

INTEGRATION OF EDC/HRE INTO THE DIGITAL EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT FOR THE TRAINING OF FUTURE TEACHERS IN UKRAINE

Mariia HRYNOVA¹

¹*Senior Lecturer of the Department of Philosophy of Education, Head of the International Cooperation and Innovation Transfer Department at the Odessa Regional Academy of In-Service Education, Ukraine,
Corresponding author: marishagrin@ukr.net*

Abstract

This article examines the integration of Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (EDC/HRE) into the digital educational environment in the training of future teachers in Ukraine. The relevance of this research stems from the challenges posed by global transformations, digitalisation, and wartime conditions, which require educators to develop competencies to foster a culture of democracy, facilitate democratic interaction, and support an inclusive educational environment.

The theoretical framework is based on contemporary approaches to implementing EDC/HRE in conjunction with the principles of sustainable development, the democratisation of education, and the “New Ukrainian School” reform. The study identifies key challenges in the training of future educators, including the inertia of the teacher education system, rapid digitalisation, and the difficulty of implementing values-based approaches in a wartime environment. The empirical basis of the study consists of survey results from 93 students from teacher training colleges in the Odesa region – participants in the distance learning program “Becoming Stronger Together” (DECIDE project), which combined synchronous and asynchronous learning formats. The results demonstrated an increase in future teachers' awareness of EDC/HRE approaches, their readiness to organise democratic interaction, their use of interactive and cooperative methods, and their readiness to create a safe, inclusive, and non-discriminatory educational environment. The most pronounced dynamics are observed in the value-based and activity-based components of competencies. In contrast, competencies related to reflection, the emotional sphere, and acceptance of uncertainty require further development.

A synthesis of the results confirms that non-formal distance education is an effective tool for integrating EDC/HRE into the digital educational environment and for preparing future teachers for professional practice based on the principles of democracy, human rights, and sustainable development.

Keywords: competences for a culture of democracy; digital educational environment; Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (EDC/HRE); educational project; humanistic and democratic principles; inclusive education; non-formal education; sustainable development; teacher training; wartime education.

1. Introduction

The 21st century is marked by the intensification of several geopolitical challenges that undermine the humanistic and democratic foundations of sustainable social development on a global scale.

Under these conditions, achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals set for 2030 – namely, ensuring the balanced development of people, the economy, and nature while acting responsibly toward future generations – is directly linked to the implementation of local policies to ensure the quality of education (United Nations, 2015).

Despite the existence of a well-developed international discourse on the interpretation of the concept of quality education, in the context of global civilizational changes, achieving quality

education should be considered in the context of implementing the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly by ensuring that students develop the transversal competencies necessary to promote sustainable development, including through education on human rights, gender equality, the promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, and global citizenship (United Nations, 2015).

The above highlights the need to strengthen the implementation of Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (hereinafter referred to as EDC/HRE), which, while not directly equated with education for sustainable development, at the same time conceptually intersects with and interacts with it in promoting the Council of Europe's core values (Council of Europe, 2010).

Undoubtedly, the synergy of values inherent in democratic citizenship – including human rights, equality, freedom, justice, peace, interdependence, pluralism, and sustainable development (Gollob, Krapf, Huddleston, Salema, & Spajic-Vrkaš 2007, p. 25) – should be viewed as the conceptual foundation for the implementation by institutions at various levels of sustainable development policies aimed at achieving social well-being in harmony with economic stability and environmental integrity.

At the same time, the realisation of this goal requires citizens to take a proactive stance in their interaction with the government and to develop effective practices of democratic culture (Council of Europe, 2018).

Therefore, EDC/HRE are designed to foster competencies based on the key criteria and dispositions inherent in democratic citizenship, including openness and respect for cultural and social diversity, a willingness to share and delegate authority, trust and honesty, commitment to the truth, self-respect and respect for others, tolerance for uncertainty, ambiguous, and unresolved situations, persistence as the ability to clearly and reasonedly defend one's own position, democratic leadership manifested in involving others in decision-making, as well as the ability to work in a team and collaborate (Gollob, Krapf, Huddleston, Salema, & Spajic-Vrkaš, 2007, p. 25).

