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Article

Teachers, Teaching, and Teacher Education in the Public Sphere: A Review of Their Role in Strengthening Democracy

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Abstract:

Education is fundamental to sustaining democratic values and fostering active citizenship within the public sphere. Teachers, as frontline practitioners, and teacher education programs, as essential preparation sites, bear a critical responsibility in cultivating democratic attitudes, skills, and practices. This review explores research trajectories on the role of teachers and teacher education in strengthening democracy, highlighting how educators serve as agents of change, mediators of democratic dialogue, and facilitators of inclusive participation in classrooms and communities. It examines how teacher training can develop democratic dispositions, equip teachers with critical pedagogical approaches, and address social inequality and political polarization. While the theoretical foundations are strong, pedagogical methods reflecting democratic educational principles are not fully understood. This qualitative literature review analyzes techniques used by democratic educators, focusing on inquiry-based, artistic, oral, and student-centered approaches to promote democratic practices. Teachers must consider socio-economic and cultural factors to design effective, engaging learning strategies. The review also discusses beginning teacher preparation, proposing modifications to traditional structures and advocating for partnerships between schools and universities to integrate practice and theory. Schools and classrooms are conceptualized as democratic public arenas where participants pursue understanding for equity and the common good. Collaboration and the public domain are vital aspects of innovative educational practices, fostering democratic principles and civic engagement.

Keywords: Democratic Education, Public Sphere, Teacher Education, Role of Teachers, Teaching Practices, Citizenship and Democracy

1. INTRODUCTION

Teacher education, sometimes referred to as teacher training, encompasses the programmes, policies, practices, and resources designed to prepare prospective teachers for effective work in classrooms, schools, and the wider community. Its aim is not only to develop teachers' knowledge and skills, but also to shape professional attitudes, values, and approaches to practice. Those responsible for this work are commonly known as teacher educators, though in some contexts the term teacher trainers is still used.

There has long been debate over how this field should be described. In the United States, for example, the term teacher training often associated with learning routine tasks that has gradually given way to teacher education, which better reflects the preparation of teachers as reflective professionals rather than technical functionaries. Teacher education is generally understood to include two broad phases: pre-service and in-service education. Ideally, these phases would form a coherent and continuous process. In practice, however, teacher education is more often organised as a series of separate stages.

The first stage focuses on the preparation of new teachers through programmes completed before they assume full responsibility in the classroom. This is followed by induction, which provides structured support and professional

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learning during a teacher's initial years of practice or when they enter a new school. The final stage, commonly referred to as continuing professional development, supports the ongoing growth of teachers who are already established in the profession.

Initial Teacher Education, or preservice teacher training, mostly or only happens at colleges and universities. In Sri Lanka and other nations, there are separate schools called National Colleges of Education that train teachers before they start working, and Teacher Training Colleges that train teachers while they are working. Teacher Centers are other places where instructors can get more training. There are two main ways to structure it. In the consecutive model, a teacher first gets a diploma in teaching or an undergraduate bachelor's degree in one or more subjects. Then, they study for a longer period of time to get another teaching qualification, which could be a post-baccalaureate credential or a master's degree. In the alternative concurrent model, a student studies both one or more academic courses and how to teach those subjects at the same time. This leads to a bachelor's degree and a teaching credential that allow them to teach that subject. There are other ways to get there as well. In several nations, individuals may obtain teacher training by working in a school under the supervision of a qualified and seasoned practitioner. In many cultures, there is a lot of disagreement on what teachers should know, how they should act, what methods they should use, and what talents they should have. This makes sense because teachers are responsible for passing on society's beliefs, attitudes, and morals to students, as well as information, advice, and wisdom. They also help students learn the important knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours they will need to be active in society and the economy.

