

CULTIVATING DEMOCRATIC SKILLS IN THE 21ST CENTURY SOCIETY

El cultivo de competencias democráticas en la sociedad del siglo XXI

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Abstract

This paper addresses the current problems facing 21st century democracies, the threats and conflicts faced by citizens, and how to mitigate the negative effects of growing atomization and authoritarian radicalism, which are exacerbated by technology and digitalization. The aim is to present ethical and civic education as a fundamental resource for human development and democratic life, understanding that critical thinking and civic virtues lay the foundations for enjoying democratic values. It highlights the importance of equipping young people with the democratic skills that will enable them to become responsible agents in a pluralistic and complex social context. To this end, a methodology of critical analysis of articles and research studies has been followed, providing results and reflections on both the current situation and pedagogical proposals aimed at revitalizing democratic life. Therefore, the document initially presents an analysis of the state of the art and the foundations of democracy, pointing out which democratic skills are most necessary today. Next, the importance of ethical-civic education is justified, and finally, pedagogical proposals aimed at cultivating these skills are presented, which are framed within dialogic learning, peaceful conflict resolution, and emotional education.

Keywords

Democracy, Education, Ethics, Skills, Citizenship, Critical thinking.

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Resumen

El presente escrito plantea la problemática actual en las democracias del siglo XXI, las amenazas y los conflictos a los que se enfrenta la ciudadanía y de qué manera paliar los efectos negativos de un atomismo y radicalismo autoritario creciente, que se agrava con las tecnologías y la digitalización. El objetivo es presentar la educación ético-cívica como un recurso fundamental para el desarrollo humano y la vida democrática, entendiendo que el pensamiento crítico y las virtudes cívicas sientan las bases para degustar los valores democráticos. Se destaca la importancia de capacitar a los jóvenes con las competencias democráticas que les permitirán erigirse como agentes responsables en un contexto social pluralista y complejo. Para ello se ha seguido una metodología de análisis crítico de artículos y estudios de investigación que aportan resultados y reflexiones, tanto sobre la situación actual como propuestas pedagógicas orientadas a la revitalización de la vida democrática. Así, el documento presenta inicialmente el análisis del estado de la cuestión y los fundamentos de la democracia, señalando qué competencias democráticas son más necesarias en la actualidad; a continuación, se justifica la importancia de la educación ético-cívica; finalmente, se presentan unas propuestas pedagógicas orientadas al cultivo de dichas competencias y que se enmarcan en el aprendizaje dialógico, la resolución pacífica de conflictos y la educación emocional.

Palabras clave

Democracia, educación, ética, competencias, ciudadanía, pensamiento crítico.

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Introduction

At this historic juncture in the 21st century, society is witnessing a rise in radicalism, a decline in the democratic spirit, and the reemergence of authoritarian political stances—proposals that seemed to have been consigned to the 20th century with the triumph of Western liberal democracy (Fukuyama, 1992). This current landscape can be framed as a context of “post-democracy” (Crouch, 2020) or “illiberal or anti-liberal democracy” (Zakaria, 1997; Ylarri, 2015), manifesting through symptoms that primarily threaten citizens and the core ethical and civic values of democratic life: equality, justice, and freedom. This baseline situation is further compounded by prevalent societal individualism and atomization, a lack of social and democratic commitment among younger generations, and their limited participation in civic processes—all of which pose a serious threat to democratic stability (Taylor, 2005).

Such a scenario is highly conducive to the emergence of radicalism and extreme positions that undermine tolerance and mutual respect, as seen in the rise of xenophobic, racist, or discriminatory attitudes toward different belief systems. Consequently, polarized identities clash within pluralistic and multicultural spaces which, in democratic terms, demand respect for and recognition of equal human dignity to guarantee social peace (Przeworski, 2022). This context is further fueled by a lifestyle of conformity and adaptation that increasingly drives individuals inward.

In an environment shaped by pervasive digitization and technological transformation, individuals often take refuge in an anonymous reality, lacking the critical capacity to navigate overwhelming amounts of information and feeling desensitized by the accelerated pace of data delivery (Rosa, 2016). This results in a vast, uncritical accumulation of data (Han, 2022) that defies comprehensive understanding. As mathematician Cathy O’Neil (2018) noted, complex mathematical models are increasingly used for political decision-making, leading not only to the perpetuation of inequality and discrimination but also to a new form of technocracy where citizens are effectively sidelined by algorithms.

This situation constitutes the main problem of this research: it affects individual development, self-concept, and identity formation, while simultaneously threatening the foundations of community life—namely, the ethical and civic values of freedom, justice, equality, and solidarity that undergird democratic societies (Bauman, 2007). Therefore, the objective of this study is to propose the viability of learning to live in a democracy, under the premise that no one is born knowing how to appreciate freedom or justice; rather, this is an educational task that requires a strong cultural backdrop and a horizon of meaning. To address this issue—which is of critical relevance given its impact on democracy as a form of social and political organization—this paper proposes the promotion of ethical-civic education as a fundamental mechanism for empowering citizens. This approach aims to help individuals exercise their democratic competencies, rediscover essential civic values, and cultivate a set of virtues that, alongside critical thinking, will revitalize an active, responsible, just, and supportive citizenry (Jerome et al., 2024).