It is important to note that, to promote democratic values, human rights, and the rule of law within the national education system, as well as harmonising education policy with European standards, Ukraine has committed to implementing the provisions of the Council of Europe's Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education. This is reflected, in particular, in the foundations of state policy in the field of education and the principles of educational activity defined by the Law of Ukraine "On Education", adopted in 2017 (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2017).

Accordingly, in the context of the educational reforms currently underway in Ukraine, EDC/HRE are being systematically implemented in both formal and non-formal education for children and adults and continue to evolve in response to contemporary social and educational challenges.

2. Theoretical Framework

An analysis of the regulatory framework and educational practices in Ukraine shows that the most significant progress in implementing EDC/HRE has occurred at the general secondary education level. This is because this level of education was among the first to undergo conceptual and methodological transformations in the context of the reform of state educational policy.

In particular, the formula for the success of the "New Ukrainian School" reform highlights several key components, including the development of key life competencies, child-centeredness,

motivated teachers, partnership-based pedagogy, and values-based education (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2016). The combination of these components entails the cross-cutting integration of EDC/HRE into the educational process. It defines the educator's special role in designing and implementing it, grounded in humanistic and democratic principles.

In line with this approach, EDC/HRE are oriented toward the democratization of interaction within children's communities, in which adherence to the principles of human rights and democracy becomes an integral part of everyday collective activity, based on respect for diversity, ensuring everyone's participation, equal opportunities, respect for human dignity, and a focus on peaceful coexistence (Council of Europe, 2010).

The effective implementation of the above-mentioned principles within the children's community serves as the foundation for developing students' competencies for a culture of democracy, which are closely intertwined with psychological, social, civic, and cultural competencies, as well as with the transversal competencies of education for sustainable development.

Within the educational process, these competencies are fostered through the creation of a non-discriminatory educational environment and democratic pedagogical interaction, and encompass the ability to learn independently, analytical and critical thinking, the ability to listen and observe, empathy, flexibility, and adaptability, language and communication skills, including multilingualism, the ability to collaborate, and the capacity to constructively resolve conflicts (Council of Europe, 2018).

The development of competencies for a culture of democracy in the educational process is structured around the exploration of a set of thematic blocks within the EDC/HRE framework, which are addressed at the classroom, school, and community levels. This approach creates conditions for children and youth to gradually and contextually understand socially significant issues, including identity, diversity and pluralism, equality, human rights and freedoms, conflict, responsibility, and the norms and rules of coexistence (Council of Europe, n.d.).

The methodological foundations of EDC/HRE are based on a combination of *learning about, through, and for democracy and human rights*, which is implemented not only at the content level but also through the application of specific pedagogical practices aimed at helping students develop experiences of democratic interaction and transfer them to broader social contexts.

Within this approach, active citizenship is understood as an experience shaped primarily through direct action rather than through instruction. Accordingly, education for active citizenship is not limited to providing information but involves the development of critical understanding, skills, and competencies, as well as relevant values and attitudes. The educational environment plays a crucial role in this process, particularly the classroom, where the teacher's example and methods of organising interaction become decisive (Gollob, Krapf, Huddleston, Salema, & Spajic-Vrkaš, 2007, p. 34).

Therefore, to put the EDC/HRE concept into practice, educators must be prepared to apply teaching methods and approaches in various educational settings that are based on inductive and active learning, a focus on experiences relevant to students, cooperative and interactive engagement, the development of critical thinking, and learning through participation (Gollob, Krapf, Huddleston, Salema, & Spajic-Vrkaš, 2007, p. 28).

Undoubtedly, a teacher who carries out educational activities in line with the EDC/HRE concept must possess a set of personal qualities necessary for building daily relationships with students on humanistic and democratic principles, including fairness, openness, and impartiality; the ability to empathize and sensitivity to the needs of others; self-confidence; respect and honesty in

interactions; a developed sense of self-awareness; and a willingness to engage in dialogue (Gollob, Krapf, Huddleston, Salema, & Spajic-Vrkaš, 2007, p. 26).