> *"The harmful practice of excessive teacher transfers will be halted, so that students have continuity in their role models and educational environments. Transfers will occur in very special circumstances, as suitably laid down in a structured manner by State/UT governments. Furthermore, transfers will be conducted through an online computerized system that ensures transparency" (Nep2020, para 5.3).*

All B.Ed. All B.Ed. programmes are expected to combine established teaching practices with emerging approaches to learning. This includes preparing teachers to develop foundational literacy skills, teach across different grade levels, assess student learning, and support learners with disabilities as well as those with special interests or talents. Programmes will also emphasise the effective use of technology, learner-centred pedagogy, and collaborative forms of learning. Recent studies emphasize the importance of digital competence frameworks in teacher education, which align with NEP 2020's focus on technology integration and inclusive, equitable education (Asagar, 2025; Kaur & Kaur, 2024). A strong practical component will be central to all B.Ed. programmes, with extensive hands-on experience gained through teaching placements in local schools. In addition, teacher education will emphasise the importance of upholding the Fundamental Duties outlined in Article 51A of the Indian Constitution, along with broader constitutional values, across all teaching and learning activities. Environmental awareness, conservation, and sustainable development will be meaningfully integrated, positioning environmental education as a core element of school curricula (NEP 2020, para. 5.24).

2. TEACHER EDUCATION

Teacher education is essential for cultivating a cadre of educators who will influence future generations. Preparing teachers is a process that involves learning from different fields, developing beliefs and attitudes, and practicing with the finest mentors. Teachers need to know a lot about Indian beliefs, languages, knowledge, ethos, and traditions, particularly tribal traditions. They also need to know a lot about the newest developments in education and pedagogy. The Supreme Court's Justice J. S. Verma Commission (2012) says that most stand-alone TEIs more than 10,000 aren't really trying to provide serious teacher education; they're just selling degrees for a fee. Regulatory efforts so far have neither been able to stop the bad things that happen in the system, nor set minimum requirements for quality. In fact, they have made it harder for the sector to expand in terms of excellence and innovation. To increase standards and bring back integrity, credibility, effectiveness, and high quality to the teacher education system, the industry and its regulatory framework need to be completely overhauled right away.

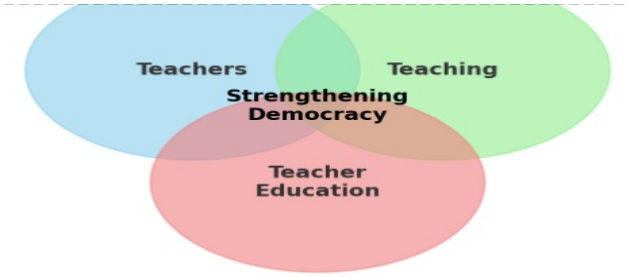

Figure 1: *Public sphere & Democracy*

2.1. Teachers in the Public Sphere

Teachers are not only classroom instructors but also participants in shaping public dialogue. Their work influences how young people learn to think critically, engage in debate, and act as citizens in a democracy. Teachers model values like fairness, inclusivity, and respect—qualities essential for the public sphere.

2.2. Teaching in the Public Sphere

Teaching is more than delivering knowledge; it is a communicative practice that connects classroom learning with wider social issues. Through dialogue, participatory pedagogy, and addressing real-world problems, teaching becomes a form of democratic engagement.

2.3. Teacher Education in the Public Sphere

Teacher education prepares future teachers to understand their role not only in schools but also in society. It equips them with democratic dispositions, reflective skills, and the ability to engage with social, cultural, and political contexts. Viewing teacher education as part of the public sphere links professional preparation with larger democratic goals.

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This review contributes to the existing body of knowledge by integrating the roles of teachers, teaching practices, and teacher education within the broader framework of the public sphere and democracy. While previous studies have largely examined these dimensions in isolation, this paper highlights their interconnectedness and collective impact on strengthening democratic culture. By applying Habermasian and contemporary perspectives on the public sphere, the study emphasizes how classroom practices, professional preparation, and the agency of teachers are embedded in wider social, cultural, and political contexts. The review not only synthesizes classic and recent scholarship but also identifies gaps such as the lack of comparative, longitudinal, and practice-oriented research. In doing so, it provides a comprehensive understanding of how teacher education can serve as a bridge between educational practice and democratic participation, while offering insights for teacher educators, policymakers, and researchers to enhance the democratic potential of education.