Consequently, this paper presents learning for democratic life as a priority within citizenship education (Santisteban et al., 2018), emphasizing that living in a democracy is a learned behavior requiring specific skills, attitudes, values, and knowledge.

The methodology used to justify this proposal is grounded, on the one hand, in the immediate demands and challenges of the current socio-political context and, on the other hand, in the recovery of the philosophical foundations of democratic thought as a political system centered on freedom and justice. To this end, a comprehensive literature review is conducted, analyzing the primary classical theoretical proposals within political philosophy. Additionally, the research includes a propositional section that outlines a series of pedagogical proposals aligned with ethical-civic education. These proposals are intended to serve as a practical framework for cultivating democratic virtues, skills, and competencies



for active citizenship. The goal is to prepare citizens to understand what life in a democracy entails and to exercise their agency responsibly and in solidarity, working for the common good and recognizing others as beings possessing inherent dignity.

Finally, the paper presents relevant conclusions addressing the challenges posed by the initial research question, delving into the role of educators in this endeavor and exploring how the educational context serves as a vital nexus for human development and the revitalization of 21st-century democracy.

A World in Crisis Facing “Post-Democracy”

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It is undeniable that the 21st century began at a critical juncture for democratic systems, the effects of which are clearly evident in the current global landscape. This context is characterized by a globalization that, while connecting us through communication and enabling us to live alongside countless others, has simultaneously disconnected us from the human issues closest to us. Consequently, situations of injustice are rendered invisible, relegated to anonymity and to the margins of a society focused strictly on the immediate. In this regard, it is worth highlighting the role of social media and the dominance of technology and digitalization; these forces drive a mass-oriented way of life that often feels hollow, pursuing a false imperative of happiness that ultimately leads to disillusionment and confusion (Pinedo Cantillo, 2024).

The accelerated pace of modern life not only impacts us individually but also leads to an alienation of the self, as Hartmut Rosa (2016) points out, making it impossible to explore our authentic identity and the deeper implications of our humanity. This alienation extends to the community: as the capacity to pause and listen attentively to others diminishes, we lose sight of the importance of recognizing them as equals and valuing their inherent dignity.

Likewise, the bonds that historically held communities together—giving meaning to customs, beliefs, lifestyles, and shared understandings of the world—are gradually eroding. Social cohesion, which is essential for mutual recognition and solidarity-based agency, is fracturing. These emerging cracks weaken the very foundation necessary for human flourishing.

Furthermore, the complexity of a multifaceted identity is being oversimplified. The habits that allow for mutual understanding beyond the immediate—by returning to the origins and shared horizons of

meaning from which genuine consensus is possible—are neither cultivated nor forged (Taylor, 1994, 2005). Cultural freedom is lost alongside critical capacity, and the richness of context is nullified as cultural diversity and the varied lifestyles of pluralistic societies are homogenized into standardized patterns. Paradoxically, this reduction in cultural diversity coexists with the extreme radicalization of certain cultural practices and viewpoints. This polarization generates conflicts and clashes between opposing stances—at times escalating into violence and hate speech—that undermine the foundations of communal life, trust, and security required for a healthy democracy (Gracia Calandín & Suárez Montoya, 2023).

All these factors undermine democratic life, suggesting that we may be entering an era of “post-democracy,” where the democratic system has become so distorted that it fails to function or respond to the political organizational needs of states aspiring to be governed by the principles of equality, justice, and freedom (Gozálvez Pérez et al., 2023).

In the absence of a robust system, some states claim to be democratic yet include extremist and authoritarian groups within their political landscape. These factions deploy radical rhetoric that polarizes public opinion, leaving no room for dialogue or the pursuit of common ground (Bauer et al., 2021). Furthermore, political institutions are deteriorating—a shift that citizens interpret as a cause for mistrust due to issues such as corruption, embezzlement, institutional inefficiency, and a blurred separation of powers. While nominally democratic, these regimes function as weak democracies for several reasons: they may be fledgling democratic states with limited democratic traditions and authoritarian origins, thus requiring a strengthening of their baseline foundations and values (Albertus & Menaldo, 2018); alternatively, they may be historically established, strong democracies that have weakened over time by failing to safeguard essential pillars of democratic life, such as fundamental freedoms, pluralism, critical civic participation, respect for minorities, a free and diverse press, a multiparty system, security, and the basic civil rights of all groups within civil society.¹

Both scenarios suffer from democratic deficits that must be addressed if we are to remain committed to a democratic political system (Bauer et al., 2021). The following section outlines the democratic foundations that justify the relevance of pedagogical proposals capable of contributing, through ethical and civic education, to strengthening citizens’ democratic competence and revitalizing democratic life in 21st-century societies, utilizing an approach centered on the acquisition of skills, attitudes, and values that facilitate competency development.

Fundamentals of Democratic Life

In its origins, democracy was conceived as a participatory and direct government by the people, albeit with a distinct degree of elitism embedded in the concept of citizenship. In Athens and the Greek city-states of classical antiquity, those considered citizens were limited to a small fraction of the population—specifically, free adult males who were not foreigners. The capacity for participation—and, consequently, the recognition required to exercise that freedom—was highly restricted; equality was not understood as equal treatment or the recognition of rights for all inhabitants of the *polis*, but only for those who could truly conceive of themselves and be recognized as full citizens (Bovero, 1987).