It should be noted that, with a view to effectively integrating EDC/HRE into school practice, Ukraine's state education policy focuses not only on teacher education – the training of future teachers – but also on post-graduate teacher education, aimed at ensuring their continuous professional development.

In particular, the Professional Standard for Teachers of General Secondary Education identifies collaborative interaction with participants in the educational process as one of the teacher's key professional functions, the fulfilment of which requires the formation and development of a range of professional competencies. These include psychological competence, which encompasses the ability to apply strategies for working with students to develop their positive self-esteem and self-identity, as well as the ability to foster a student community in which everyone's rights are respected and considered. Equally important is emotional and ethical competence, which involves awareness of one's own feelings, emotions, and needs; the ability to recognise the emotional states of other participants in the educational process; to manage one's own emotional reactions; and to appreciate the interdependence of people and social systems in a globalised world. At the same time, pedagogical partnership competence involves the teacher's ability to engage in subject-to-subject interaction with students within the educational process, as the foundation for democratic and equitable educational relationships (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2024).

In parallel, three interrelated challenges are emerging in teacher education.

Challenge 1: There is a certain inertia within the teacher education system toward updating content and methods for preparing teachers to implement new educational approaches, particularly the roles and tasks outlined in the “New Ukrainian School” reform. As noted in the OECD (2025) analytical report, this situation hinders teachers' readiness to adopt modern educational practices.

This, in turn, limits the opportunities for systematically mastering the approaches and methodologies of EDC/HRE.

Challenge 2: The rapid digitisation of education, which has become a key educational trend as a result of the shift to distance learning triggered by the pandemic and the state of war, opens up broad opportunities, particularly for the development of digital technologies and expanded access to various educational sources.

However, it also requires rethinking digitisation models, developing digital competencies among all participants in the educational process, and overcoming technical and organisational barriers (Krymska, Chalii, Petruk, Kobziieva, & Tytyr, 2024).

It should also be noted that digitisation in education and distance learning significantly exacerbates existing educational inequalities. Families without adequate technical equipment (hardware/software, internet) or digital skills are less able to support their children. This leads to a digital divide, as educational success increasingly depends on socioeconomic background and access to resources at home.

Under these conditions, the digitalisation of education simultaneously expands opportunities and creates additional challenges for the effective implementation of EDC/HRE.

Challenge 3: The local challenges of implementing the value-based principles of EDC/HRE in wartime (Karlsson, 2016), when experiences of danger, loss, and forced change significantly influence how children and adults perceive the concepts of human rights, democracy, and justice.

In a situation of societal vulnerability, there is a growing need for the holistic integration of the value-based, cognitive, and activity-based dimensions of EDC/HRE through educational practices that ensure the acceptance and support of every child in the educational environment. This

environment should function as a space for the integration of children with diverse life experiences shaped by wartime conditions, including forced displacement, living in military families, temporary stays abroad and returns to Ukraine, residence in de-occupied, temporarily occupied, or Ukraine-controlled territories, experiences of loss and physical trauma, as well as the additionally complex situations of children with special educational needs.

Under these circumstances, there is a growing need to prepare educators to facilitate social inclusion processes, particularly through ethical engagement with sensitive topics and support for the psychosocial well-being of the student community.

The above highlights the role and importance of informal teacher education, which, thanks to its openness to integrating successful international practices, has significant potential for ensuring the effective training of future teachers in EDC/HRE, which must be active, purposeful, and coordinated, based on cooperation and participation, interactive, and aimed at developing independent thinking (Gollob, Krapf, Salema, & Spajić-Vrkaš, 2007, p. 36).

3. Methods

Research Hypotheses. As part of this study, several hypotheses were formulated to empirically test the potential of non-formal education to address the identified challenges in the training of future teachers.

Hypothesis 1: Participation in non-formal education programs has a positive impact on future teachers' readiness to serve as facilitators of democratic interaction and empathetic interpersonal communication within the children's community.

