴ initiative. This ongoing programme has run since 2016 and aims to enable people of all ages to reflect critically and assume active roles, both locally and globally with the intention to:

...understand, imagine, hope, and act to bring about a world of social and climate justice, peace, solidarity, equity and equality, planetary sustainability, and international understanding.

(EGEN/GENE 2022)

The approach taken by *iLegend* is particularly interesting because of the range of participants that the initiative deliberately seeks to engage and the multiple levels at which the programme operates. Through a series of network meetings, regional seminars, and Global Education congresses, *iLegend* seeks to foster dialogue, mutual understanding, and trust between educators, policymakers and civil society, bridging formal and non-formal education sectors to promote and implement its ambitious agenda. Like *EU GreW*, the *iLegend* project also emphasises what Scoones et al, (2020) term '*an optimistic and directly activist stance*' (p.67) in its enabling activities; it celebrates hope and action. Taking an enabling approach is a foundational step in building the practitioner capability and confidence essential to introduce fresh perspectives and instil a competence for change into the business of teaching for sustainability and active citizenship.

The *Ubuntu Network* is a longstanding teacher-education partnership funded by *Irish Aid* and the Department of Foreign Affairs in Ireland. The programme helps teacher educators and future teachers gain a deep understanding of global development issues, recognise the need to question these issues critically, and equip them with the skills and determination to integrate positive learning in this vein into their teaching.¹⁵ 'Ubuntu' – meaning humanity towards others in Zulu – is the network's underpinning philosophy which has emerged as a pioneering initiative in the integration of Global Citizenship Education (GCE) into secondary education. The network works throughout Ireland with secondary teachers across multiple disciplines, providing tailored teaching resources to ongoing professional

¹² <https://eugrew.eepek.gr/index.php>

¹³ <https://dearprogramme.eu/project/ilegend/>

¹⁴ <https://dearprogramme.eu/>

¹⁵ <https://www.ul.ie/ehs/soedu/ubuntu-network>

development workshops and conferences on a regional and national basis, annually to help teachers integrate GCE into their subjects.

Essentially, the focus is on embedding sustainability *and* citizenship in existing curricula, rather than introducing these topics as standalone areas. This ensures that network participants encounter these crucial concepts in a variety of learning contexts, from science and geography to history and civics, making connections between local and global challenges. For instance, in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) subjects, network members learn to teach about exploring the environmental impact of technological advancements, the role of innovation in sustainable solutions, and the ethical considerations of scientific research. In humanities, discussions around human rights, migration, and global conflicts are linked to the broader goals of citizenship education, with sustainability being a recurring theme in understanding the root causes and consequences of these issues.

The idea of "virtuous cycles" embraced by the Ubuntu partnership refers to a self-reinforcing loop where the promotion of sustainability leads to active citizenship which in turn fosters a deeper understanding and commitment to sustainability. Through the virtuous cycle framework, the Ubuntu Network seeks to blend sustainability education with citizenship education in ways that emphasize that the UN sustainable development goals (SDGs) are not just environmental targets but are interconnected with broader issues of human well-being, equity, and justice. By engaging teachers, teacher educators and students in this understanding, the partnership fosters a mindset of responsibility and action among network members and participants in its various training events and activities, preparing them to contribute meaningfully to their communities and the world at large.

The type of project and initiatives noted above can serve as useful reference points for thinking about how the advantages of this type of cross-cutting work can be embedded more successfully in both the formal and non-formal settings. They raise interesting questions about ways to encourage – in both non-formal and formal sectors – opportunities and resources for learning about global citizenship alongside concepts relating to sustainability, just transition and fair and sustainable futures.

5. Learning for Sustainability and Citizenship education synergies: challenges and opportunities

- **Action on resourcing practice and development:** Teachers and youth leaders can play a critical role in driving the agenda for systemic changes that require civic participation, democratic governance, and education. They can be key innovators in sustainability and citizenship education within schools and their wider communities. To support this, more focused initial and ongoing teacher and youth leader education is essential, supported by relevant and readily available resources – including both materials and spaces. Educators from both formal and non-formal sectors can make good use of material and spaces that help raise awareness of global issues, sustainability, and citizenship, thus fostering intercultural understanding and significant learning. However, they need the crucial training and education to address these various intersection of sustainability education and active citizenship. Policymakers can act to promote and resource environments that reflect multidisciplinary, task-based methods, community activism, and exposure to critical perspectives – so enabling teachers and other educators to create supportive learning environments for students engaging with these complex global challenges.
- **Action on consolidating vision and dialogue:** The still contested natures of LfS and CE pose one of the main challenges for policy action. Even among those who are positive and open to