Therefore, we must look to the Modern Era to understand the resurgence of democracies in the West. Through this transition, an alternative perspective emerged for interpreting freedom and equality. This approach, contrasting with the democracy of the ancients, defines modern democracy. It can be categorized according to Benjamin Constant's—and later Isaiah Berlin's (2001)—conceptualizations comparing the liberty of the ancients with that of the moderns.

Modern democracy is inherently representative and characterized primarily by the separation of powers; moreover, every individual is recognized as a rights-holder with an equal capacity to participate in democratic life. The classical restrictions on the concept of citizenship were lifted, establishing the premise that every person is eligible to exercise their rights of participation, at least through universal suffrage. Historically, however, exceptions to this universality arose, based precisely on an alleged lack of capacity to participate on equal terms or to exercise rights and freedoms responsibly. Full citizenship, therefore, is not something acquired simply by being born in a particular territory; it requires legal status and institutional recognition.

The liberalism characteristic of modern society undoubtedly represents significant social progress regarding individual rights and freedoms when contrasted with the oppression of pre-modern regimes. Since the seventeenth century, authors such as John Locke—and, in a more developed form in the mid-nineteenth century, John Stuart Mill (1988)—have emphasized the central role that individual freedom must play in society. However, although the concept of “negative liberty” (Berlin, 2001) constitutes an indispensable safeguard against totalitarianism—a validity that must be acknowledged in both Mill and Berlin—it nevertheless presents certain shortcomings for the purpose of cultivating democratic com-



petencies. In this regard, Taylor (2005) analyzes the limitations of negative liberty and proposes a positive conception of freedom. According to this view, it is insufficient to merely assert that liberty is a right; rather, it must be understood as an exercise. Otherwise, it risks remaining a mere declaration on paper with no mechanism to make it effective—i.e., to act and be free. In other words, even if an individual encounters no external interference or obstacles—as negative liberty posits—this absence alone does not guarantee the actual exercise of freedom. To achieve this, it is essential to recognize the material conditions of existence, including social, historical, and political contexts. Special emphasis must be placed on social ties and the actors' horizons of meaning, as these factors either facilitate or hinder the actual exercise of freedom. Understanding freedom as an exercise implies a critique of social atomism, shifting the focus toward the social bonds that shape society and facilitate free action. In this sense, education for democratic citizenship is key, as it helps to critically assess these contextual conditions, which are essential for understanding the true exercise of freedom (Santisteban et al., 2018).

Consequently, following classical authors such as John Dewey (1995) or contemporary thinkers like Nussbaum (2010), there is an intrinsic relationship between education and democracy, since education is the primary vehicle for forming active, responsible, and committed citizens. Education for participation, democracy as a way of life, and the promotion of ethical and civic values—such as justice, equality, freedom, solidarity, and dialogue—are foundational pillars of teaching (Gracia Calandín, 2020). To be genuinely exercised, the status of democratic citizenship requires both competence (the aptitude or know-how) and capacity (the real freedom to fulfill the role that characterizes a responsible, free, and just citizen). This democratic competence is acquired through ethical and civic education, which cultivates the virtues, habits, and abilities enabling its development while simultaneously fostering awareness of the profound responsibility that this type of agency entails.

Democratic Competencies for the Effective Exercise of Citizenship

This section outlines the competencies required for citizens to effectively exercise their power and sovereignty within a democratic system, thereby safeguarding the foundations and values of democratic life in 21st-century societies.



First, citizens need to cultivate critical thinking grounded in an embodied rationality (Cortina Orts, 2007)—as opposed to an instrumental or calculating one—directed toward the holistic development of individuals and communities (Barrientos Rastrojo, 2024). Faced with an overwhelming influx of information, alongside systematic attempts at indoctrination and polarization by populist or authoritarian factions (Han, 2022), citizens must possess the capacity to critically analyze, select, and process information. This capability allows them to distinguish between truth and falsehood, and between communication designed to manipulate and data disseminated merely to generate confusion or obscure essential issues. Furthermore, the populist discourses proliferating across the political landscape demand rigorous critique to accurately assess the underlying intentions of political parties or media outlets that have compromised their integrity by partisan bias, relying on fake news or the distorted presentation of facts.

This critical disposition also enables individuals to evaluate personal prejudices, ungrounded opinions, and underlying arguments, exercising a capacity for self-criticism that dismantles cognitive biases and discriminatory stances (Barrientos Rastrojo, 2024). Critique requires rational justification; however, specifying the nature of this rationality is vital to avoid the pitfalls of purely instrumental or calculating reasoning. Instrumental logic often approaches civic issues from an exclusionary standpoint, exhibiting little sensitivity toward arguments rooted in feelings, traditions, or customs that imbue communities with meaning but defy quantitative calculation. These elements pertain to personal roots and moral obligations (Cortina Orts, 2007, 2024) rather than algorithmic efficiencies. In contrast to the ubiquity of artificial intelligence in contemporary technologically advanced societies, “cordial reason” and “embodied reason” appeal to what fundamentally humanizes us—through the body and the heart. This perspective acknowledges human beings as entities who simultaneously think, reason, and feel, thereby establishing empathy as the foundational step toward the recognition of the other. While empathy is frequently an ambiguous term, this framework advocates for a form of “ethical compassion” directly intertwined with critical capacity, since reason and emotion, or discernment and feeling, are intrinsically linked (Gracia Calandín, 2020, 2023). This synthesis manifests as a creative sentimental education (París Albert, 2022b).