Hypothesis 2: Participation in distance learning programs in non-formal education has a positive impact on prospective teachers' readiness to engage children in various types of collaborative learning and socially meaningful activities in the digital educational space.

Hypothesis 3: Participation in non-formal education programs tailored to EDC/HRE, and adapted to the context of war, has a positive impact on future teachers' readiness to provide social and psychological support to students and to create a non-discriminatory educational environment.

Empirical Basis of the Study. The empirical basis of this study consists of the results of a survey of 93 students from teacher training colleges in the Odesa region – participants in the “Becoming Stronger Together” training program, which was implemented at the Odessa Regional Academy of In-Service Education as part of the Swiss-Ukrainian project “DECIDE – Decentralisation for the Development of Democratic Education”.

Study Context. The curriculum for the “Becoming Stronger Together” training program was delivered remotely and combined synchronous and asynchronous learning activities.

The program has a clear modular structure and combines theoretical, practical, and reflective components, ensuring its integrity and practical focus. Structurally, the program was designed for 30 instructional hours and included six thematic online sessions and two independent assignments.

The first two sessions were devoted to analysing the social, psychological, and pedagogical aspects of integrating children affected by war, as well as familiarising participants with the basic resources of the EDC/HRE. During these sessions, participants worked on creating a safe and supportive educational environment, fostering a friendly classroom atmosphere, agreeing on rules for collaboration, and recognising the educator's role as a facilitator of interaction.

Subsequent sessions focused on the practical use of EDC/HRE educational resources to develop competencies in democratic culture. Significant attention was paid to issues of human rights and children's rights, acceptance of diversity, empathetic perception of others, joint agreement on

rules, and constructive conflict resolution. The practical component was implemented through exercises from the methodological guide, small-group work, circle discussions, and reflection on the experience gained.

The independent work component of the program focused on deepening educators' psychological sensitivity to the needs of children living in wartime conditions, as well as on developing the ability to select and adapt educational activities using EDC/HRE resources to specific problem situations within the children's community.

The final sessions of the training were aimed at developing effective interpersonal communication skills, understanding the ethics of an EDC/HRE educator, and developing strategies for integrating EDC/HRE resources into daily professional practice.

Overall, the program's content is structured around a gradual transition from understanding the context of war and the related challenges of integrating children to the practical mastery of methods for fostering democratic interaction within the children's community.

Data Collection Instrument. A structured online anonymous questionnaire was used to collect data.

Reliability of the Research Instrument. An assessment of the instrument's reliability using Cronbach's alpha coefficient indicated sufficient internal consistency among the questionnaire scales. The scale for assessing the relevance of training topics (8 items) demonstrated high reliability ($\alpha = 0.84$). In comparison, the scale for assessing the overall quality and usefulness of the training (4 items) showed acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.74$).

Limitations of the Study. The findings should be interpreted with caution due to potential social desirability bias and the limited representativeness of the sample.

4. Results

Training relevance. To assess prior familiarity with EDC/HRE resources, respondents completed the sentence "Before the training began, I..." by selecting one of the provided options.

The data presented in Figure 1 show that more than half of the respondents (52.7%) were not familiar with EDC/HRE resources before the training began. At the same time, 37.6% of respondents indicated familiarity with the relevant resources but did not use them in their own practice. Only a small proportion of participants (9.7%) reported having actively used EDC/HRE resources previously.