> *"All B.Ed. programmes will include training in time-tested as well as the most recent techniques in pedagogy, including pedagogy with respect to foundational literacy and numeracy, multi-level teaching and evaluation, teaching children with disabilities, teaching children with special interests or talents, use of educational technology, and learner-centered and collaborative learning. All B.Ed. programmes will include strong practicum training in the form of in-classroom teaching at local schools. All B.Ed. programmes will also emphasize the practice of the Fundamental Duties (Article 51A) of the Indian Constitution along with other Constitutional provisions while teaching any subject or performing any activity. It will also appropriately integrate environmental awareness and sensitivity towards its conservation and sustainable development, so that environment education becomes an integral part of school curricula (Nep 2020 para 5.24)"*

2.4. Teacher education in Australia

Australia, one of the world's wealthiest countries, is progressing towards most young people completing thirteen years of schooling. While primary schools focus on broad language development, the purpose of secondary education remains unsettled. With around 75% of students completing the final year, debate continues over whether secondary schools should primarily prepare students for employment or university. The curriculum increasingly reflects a split between academic and vocational pathways, with limited emphasis on a broad liberal education in the Deweyan sense. Teacher preparation is managed by universities through four-year programs combining discipline and educational studies, followed by registration with state authorities (e.g., VIT, 2006). As schooling is a state responsibility, curriculum is shaped by policy frameworks but leaves teachers scope for professional judgement. Traditionally, both primary and secondary curricula are organised around eight Key Learning Areas (KLAs), though many states are shifting towards more flexible structures. Consequently, teacher education programs must prepare graduates to understand diverse approaches to curriculum design and to adapt teaching to the varied learning needs of students.

After World War II, secondary schooling in Australia expanded rapidly as part of post-war reconstruction. The 1960s and 1970s shifted towards school-based curriculum development, granting teachers more autonomy. Since the mid-1980s, however, tensions have emerged between teachers' professional rights to shape learning and political moves to centralise curriculum, reflecting broader economic pressures for efficiency and criticism of the public sector. As a result, new teachers often face complex political, educational, and cultural challenges, making the practicum especially significant.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a series of Federal Government reports raised growing concerns about the quality of teacher preparation, pointing in particular to weaknesses in the structure, duration, content, and resourcing of pre-service education (Dawkins, 1988; Schools Council, 1990; NBEET, 1990a). Although these reviews called for closer collaboration between the key players in teacher education, they stopped short of strongly advocating for fully developed school–university partnerships. Where partnerships were discussed, they were often characterised as limited and superficial, shaped by an ongoing reluctance among institutions and authorities to relinquish control (NBEET, 1990b).

The form of collaboration at issue here goes beyond the day-to-day delivery of programs in schools and universities. Instead, it concerns shared responsibility for coordination, decision-making, and the broader direction of teacher education. Unsurprisingly, this has proven to be a sensitive area. Universities are autonomous and accountable for their own programs, schools operate within state policy frameworks, and employing authorities are driven by workforce planning, recruitment needs, and curriculum priorities. Registration bodies and professional associations further complicate the landscape, as they too have a strong stake in how cooperative arrangements are shaped and governed.

2.5. Educational public spheres

German social theorist Jürgen Habermas (1992) argues that democratic life is sustained through a network of associations across society that provide spaces for citizens to come together and deliberate on issues of shared concern. While these forums do not function as formal decision-making bodies like parliaments or local councils, they play a crucial role in shaping informed, reasoned public opinion. Of course, this kind of group may not agree with the conclusions of formal entities, and in some cases, it may even foster debate that would be hard or illegal otherwise. Habermas said that the coffee houses in London and Paris in the 1600s were locations where people could have these kinds of democratic debates. In countries like Australia today, we may look to trade unions, local neighborhood groups, environmental groups, women's groups, and schools and universities as examples of public spheres. Eriksen and Weigard (2003, p. 179) say that the term "public sphere" means that equal citizens come together in

public and define their own agenda through free discussion. This public realm is defined by its lack of power, its secular nature, and its rationality.