Second, closely linked to this embodied rationality and critical thinking, are language and the capacity for speech—the *logos* of classical antiquity, as articulated by Aristotle. It is this uniquely human fac-

ulty that, through reason and language, allows us to discern between the just and the unjust, the true and the false, and the harmful and the good. When this *logos* engages with another, it transforms into dialogue; thus, rational inquiry and the pursuit of truth occur intersubjectively through language, conversation, and the exchange of words, enabling individuals to understand the reasons, feelings, and perspectives of others (Tamarit López, 2025).

Evidently, dialogic competence is foundational for mutual understanding, peaceful conflict resolution, reaching consensus on controversial issues, and fostering empathy. These actions constitute the core of democratic life and provide the baseline for active civic participation within the public sphere (Dewey, 1995; Nussbaum, 2010).

Third, life in society demands cooperation and solidarity to sustain communal bonds and meet basic human needs, particularly those of the most vulnerable, given that all individuals require the assistance of others at various stages of life. Recognizing this inherent vulnerability and the precarity associated with isolation becomes starkly apparent during periods of frailty—such as illness, old age, or disability—yet it remains a permanent feature of the human condition. Consequently, citizens must commit to maintaining social cohesion and fostering the cooperative processes that preserve interpersonal bonds (Barrientos Rastrojo, 2024). These connections, rooted in ethical compassion, mutual recognition, care, and civic friendship, are cultivated within community life. They drive acts of solidarity—the deliberate willingness to act on behalf of others in need—out of a sense of shared humanity or other ethical imperatives that compel us to alleviate suffering and redress injustice (Nussbaum, 2010; Gracia Calandín, 2020, 2023).

Sustaining these bonds as catalysts for altruistic action aimed at the common good requires the cultivation of specific moral feelings. Emotional education and the development of civic virtues serve as the keystone for achieving genuine mutual recognition and active respect among individuals, whether within a local community or as part of global humanity (Tamarit López, 2022; París Albert, 2022b).

Fourth, this framework emphasizes cultivating the ethical feeling of compassion and acquiring a robust sense of justice to prevent indifference toward the suffering of others (Gracia Calandín, 2023; Gozávez Pérez, 2025). This competency involves developing a sensitivity to injustices, alongside the capacity to denounce them and act on behalf of disadvantaged groups to advance equity and social equality. Within a democratic framework, the presence of the other —regardless of differ-

ences— cannot be ignored; recognizing equal human dignity obligates the collective to demand freedoms, rights, and opportunities under equitable conditions. While a sense of justice provides the capacity for moral outrage, compassion allows individuals to understand the suffering of others and translates that understanding into decisive action.

Fifth, and finally, citizens must become conscious of their shared responsibility toward the community to achieve the common good. Mutual recognition, social connections, and a sense of belonging cultivate a responsibility toward the institutions and individuals with whom we identify, counteracting the individualism and atomism that isolate and fragment contemporary society. This responsibility entails managing collective affairs, sustaining community life, and preserving its foundational elements, while remaining open to new perspectives and broadening horizons through critical thinking and an understanding of alterity (Taylor, 2005). Accordingly, promoting intercultural dialogue requires a cosmopolitan competence (Nussbaum, 2010) that expands our ethical perspective and identity from the local to the global, fostering inclusion and valuing the inherent richness of human diversity.

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Justification for Ethical and Civic Education in Cultivating Democratic Competencies

The development of democratic competencies is fundamental to the exercise of citizenship. However, these competencies cannot be achieved unless they are intentionally cultivated and taught, as they require habits, systemic training, and the capacity to respond to situations that demand civic action (Suárez Montoya et al., 2024).

- For their part, Teegelbeckers et al. (2025) identify six relevant practices for fostering democratic competence:
- Meaningful engagement
- Incorporation of multiple perspectives
- Reflection on solutions from divergent viewpoints
- Independently gathering and presenting information
- Implementation of sociopolitical measures
- Critical reflection on the topic at hand

The ideal discipline for developing these competencies is ethical-civic education, as it focuses on cultivating virtues and moral feelings, facilitates value learning, and regards reasoning and dialogue as central

to the educational process. Within this framework, the objective is not indoctrination, but rather deliberating and arguing about what is understood to be just, good, or correct (Conroy, 2020).

Ethical-civic education is not restricted solely to formal educational contexts; it must also be embedded within community life, family structures, and civil society (García López et al., 2011; Gozávez Pérez, 2025). Indeed, numerous settings provide individuals with the opportunity to develop and exercise their democratic competencies. Nevertheless, the formal educational context offers an exceptionally conducive environment for creating structured opportunities for interaction and dialogue. This learning process requires practice, activity, and active engagement—involving individuals not only cognitively but also emotionally—and relies on the presence of others for genuine interaction and recognition to occur. Ultimately, citizens must possess the actual capacity to act and deploy these competencies at the appropriate moment. If opportunities for such development are absent, learning remains incomplete and insufficient because, like any habit, civic competence is forged through practice and repetition (Lipman, 2003; París Albert, 2022a).