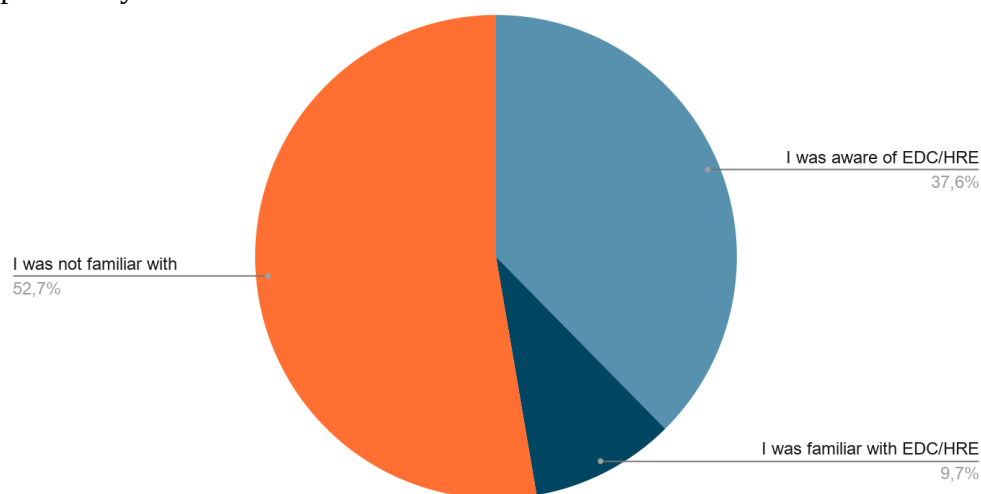


Figure 1. Familiarity with EDC/HRE resources before training, %

Training content. To assess the relevance of the training topics, respondents selected one of the response options (“Very relevant”, “Relevant”, “Not relevant”) for each type of activity.

The data (Figure 2) indicate a consistently high level of perceived relevance across all program components. The proportion of “Very relevant” responses ranged from 53.23% to 72.04%, with the highest value recorded for Session 1, which focused on the social, psychological, and pedagogical aspects of integrating children affected by war (72.04%).

Relatively high values were also observed for Independent Work 1, aimed at deepening participants' understanding of children's needs in wartime conditions and developing teachers' psychological sensitivity (64.52%), as well as for Session 3, which addressed issues related to human rights and children's rights (59.68%).

The proportion of “Relevant” responses ranged from 27.96% to 45.16%, complementing the dominant positive evaluations and confirming the overall alignment of the training content with participants’ professional needs.

At the same time, the proportion of “Not relevant” responses remained minimal and non-systematic. In most cases, it did not exceed 1.61%, was absent for Sessions 1 and 2, and reached its highest value for Session 6, focused on developing interpersonal communication skills and applying EDC/HRE resources in professional practice (4.84%).