developing these fields and their cross-cutting relationships, there can still be misunderstandings, misapprehensions, and distrust. Building a shared vision of the possibilities and value of these in the lives of young Europeans should therefore be a priority. This needs to be inclusive, transparently co-constructed, open to formal and non-formal possibilities and vested in a hopeful and determined worldview. Competence in sustainability and active citizenship equips individuals to advocate for policy changes at various levels of society while addressing global challenges. By instilling values such as respect for nature, empathy, fairness, climate and social justice, teachers and youth leaders can encourage learners to adopt behaviours that align with these principles and contribute to the collective good. Active participation in solving local, national, and global issues can in this way become integral to their roles as engaged citizens. Young people, with their unique experiences and concerns about sustainability, trust, politics and the world in general must have their voices heard. Creating spaces for student engagement and decision-making, both in schools and beyond, is crucial to advancing both LfS and CE and the values they embody. Doing so can empower young people to better influence the world around them through active participation and so help them take ownership of the future.

- **Action on infrastructures and supporting mechanisms:** Creating meaningful change in a complex area such as the crossover spaces between sustainability and citizenship depend on having good structures and mechanisms in place to guide decision makers. It requires developing what has been termed *policy capacity*¹⁶ with a balanced focus on the analytical, operational and political skills necessary for success along with the individual, organisational and system resource levels necessary to do this work.¹⁷ A number of possibilities are foregrounded by applying what Wu et al., (2015) have termed the *nested logic* of policy capacity building to the question of infrastructures and supporting mechanisms for LfS and CE. First, this confirms the importance of the political in the policy process. Both LfS and CE carry significant political dimensions. Policy work must acknowledge this and provide forums and opportunities for dialogue which can facilitate deeper engagement with the complex socio-political aspects of both active citizenship and sustainability activism. Second, policy capability is not confined to governments and ministries alone. To achieve the full possibilities offered by the intersection of LfS and CE will require working with a wide range of stakeholder organisations such as civil society/NGOs, businesses, foundations, and international organisations, as well as the multiple government ministries and agencies that are regularly involved in policy processes. Finally, policy action on improving infrastructures and supporting mechanisms needs to prioritise the capacity of participants in organisations such as those just mentioned to contribute meaningfully – individually and collectively – to the policy work of change.¹⁸ For example, opportunities regularly present to develop and/or maintain the involvement of young people and school students in the formulation of policy relating to LfS and CE. These range from the local, small-scale project like those mentioned earlier in the paper to opportunities to impact policy thinking represented by participating in Commission initiatives such as the EU *Education for Climate Coalition*¹⁹. Similarly, facilitating participation in Erasmus+ *Teacher Academy* and *Jean Monnet Teaching Actions* can be used to inspire, develop and draw out innovative European education capabilities in teachers and youth leaders.

¹⁶ Defined by Washington (2023) as *mutually reinforcing parts of a policy capability infrastructure that includes components of leadership, policy quality systems, people capability, and effective internal and external engagement* (p.283).

¹⁷ See Annex 1

¹⁸ See Wu et al (2015) for a detailed discussion of this which emphasises how such policy capacity is 'a vital determinant of the extent to which policy actors are able to address public problems' (p.170).

¹⁹ <https://education-for-climate.ec.europa.eu/community/>

Recognising these and similar opportunities to build policy capacity at every level can contribute meaningfully to a cohesive European education and training agenda that promotes sustainability and democratic participation across member states.

Among the challenges that this agenda presents for action on combining advantageously aspects of LfS and CE, two can be seen as particularly important:

- When modelling and then supporting policy action to stimulate novel learning experiences, the structure and enabling aspects of effective change need close attention. This involves providing training and guidance on appropriate pedagogies and learning environments – especially at the level of interdisciplinary school curricula, shared teacher and youth leader education and development, and in the use of the ‘non-traditional’ learning spaces that so often make up the value-added aspects of non-formal education. Strategically developing the technical capacity and confidence to design project-based curricula where learners tackle environmental issues while exploring their roles as active citizens would seem particularly valuable here. This type of expansive learning fosters deeper appreciation and competence based in critical thinking about sustainability but also civic engagement – so enabling learners to see real-world, positive impact to their actions.
- Key aspects requiring systemic policy also include working with teacher education organisations, training schools, and civil society groups who have strengths and interests in the shared aspects of LfS and CE to support efforts to build this transversal learning into their core activities. Building mutually supportive inter-sectional networks that focus on national or regional capacity building would seem particularly valuable in this. This addresses the problem of systemic support too often falling short in terms of acting for learning that emphasis individual and collective agency and fostering hopeful approaches to a shared future.²⁰ Building this networked knowledge and action base would help ensure that educators and youth leaders are well-versed in the possibilities of this LfS / CE cross-over. The type of deep knowledge that networks can foster is known to help members deconstruct / break down challenging contexts and contentious issues into more manageable components, which helps with clearer explanations and providing multiple perspectives or analogies to enhance learning. Without attention to the system level of policy work this would fall to a considerable number of uncoordinated actors and interests resulting in technical and organisational difficulties and missed opportunities at the school and youth levels.