Consequently, a philosophical rethinking of the foundations of education is essential (Aguilar Gordón & Collado Ruano, 2025). More specifically, for the cultivation of democratic competencies, ethical and civic education must be rooted in conceptual foundations that justify democracy as a framework for political organization within which to exercise freedom and uphold the values of justice, equality, solidarity, and dialogue (Conroy, 2020). We situate these foundations within the realm of human rights and the capabilities-based approach to sustainable human development (UNESCO, 2015, 2021).

On the one hand, human rights lay the groundwork for a universalist ethical theory that serves as the foundation for advocating an intercultural ethic and a cosmopolitan approach (Schaffer, 2015)—one that remains open to the inclusion of individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds and worldviews distinct from the prevailing norm (Nussbaum, 2010). Thus, the differences characteristic of today's pluralistic societies can be addressed without forcing individuals to renounce their own cultural identity or distinctive traits by focusing instead on the social bonds that coexistence itself generates, thereby achieving a greater degree of social cohesion (Gracia Calandín, 2020).

On the other hand, referencing sustainable human development highlights the necessity of orienting civic actions toward a development model focused on people and their functional capacities. As the capa-



bilities approach—advocated for decades by Amartya Sen and Martha C. Nussbaum—maintains, this involves providing individuals with real opportunities to lead lives they have reason to value. What is essential is that people possess the means to act, be, and do what they deem valuable—elements that imbue their lives with meaning and afford them the freedom to pursue their own life plans—while explicitly factoring in sustainability. This implies respect for present and future generations, as well as responsibility toward the environment and vital, scarce resources. From this perspective of human development, democracy can be understood as the optimal vehicle for fostering capabilities and expanding personal, social, and economic opportunities (Sen, 2000; Nussbaum, 2010).

Finally, it is essential to distinguish between capabilities—understood here as measures of positive or substantive freedom that enable people to effectively execute their life plans—and competencies or skills. More specifically, regarding democratic competencies, the Council of Europe (2016) provides the following definition:

The ability to mobilize and use relevant values, attitudes, aptitudes, knowledge, and/or insight to respond appropriately and effectively to the demands, challenges, and opportunities posed by democratic and intercultural situations. Competence is approached as a dynamic process in which a competent person actively and flexibly mobilizes and uses a range of psychological resources to respond to new circumstances as they arise (p. 6).

The Art of Conversation as the Key to Democratic Life

In previous sections, it has been noted that dialogue is one of the most powerful tools in democratic life. It is considered key because citizens use speech to express their viewpoints and opinions, as well as to listen to those of others, on topics that may or may not be directly related to politics. Dialogue does not inherently involve confrontation; however, the exchange of reasons or views can naturally give rise to disagreements or divergent perspectives on a given issue. In such cases, dialogic competence prevents this exchange from being cut short, ensuring the continuity of the communication. Rather than dividing us, dialogue should foster proximity by allowing the free expression of thought, provided specific conditions are met for a truly fruitful exchange to occur. According to Boontinand and Forstenzer (2024), these essential conditions include active respect, active listening, and sincerity in expression; speaking from



one's own perspective; providing arguments and justifications for one's opinions; critically reviewing and reflecting on one's own thoughts; and the capacity to shift viewpoints, reach consensus, or accept dissent without undermining peaceful coexistence or resorting to violent behavior.²

To the reader, conversation may seem like an everyday activity learned almost by osmosis due to our social nature; however, genuine conversation happens neither automatically nor spontaneously. While human beings learn to speak through early socialization, language acquisition alone does not make speakers effective conversationalists. Even a sophisticated command of language in adulthood is insufficient for functioning adequately in dialogic settings. Conversation requires a process of deliberate, practical learning; it is an art—a skill that must be systematically cultivated—and its practice requires the mastery of specific techniques and procedural know-how.

If democracy demands dialogue and conversation to resist authoritarianism, populist domination, or discursive manipulation, it is clear that we must foster this art of conversation. Deliberation, as an essential resource of democratic life, requires identifying and overcoming both visible and invisible obstacles, such as the deeply ingrained prejudices and preconceptions that restrict dialogic exchange (Lipman, 2003; Gozávez Pérez, 2025; Gozávez Pérez et al., 2023).

That said, it is easy to conflate the art of conversation with mere rhetoric. Succumbing to this misconception traps communication within the realm of manipulation, dialectical struggle, the ridicule of opponents, and an inability to reach the consensual agreements necessary for the common good. Rhetoric is indeed an art, but it serves fundamentally different purposes, as Plato famously illustrated in his dialogue *Gorgias*. Those who employ rhetoric do not always seek truth or the common good; they are often less concerned with listening to the interlocutor than with defeating them, aiming to impose their own perspective as if it were already uniquely valid. This monological approach precludes genuine dialogic practice, as it eliminates the exchange needed to discover common ground through reason and the spoken word; the rhetorician's starting point and destination are already rigidly predefined.

- Learning to converse requires, first, recognizing and respecting the other as a valid interlocutor.
- Second, building upon this baseline of respect, individuals must practice active listening and respond from their own perspective, directly addressing the interlocutor's arguments and critically reflecting on their own position in light of these differences.