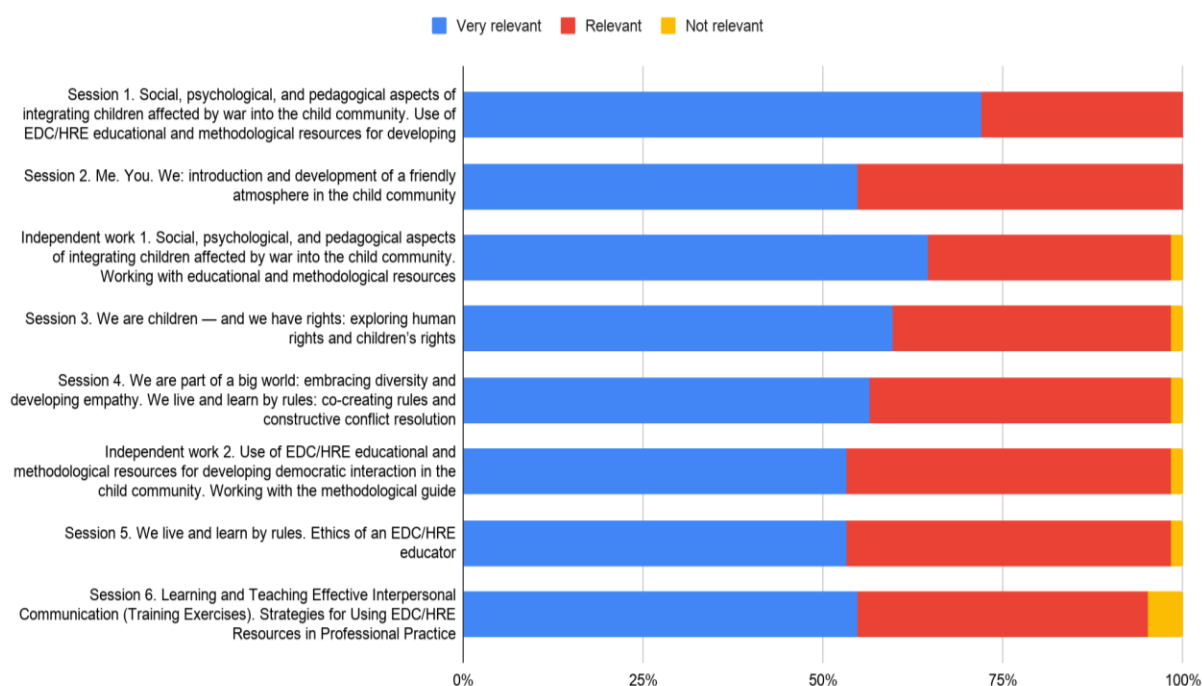


Figure 2. Relevance of training topics, %

To identify the most useful topics, respondents answered an open-ended question about the training content. An analysis of the responses reveals a wide range of content areas.

Most often, participants highlighted the importance of integrating children and youth affected by war, effective interpersonal communication, fostering a friendly atmosphere within the children's community, embracing diversity, developing empathy, and upholding human rights and children's rights. The responses indicate a strong demand for mastering strategies for constructive conflict resolution, preventing bullying, fostering a tolerant educational environment, and

developing a democratic culture of interaction. Separately, respondents emphasise the practical value of training exercises and educational activities, as well as the opportunity to apply educational resources EDC/HRE in their professional practice.

In addition, respondents were asked an open-ended question about topics they believed should be further explored during the training. An analysis of the responses shows that a significant portion of participants do not see a need to expand the content, emphasising its sufficient comprehensiveness and quality.

At the same time, some responses include suggestions for delving deeper into specific areas, particularly topics related to children's mental health in wartime, the specifics of their adaptation and integration into the children's community, and the development of emotional intelligence, stress resilience, and self-regulation. Among other areas proposed for strengthening are interaction with parents and the community, constructive conflict resolution, the development of interpersonal communication, leadership, and cooperation, as well as a deeper understanding of democracy, human rights, children's rights, and the ethics of EDC/HRE teachers.

Training quality. To evaluate participation, engagement, learning conditions, and overall usefulness, respondents used a five-point scale.

The data obtained (Figure 3) show that the highest proportions of top ratings (5 points) were recorded for the overall usefulness of the training (70.97%) and for the conditions for developing practical skills in a remote format (64.52%). The assessment of conditions for using EDC/HRE resources in the in-person format also demonstrates a high level of satisfaction (60.22% – rating of 5). At the same time, participants rate their own activity and engagement somewhat more modestly: the most common rating is 4 (38.71%), while the share of the highest ratings is 25.81%.