A closing thought: we live in times when an essential function of all involved in educating for a better future is to help ensure that learners of all ages are equipped with the knowledge to live more sustainably, develop a sense of personal and collective agency, and have meaningful opportunities to acquire the skills and capabilities needed to live full and productive lives as active citizens. The EU constitutes an unprecedented union rooted in shared values such as human dignity, democracy, the rule of law, human rights and equality. It is striking how well this resonates with the core values embedded in a framework already familiar to the WG Schools LfS; the EU GreenComp. The centrality of its four areas of activity – embodying sustainable values, embracing complexity in sustainability, envisaging sustainable futures, and acting for sustainability – resonates with core values driving the Council of Europe (CoE) *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* (RFCDC), 2013/21.²¹ The emphasis here rests on promoting and teaching the values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and critical understanding needed by young people to function as democratically and interculturally competent citizens who exercise their rights and participate effectively in the affairs of their communities and society broadly.

²⁰ See Wu et al., (2015) for a discussion of these issues.

²¹ See Annex 2.

It is striking how well these two areas of work align and mutually reinforce each other. Thoughtful policy action that leverages their synergies can create rich learning spaces and environments that emphasises the interconnectedness of Learning for Sustainability and Citizenship Education, ultimately preparing learners to become engaged and informed citizens in a more just and sustainable world.

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7. Appendices

Annex 1

A general model of policy capacity; skill-types and competences mapped against levels of resources and the capabilities within a developing system.

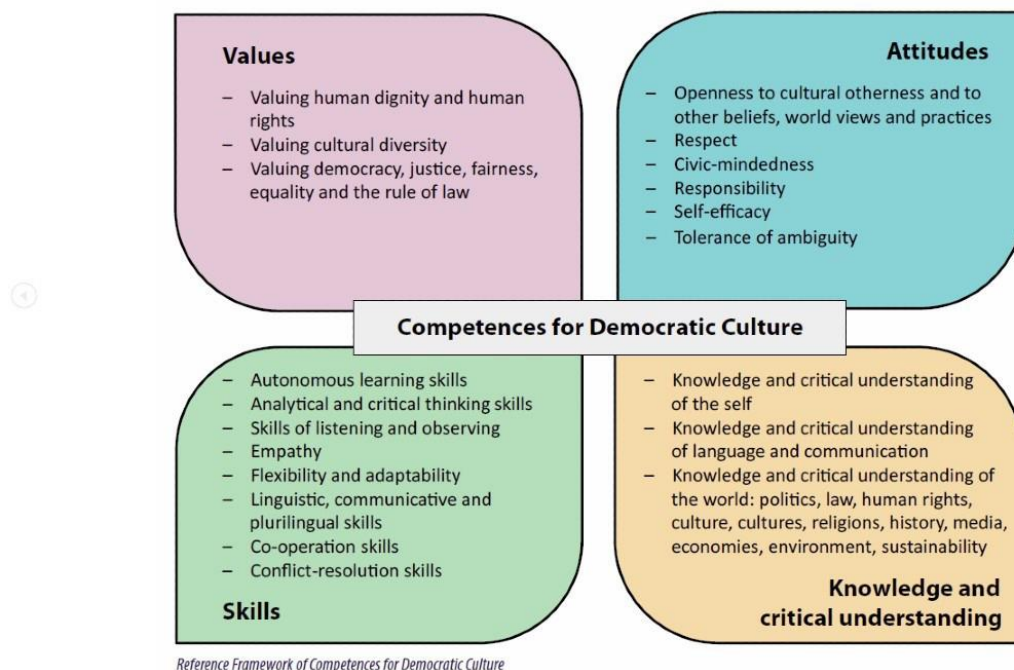
Table 1
Policy capacity: skills and resources.

Levels of resources and capabilities	Skills and competences		
	Analytical	Operational	Political
Individual	Individual analytical capacity	Individual operational capacity	Individual political capacity
Organizational	Organizational analytical capacity	Organizational operational capacity	Organizational political capacity
Systemic	Systemic analytical capacity	Systemic operational capacity	Systemic political capacity

From Wu et al., 2015. p.167.

Annex 2

The Council of Europe (CoE) *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* (RFCDC), 2013 / 2020.



Council of Europe (2018). *Reference framework of competences for democratic culture*. Council of Europe. Vol1.

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