- Third, participants should aim for consensus—or at least maintain a clear intention to advance the exchange of ideas—thereby broadening the shared horizon of meaning within which the conversation is framed.

Education must intentionally address this dialogic learning to fulfill the democratic purposes outlined above (Teegelbeckers et al., 2025). Mastering this skill within democratic societies to facilitate coexistence and mutual understanding requires both substantive knowledge and procedural practice, operating within a framework where active respect prevails over mere tolerance (Forst, 2014).

The cognitive dimension of this learning manifests through activities of structured inquiry, information-seeking, and the application of critical thinking to analyze and evaluate data or sources (Valles Molina & Rivas Lara, 2025; París Albert, 2022a).

Conversely, the procedural dimension involves cultivating spaces of encounter where individuals can engage in face-to-face conversation, exchange perspectives, articulate arguments, and clarify their points according to the specific context of the discussion. This practice is only effective when participants are placed in situations that demand a direct, intentional encounter with the other.

Ultimately, these spaces for intersubjective exercise must be championed throughout civil society—within schools, civic associations, and neighborhood groups—as well as within institutional and corporate sectors. These are the concrete contexts where agreements must be forged to build robust communities.

The educational framework is exceptionally conducive to these practices, serving as a laboratory for innovative pedagogical proposals that promote dialogic practice and democratic competencies. Deploying active, deliberative methodologies—such as Lipman’s (2003) model of “communities of inquiry,” which stimulates reflection, critical thinking, and collaborative problem-solving through deliberative practice—is vital for integrating dialogue into classroom instruction and preparing students for democratic life (Tamarit López, 2025).

Likewise, educational innovation in this domain must be critically tied to a broader social commitment to community improvement. Innovation should not be pursued for its own sake or merely to boost academic performance and isolated skill acquisition. Rather, it must convey to students the foundational values and transformative power of an education designed to secure collective achievements, social justice, and the common good (Jasso Alfieri et al., 2025).



Peaceful Conflict Resolution as a Democratic Competency

One of the democratic competencies identified by the Council of Europe (2016) is the ability to resolve conflicts peacefully. This competency involves listening to the parties involved and seeking consensus, thereby reducing the likelihood that violence or intolerance will prevail in the conflict situations that inevitably arise in communal life (Galtung, 2003).

Education for the philosophy of peace is essential in the current global context, where polarization and radicalism in pluralistic settings generate dissent as well as intercultural and ideological clashes; these must be constructively redirected to prevent violent or discriminatory responses to alterity. The objective is to promote educational methodologies and strategies—such as mediation and restorative practices—that foster the art of peacemaking from the perspective of a culture of peace. This paradigm posits that human beings are fully capable of treating one another with care and tenderness, as well as with justice and equity, on both personal and institutional levels (Martínez Guzmán, 2009, 2015; París Albert, 2022a, 2025; Steele & García, 2024; Comins Mingol, 2009). Consequently, it becomes possible to address escalating violence and its accompanying social ills, such as exclusion, discrimination, poverty, and marginalization. This is not a utopian aspiration, but rather a realistic goal characteristic of a democratic society striving to realize human rights and ethical-civic values.

Once again, schools emerge as an ideal setting for nurturing this culture of peace and equipping individuals with the skills required for mediation and restorative justice—namely, dialogue, empathy, mutual recognition, active respect, and care for interpersonal relationships. The Philosophy for Children framework offers a methodology that develops the attitudes and competencies enabling students to view themselves as active mediators (Valles Molina & Rivas Lara, 2025; Orts García, 2025). Within this approach, they become capable of addressing conflicts through reflection and empathy, collaborating with others to seek agreements that facilitate resolution and, where appropriate, the restoration of harm and fractured relationships. Therefore, the goal extends beyond mere conflict resolution; it encompasses restoring and inventing new modes of relationship that allow individuals to understand one another and coexist, enabling each person to pursue their life's purpose without undermining the foundations of democratic life (Vázquez Recio et al., 2024).

In this regard, Martínez Guzmán's (2009, 2015) "philosophy for making peace" approach is highly enriching, as Sonia París Albert (2025)

asserts, since it allows educators to orient teaching toward the construction of peaceful social environments —settings where individuals develop their peaceful capacities rather than violent impulses when faced with conflict. In this manner, societies are built where the presence of peaceful means and environments is more visible and recognized as a viable alternative to violence. Violence, unfortunately, is often more striking, more prominent in the media, and more visible among the life choices perceived by citizens, who sometimes lack the opportunity to consider alternative courses of action. Following Herrero Rico (2021), París Albert (2025) emphasizes the importance of philosophical pedagogical approaches to peacemaking, linking their development directly to the pursuit of social justice:

I am referring, for example, to pedagogical dynamics that foster cooperation, perception, empathy, active listening, integrative skills, nonviolent communication, recognition, etc (Herrero Rico, 2021). In other words, a whole series of competencies that are, at the same time, a *sine qua non* for social justice (París Albert, 2025, p. 6).

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In the educational setting, peaceful conflict resolution translates into school mediation processes that serve as a vital resource for positive coexistence while providing students with the opportunity to learn as citizens who can respond peacefully. Operating from a perspective of positive peace, they develop the capacity to deliberately choose peace over violence as an effective behavioral option (París Albert, 2022a). Ultimately, it is a matter of educating —about’ violence, rather than —for’ violence; according to París, this involves explicitly acknowledging that violence exists and that we must learn to respond to it —ideally, without resorting to further violence.