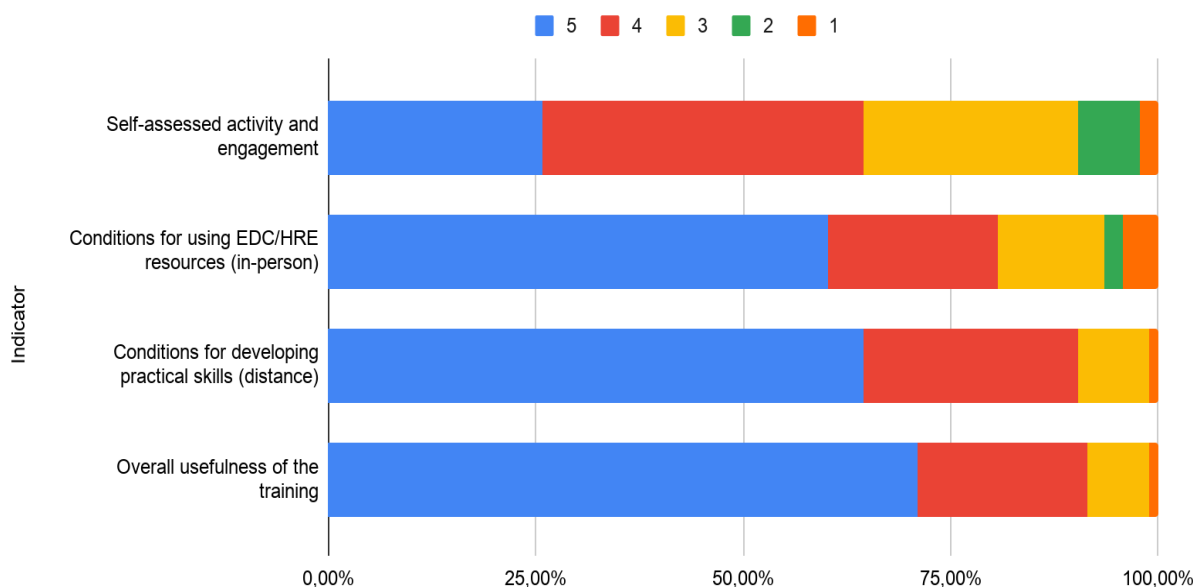


Figure 3. Training quality, %

In addition, respondents reviewed the guide “Becoming Stronger Together” (Hrynova, Karpenko, & Solntseva, 2023) and shared their impressions. An analysis of the responses indicates that the material was generally well-received.

Most participants noted its substantive content, practical focus, accessibility, and logical structure. The responses frequently highlight a range of learning activities, exercises, and

methodological recommendations that can be directly integrated into professional practice. The relevance of the topics is also emphasised, particularly aspects related to the support and integration of children and youth affected by war, as well as the development of communication, empathy, tolerance, and democratic interaction. Separately, respondents note the clear organisation of the material, its conciseness, and the absence of excessive information, which facilitates ease of comprehension and the effectiveness of its subsequent use in pedagogical practice.

Training results. To identify the competencies developed during the training, respondents selected one or more options from a list of competencies for a culture of democracy.

The data (Figure 4) show that participants most frequently reported developing respect for human dignity and human rights (87.1%) and recognising the value of democracy (75.3%). More than half also noted respect (57.0%) and civic awareness (55.9%), while nearly half cited responsibility (47.3%) and self-confidence (40.9%). Competencies related to cognitive and social activities were also commonly reported, including independent learning, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and openness to diversity (26.9–36.6%). The least frequently noted competencies were tolerance of uncertainty (20.4%) and empathy (20.4%).



Figure 4. Development of competencies for a culture of democracy, %

Respondents also answered questions about how they plan to apply the knowledge and skills they gained during the training in working with EDC/HRE resources. An analysis of the responses shows that the vast majority of participants intend to apply their new knowledge in their professional practice, primarily in their work with children.

The most frequently mentioned use involves educational activities and exercises during lessons, educational events, morning meetings, and play-based activities. Separate emphasis is placed on the intention to apply the acquired knowledge to create a friendly and safe educational environment, foster a democratic culture, respect human rights and tolerance, and support constructive conflict resolution and children affected by war. Some of the responses also reflect a willingness to use these resources in extracurricular activities, interactions with parents and colleagues, and everyday life.

5. Discussion

Training relevance. The results (Figure 1) suggest several possible explanations for the limited use of EDC/HRE resources among respondents who reported being aware of them.

In particular, this may be related to the specifics of their educational or professional status, in which respondents have not yet had sufficient opportunities to apply these resources in real or near-real educational settings.

Furthermore, limited experience with EDC/HRE resources may stem from the fact that, during formal teacher training, these resources were not systematically integrated into academic disciplines or practical training. Consequently, respondents had a general awareness of their existence but lacked opportunities to test and reflect on them within the educational process.

Taken together, these results indicate a gap between the declared importance of EDC/HRE and the actual conditions for developing readiness to use these resources.

At the same time, they confirm the need for targeted educational interventions in the form of non-formal teacher education to develop practical readiness to implement EDC/HRE approaches.

Training content. The results (Figure 2) indicate a generally high level of satisfaction with the relevance of the training content. However, the limited use of newly introduced materials in practice, widely noted in international research, may be explained by structural barriers, professional workload, and established pedagogical routines that constrain their implementation despite positive evaluations.