Fraser (1992), in critiquing Habermas, highlighted issues of power and exclusion in the public sphere, particularly the marginalisation of women. She proposed that disadvantaged groups could create alternative public spheres to challenge dominant discourses. This is evident in studies of marginalized adolescent girls in India, whose educational challenges reveal systemic exclusion and the need for alternative, empowering public spheres within education (Khullar, 2024). This raises the question of whether Habermas's model is outdated or can be adapted to support participatory political life. Distinctions between roles and identities are especially complex in contexts such as trade union meetings, where power dynamics shape participation, compared with more informal political discussions.

Kemmis (2001) explains that there is not a single public sphere, but multiple ones constituted as networks of communication. Building on Habermas, Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) identify ten key features of public spheres: they are autonomous, voluntary, inclusive networks of communication; formed in response to legitimation deficits; grounded in ordinary language, communicative freedom, and mutual respect; and they generate indirect influence on public systems through social networks. For teacher education, these characteristics highlight the importance of non-coercive dialogue, autonomy, and the role of communication in professional learning. Conceptualizing pre-service teachers' work within public spheres situates classroom and school issues within broader social, economic, and cultural contexts. In this way, teacher education becomes both a site of discourse and a bridge linking educational practice with wider democratic and societal concerns.



Figure 2: *Educational public sphere*

Not all teacher education programs fully integrate these discourses, nor is it their purpose to deliver fixed conclusions. Instead, public spheres generate ideas that can inform practice, aligning with Habermas's notion of communicative action guiding strategic action. Such ideas must emerge from engagement with social and educational realities, reflecting the range of discourses within society. What matters for teachers is having a framework that connects classroom challenges with the broader social context, enabling their teaching strategies to evolve in dialogue with the socio-cultural lives of children.

3. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Democracy is not sustained only through political institutions but also through the everyday practices of citizens, and education plays a central role in nurturing democratic values. Teachers and teacher education programs are key agents in shaping how individuals learn about participation, equality, dialogue, and social justice. The classroom can function as a microcosm of democracy where students' voices are heard, critical thinking is encouraged, and collective decision-making is practiced.

This study is rationalized by the need to explore how teachers, their pedagogical practices, and the training they receive contribute to strengthening democracy in the public sphere. In times when democratic values are increasingly challenged, the role of education becomes more significant than ever. Reviewing the role of teachers and teacher education not only highlights their responsibility in promoting civic engagement but also provides insights for improving teacher preparation programs. Therefore, the study is important as it bridges the connection between education and democracy, emphasizing that teachers are not only knowledge transmitters but also nation-builders who can foster democratic culture, critical citizenship, and social responsibility among learners.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To review existing literature on the role of teachers, teaching practices, and teacher education in promoting democratic values and participation in the public sphere.
2. To examine how teachers function as agents of democracy through classroom practices, pedagogy, and professional roles.
3. To analyze the contribution of teacher education programs in preparing teachers for democratic engagement and social responsibility.

5. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do teachers contribute to strengthening democracy within the public sphere through their teaching practices?
2. In what ways do teaching methods and pedagogical approaches promote democratic values such as participation, inclusivity, and critical thinking?