In turn, school mediation is intrinsically linked to the dialogic competence and critical thinking addressed in previous sections, both of which dismantle prejudices and ideological barriers (Fisher, 2007). School mediation cannot function effectively unless we demonstrate that the value of dialogue in a democratic society—and for positive coexistence—demands the systematic cultivation of moral sentiments and emotional competencies such as empathy, compassion, and moral indignation.

Emotional Education as the Key to Promoting Inclusion and a Culture of Peace

Rafael Bisquerra (2008, 2011) argues that emotional education constitutes an education for life, which is fundamental to active citizenship. This ap-

proach involves preparing individuals to respond effectively to the social needs they encounter throughout their lives, acknowledging that they are inherently sentient and emotional beings. Emotional education is thus conceived as a continuous, lifelong process aimed at fostering emotional competencies as a core element of holistic human development, ultimately equipping individuals for life's challenges.

The development of core emotional competencies reduces vulnerability to emotional distress situations that expose individuals to dysfunctions such as stress, impulsivity, and aggression—states that generate harmful effects on personal well-being. Consequently, the ultimate goal of emotional education is to maximize constructive tendencies while minimizing destructive ones. This process fosters greater emotional awareness and management, enhances the ability to generate positive emotions while mitigating the impact of negative ones, and cultivates self-motivation alongside a positive attitude toward life. Furthermore, empirical studies link emotional education to academic performance and student success. Through psychoeducational interventions, individuals achieve greater emotional regulation, stress management skills, and frustration tolerance, benefits that extend even into higher education settings (Rojas Cadena et al., 2024; Ferragut & Fierro, 2012).

Complementarily, Nussbaum (2014) identifies political emotions that foster positive coexistence, such as compassion and love, as well as those that emerge during conflict, namely shame, hatred, and disgust. Both categories demand the attention of an educational system that takes seriously the holistic development of individuals with a view toward the common good and the public sphere (Paris Albert, 2022b).

The emotional education programs presented by Bisquerra (2008, 2011) are particularly relevant because they are implemented in formal educational settings and focus on the acquisition of five core emotional competencies: emotional awareness, emotion regulation, self-motivation, social-emotional skills, and the relationship between emotion and subjective well-being—the latter providing the conditions for optimal experiences and actions oriented toward well-being.

For these programs to be successful, they must be combined with educational innovation across all levels, since pedagogical methodologies vary in their alignment with emotional education and their capacity to promote educational inclusion (Ferragut & Fierro, 2012). Pedagogically, the most effective resources are those requiring high student participation and active engagement in both the learning process and the co-construction of knowledge (Moraga & Soto, 2016). Cooperative, team-based

activities that promote self-motivation and emotional awareness serve as valuable tools for inclusion and academic success (Tamarit López, 2022). Students trained under these active methodologies become more empathetic; they develop skills that allow them to take responsibility, recognize their own abilities, improve their self-esteem, and appreciate the value of others. In doing so, they cultivate a self-critical, self-aware, and responsible character, gaining the autonomy to make independent decisions while considering the needs of the collective. They learn to forge consensus cooperatively, moving beyond self-centered perspectives to broaden their horizons of meaning.

These lessons are essential for fostering active and responsible citizenship. Emotional education programs implemented in classrooms aim to promote the emotional, social, and personal well-being of the entire educational community (Ferragut & Fierro, 2012). This systemic improvement in well-being nurtures positive coexistence, prevents a range of socio-emotional dysfunctions, and empowers individuals to resolve conflicts peacefully. Consequently, these programs not only include diverse individuals but actively promote a sustainable culture of peace.

Individuals who develop emotional intelligence possess the social-emotional skills required to understand themselves and express their feelings assertively. They are also more empathetic and better equipped to understand others, taking external interests into account and resolving conflicts through dialogue rather than violence. However, it is essential to link this emotional education to a foundational ethical and civic framework. It is not merely a matter of achieving emotional or social well-being, but of “living well” in the strict ethical sense; this means attaining a good life and fulfilling a life project that one has reasoned to value (Tamarit López, 2022). In this manner, individuals develop a commitment to core ethical values that democratic societies embody as the bedrock of community life: respect, equality, solidarity, compassion, justice, freedom, and integrity (Santisteban et al., 2018). These values enable human beings to actively shape the world, adapting reality to human demands and offering the opportunity to experience a meaningful, peaceful existence.

Learning these values in school requires a deliberate instructional effort paired with active discovery and appreciation on the part of the students. Ultimately, the goal is to develop students’ capacity for ethical discernment, enabling them to recognize what is intrinsically valuable in reality. When combined with education in reflection and critical reasoning, emotional and ethical education ensures the holistic formation of indi-



viduals, empowering them with the moral, emotional, and social capacities required to pursue a good life (Gracia Calandín & Tamarit López, 2021).