Open-ended responses show that the most significant topics are those aligned with current wartime challenges in educational practice. The strong interest in human rights, democracy, and the use of EDC/HRE resources reflects educators' awareness of their role in shaping democratic culture and students' value orientations.

In this regard, democracy and human rights education require consistency between content and pedagogy, as learning in this field is grounded in participation, dialogue, and shared responsibility rather than in the transmission of knowledge alone. Accordingly, teaching approaches should reflect the values they aim to promote.

The expressed need to strengthen the practical component underscores the importance of further refining training programs to align with current educational challenges.

Training quality. The results (Figure 3) indicate a high level of satisfaction with the training, particularly regarding its practical focus and the development of skills for using EDC/HRE resources.

At the same time, a more moderate self-assessment of participants' own activity may indicate potential for further enhancing interactivity and engaging participants in the work during the events.

It is also worth noting that the level of participant engagement could have been influenced by both external organisational factors (including internet access, the level of digital literacy, and the security situation during wartime) and the specifics of how the training was organised, particularly the facilitation style and the methods used by the trainer to engage participants.

In this context, the guidebook “Becoming Stronger Together” (Hrynova, Karpenko, & Solntseva, 2023) serves as a key component of the training program, ensuring its substantive and methodological coherence.

Training results. The analysis (Figure 4) indicates that the training primarily contributed to the development of the values-based component of competencies for a culture of democracy, particularly those related to human rights, democracy, and respect. At the same time, competencies

associated with self-reflection, emotional intelligence, and coping with uncertainty appear less developed. This may reflect both their initial level and the need to strengthen their targeted development.

At the individual level, further progress in these areas depends on participants' readiness for personal and professional self-development, including reflection on and reconsideration of their own values in the context of future practice.

Open-ended responses indicate participants' orientation toward applying the acquired knowledge in professional contexts, suggesting its potential for transfer into practice. However, the short-term nature of the training limits the possibility of sustained changes in behavioural patterns, which underscores the need for longitudinal research and the use of mixed assessment methods, including observation of practical activities.

At the same time, individual cases of uncertainty or delayed application highlight the need for additional support to facilitate the implementation of acquired competencies.

Overall, these findings should be taken into account in the design of future training programs.

6. Conclusion

A synthesis of the findings generally confirms the effectiveness of non-formal educational practices as a flexible tool for addressing contemporary educational challenges.

Regarding Hypothesis 1. Participation in the non-formal education program helps prepare future teachers to serve as facilitators of democratic interaction.

Regarding Hypothesis 2. The distance-learning format for informal education provides an effective environment for developing future teachers' readiness to organise collaborative student activities in the digital educational space.

Regarding Hypothesis 3. Contextually adapted EDC/HRE programs, tailored to wartime conditions, enhance future teachers' readiness to provide social and psychological support to students.

Thus, integrating EDC/HRE approaches into the digital educational environment through non-formal education practices prepares future educators for professional practice grounded in humanistic and democratic principles and contributes to ensuring the quality of education by developing competencies for a culture of democracy.

At the same time, the effectiveness of such initiatives depends on their systematic alignment with formal teacher education, which determines their potential for sustainable implementation and further dissemination.

This suggests that such programs have the potential to be scaled up in other educational contexts, particularly in countries where access to in-person learning and teachers is limited due to military conflict or other crises, and where formal teacher education needs to be supplemented with flexible, digitally mediated formats.

Further research is needed to examine the long-term impact of such programs and their integration into formal teacher education systems.

Acknowledgments

The author expresses sincere gratitude to the team of the Swiss-Ukrainian project “DECIDE – Decentralisation for the Development of Democratic Education” for their significant contribution to integrating EDC/HRE approaches into the Ukrainian educational space.

The author also expresses appreciation to the Odessa Regional Academy of In-Service Education for its openness to international cooperation in the field of EDC/HRE, which has created favourable conditions for the implementation of relevant educational initiatives and this research.

The author also thanks Professor Emeritus Rolf Gollob (Zurich University of Teacher Education, Switzerland), an expert of the Council of Europe in EDC/HRE, for his ongoing academic dialogue and valuable insights that contributed to the development of this article.

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