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6. LITERATURE REVIEW TABLE DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Author & Year	Focus of Study	Key Findings	Identified Gaps
Dewey (1916)	Education and democracy	Education is central to democratic life; teachers shape democratic participation	Classic theoretical view, less focus on modern teacher education
Giroux (1997)	Critical pedagogy and democracy	Teachers as transformative intellectuals promoting social justice	Limited practical strategies for classroom implementation
Apple (2004)	Curriculum and democracy	Curriculum reflects power structures; teachers can resist undemocratic practices	More empirical research needed on classroom practices
Zeichner (2010)	Teacher education and social justice	Teacher education must prepare teachers for diversity and democratic values	Lacks large-scale studies across different contexts
Biesta (2011)	Role of teachers in democratic education	Teachers must encourage participation, responsibility, and dialogue	More evidence on teacher preparation practices needed
Cochran-Smith (2012)	Teacher education for equity and democracy	Teacher preparation linked with inclusive, democratic teaching practices	Few longitudinal studies of teacher development
Hess & McAvoy (2015)	Teaching controversial issues in classrooms	Democratic teaching requires open discussion of social/political issues	Need strategies for handling resistance in polarized societies
Carr & Hartnett (2020)	Teacher education and public good	Teachers play vital role in sustaining democratic culture through education	Comparative international studies still limited
Wadham et al. (2024)	Democratic identity in classroom practices	Provides a synthesis of how teachers express democratic identities in classrooms; offers insights into translating democratic theory into practice ERIC.	Needs further empirical validation; limited to specific contexts.
Cohen (2025)	Student-teachers' experience with civic education in teacher education courses	Explores how pre-service teachers perceive civic education practices across six courses; highlights their engagement and challenges in such contexts Taylor & Francis Online.	Requires broader and longitudinal investigation to generalize findings.
Teegelbeckers (2025)	Classroom practices supporting democracy	Identifies six practical strategies e.g., embedding democratic values, offering multiple perspectives, and encouraging solution-oriented thinking ScienceDirect.	Need to assess applicability across varied educational settings.
Magerøy (2023)	Democracy perceptions among teacher educators and pre-service teachers in Norway	Found that democracy is often understood structurally, with limited practical participatory implications such as decision-making or student assemblies Frontiers.	Reveals a disconnect between democratic ideals in curricula and actual practice.

Our search was limited to ERIC and Scopus, which we acknowledge narrowed the research pool. However, given our focus on a specific theoretical framework, this limitation was expected and considered sufficient. Since our interest was in educational practice, other disciplinary databases (e.g., APA PsycInfo or Social Science Collection) were unlikely to yield additional relevant work, and any cross-disciplinary studies would likely appear in Scopus.

Classroom management refers to organizing and regulating classroom activities and decision-making, which can be teacher-, student-, or co-regulated (Freiberg & Lamb, 2009; Schuitema et al., 2018). When students feel their voices are heard in such "micro-democratic" processes, it supports their political and democratic growth (Fielding, 2011; Lewis & Burman, 2008). Research further shows that school climates allowing student influence in decision-making

foster political interest, involvement, and participation (Claes & Hooghe, 2017; Lenzi et al., 2014; Quintelier & Hooghe, 2013).

7. COLLECTING DATA

We reviewed each article and chapter, extracting words or phrases related to pedagogy, methods, or activities, and compiled them into a spreadsheet. For example, we extracted expressions such as "literature circle," "research," and "brainstorming." We also extracted words that expressed an object, tool, or technology used in implementing pedagogy. In this category, expressions such as "journal," "news article," and "poll" were identified. Lastly, we extracted words that expressed the context of how the pedagogy was implemented. Here words such as "small group," "pair," and "interactive" were collected. We believe that these three areas of linguistic expression captured a range of methods, activities, and assessments that teachers can use as core aspects of their democratic pedagogy.

8. CONCLUSION

This review underscores the critical role of teachers, teaching practices, and teacher education in sustaining and strengthening democracy through the public sphere. Teachers act as agents of democratic culture, while teaching serves as a communicative practice that fosters dialogue, inclusivity, and critical thinking. Teacher education, in turn, equips future educators with the dispositions and skills needed to connect classroom realities with wider social and political contexts. Together, these dimensions highlight that education cannot be detached from democracy, as classrooms mirror the challenges and aspirations of society. By synthesizing existing literature and identifying gaps, this paper reaffirms the transformative potential of teacher education and calls for renewed efforts by educators, policymakers, and researchers to advance democratic engagement through teaching and learning.

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Author(s) Contribution

All the Author(s) work equally to prepare the manuscript.

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I am used QuillBot and Grammarly to refine the language.

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Availability of Data and Materials

The data available at the request of the author.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Clinical Trial Registration (if applicable)

Not Applicable

Human Ethics and Consent to Participate

The study did not involve any clinical interventions or experiments requiring formal ethical approval.

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