Such citizens possess the potential to develop a compassionate imagination that fosters mutual recognition and active respect. When deployed, this compassionate imagination awakens empathy and drives ethical reflection, as the narratives of others challenge them to think and act without divorcing reason from moral sentiments. It is, therefore, a matter of educating in compassion—the ethical virtue that enables “the recognition of the dignity of every human person” (Gracia Calandín, 2020, p. 125). Those educated within this framework not only experience moral outrage in the face of injustice but also feel a profound sense of responsibility toward those who suffer, compelling them to offer help and act on behalf of the victims.

- First, a humanities-based education inherently fosters the cultivation of imagination, reflection, and reasoning through narratives, artistic resources, and learning situations that draw upon historical memory or contemporary social analysis (Nussbaum, 2010, 2014).
- Second, the analysis of moral dilemmas effectively stimulates critical and alternative thinking, ethical reasoning, value recognition, and the development of empathy and a sense of justice.
- Third, the implementation of dialogic methodologies—specifically those based on thinking routines and a structured culture of thinking (Moraga & Soto, 2016)—cultivates fundamental moral capacities, personal and social reflection, metacognition, and prosocial behavioral change (Jerome et al., 2024).

All of this underscores the importance of establishing a classroom climate dedicated to collaborative reflection. When these routines and cognitive skills become an integral part of the individual’s personal toolkit, learning becomes transferable to other life situations, enabling citizens to choose the most appropriate and just options for themselves and their communities.

Conclusions

Learning for democratic life must be meaningful for students, grounded in a clear ethical and holistic foundation, and attentive to the various spheres of individual and community life. This paper has outlined the



democratic competencies required to live in a democracy and to exercise citizenship in an active, responsible, just, and supportive manner.

Acquiring these competencies requires a structured context, such as that provided by the educational setting, which enables individuals to come together in an atmosphere of interculturality, embracing the full diversity of contemporary pluralistic societies. To this end, a series of pedagogical proposals have been presented that place individuals at the center, alongside their inherent dignity and the respect they deserve. Simultaneously, these proposals delve into the necessity of cultivating reasoning, critical thinking, dialogue, and emotional and virtuous development—dimensions that collectively facilitate the learning, experience, and appreciation of values in real life. It is crucial to emphasize educational innovation in philosophy—at least regarding ethics education—and to support competency-based learning as a vital mechanism for addressing the 21st-century democratic crisis (UNESCO, 2021). Furthermore, advances in neuroeducation—and neuroethics specifically—must be integrated into the development of philosophy instruction and citizenship education (Gracia Calandín, 2020). Before designing pedagogical proposals for ethical and civic education, it is essential to engage in a profound reflection on the ultimate purposes of education and the specific challenges to which citizens in a democratic society must respond.

Educators, therefore, share a professional commitment to further their own development and to transform classrooms and schools into safe, free spaces. In these environments, the constructive management, resolution, and restoration of conflicts can serve as a practical model for students as future citizens—offering a valuable alternative to violent options that violate human dignity or are perpetuated by systemic prejudices and social ills (Vázquez Recio et al., 2024). Educators themselves must serve as role models for students, as the school, which must explicitly define its own ethical character and the civic principles undergirding its educational mission (Jerome et al., 2024). In the case of schools within democratic states, institutions must respect both the laws that regulate them and the legitimacy that justifies them as places where humanity and democratic citizenship are cultivated. They must flatly reject manipulation, indoctrination, or mere technical instruction—practices through which educational institutions shirk their democratic responsibility under the guise of being impartial or neutral regarding world events.

Likewise, schools must define themselves as spaces where students can enrich themselves and grow holistically, acquiring the resources to develop skills and abilities that foster awareness of their own lives and the



broader community (Gracia Calandín & Tamarit López, 2021). This implies viewing oneself as an active, responsible citizen within a democracy that demands justice and solidarity, a mindset cultivated through practices such as dialogue, cooperative research projects, and service-learning—which recognizes the value of knowledge by putting it directly at the service of community needs (Jerome et al., 2024).

Society as a whole—and specifically those working in education—must assume their share of responsibility to ensure that democracy is not undermined by rising populism or emerging authoritarianism (Gozálvez Pérez et al., 2023). Younger generations must develop robust critical thinking and open themselves to a democratic environment that encourages civic engagement, rejecting indifference and the uniform thinking that nullifies the richness of diversity. This engagement can be actively practiced in schools, where dialogue is key to discovering others through intercultural exchange, building bridges between justice and care, and transforming these values into everyday habits that forge a virtuous character. In this manner, it is possible to cultivate a sustainable culture of peace and a robust democratic culture—providing the fertile ground necessary for positive coexistence that pursues human and sustainable development, ensures inclusion, leaves no one sidelined, and realizes the fundamental values of civic ethics.



Notes

1. Data on this topic can be found in the Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (<https://bit.ly/4nU8isK>). We also find interesting data on this subject in the Forum on Human Rights, Democracy, and the Rule of Law (<https://bit.ly/3PLH9f8>).
2. “To effectively educate about, through, and for human rights and democracy—and, therefore, to engage in the art of violence reduction—requires young people to seriously engage in relational deliberative work. Instead of merely telling students that human rights, democracy, or peace are values that should be upheld and that violence is to be condemned, schools ought to give young people the opportunity to learn to deliberate together, to solve problems together, and to learn to give good reasons for why they believe in and what they wish to do” (Boontin and Forstenzer, 2024, p. 695).

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