


Research

Norwegian pre-service teachers' understanding of reflective rehearsals and democratic citizenship education: opportunities and challenges

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Abstract

Implementing democratic citizenship across disciplines in education requires careful consideration of how pre-service teachers are prepared to translate this concept into classroom practice. This study investigates Norwegian pre-service teachers' understanding of reflective rehearsals as a model in teacher education for enhancing awareness of democratic citizenship education. Findings from focus group interviews with 24 participants reveal some opportunities offered by reflective rehearsals as a model for bridging theory and practice in teacher education. Reflective rehearsals are understood as a safe space for making fruitful errors, attempting change and developing professional judgement. Pre-service teachers express an increasing sense of ownership over their formation as becoming teachers. However, certain challenges are also discussed. Firstly, understanding democratic citizenship primarily as individual knowledge is problematic in teacher education, as it may separate pre-service teachers' knowledge from their experience. Secondly, explicit dialogue concerning the connection between practice and educational purposes is needed. This article argues that reflective rehearsals could become a foundation for exploring the intersection of practice, theory and purpose, if this connection is made explicit and framed critically in teacher education.

Keywords Teaching · Education · Reflection · Rehearsing · Democracy · Citizenship

1 Introduction

The Norwegian core-curriculum highlights democracy and citizenship as one of the three interdisciplinary themes for primary and secondary education [71]. The educational democratic mandate can be understood both in terms of an economic societal advantage, as intellectual capital, and as a socialization process intertwined with cultivating humanity and justice [49]. Unlike “education for democratic citizenship” this study emphasizes “democratic citizenship education”. While these terms often share meaning and content, the former alternative implicitly positions democratic citizenship as occurring after education. Using the term “democratic citizenship education” underscores that democratic citizenship is viewed as integral to educational practice, not merely a post-educational goal. The difference lies in regarding students as *in-process* or *de facto* democratic citizens [6, 77]. Positioned within what Schugurensky and Myers [78] label a progressive orientation, democratic citizenship education refers to social interactions based on principles of social justice,

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equality and active participation. Citizens' main task is thereby to further democratize our imperfect democracies and act to foster social justice.

Recently the research project *Rehearsing Teaching Professionally* (ReTPro) implemented systematic rehearsals in teacher education emphasizing reflective practice and professional development for all actors. This study aims to investigate how reflective rehearsals can contribute to developing awareness of democratic citizenship education amongst pre-service teachers. The research question for this study is: *How do pre-service teachers express their understanding of reflective rehearsals in teacher education as a model for enhancing awareness regarding democratic citizenship education?*

Conducting focus group interviews with pre-service teachers in this context is important for several reasons. Firstly, Norwegian policy emphasizes democratic citizenship as integral to educational practice; however, there is limited research on how teacher education prepares future teachers for this purpose. Understanding how pre-service teachers perceive and engage with democratic citizenship education is essential for aligning practice with this purpose. Secondly, initiatives like the ReTPro project highlight the importance of reflective practice and professional development in teacher education. Qualitative focus group interviews can provide insight into how such models influence pre-service teachers' understanding of democratic citizenship education, aiding in refining pedagogical approaches. Lastly, interviews can elucidate how pre-service teachers perceive and integrate these multifaceted aspects into their educational practices, fostering a more comprehensive understanding of democratic citizenship education.

Norwegian teacher educators continuously struggle to better prepare pre-service teachers for what a democratic orientation means for educational theory and practice [10]. In line with other educational researchers [1, 19, 20, 68, 69, 90] I argue that a possible way forward is to define democratic citizenship as encompassing more than civic rights; it is equally concerned with civil responsibility, participation, emancipation, practices and values as fundamental for our coexistence. This study emphasizes that understanding democratic citizenship as individual knowledge can restrict pre-service teachers in connecting democratic citizenship to their experiences of educational practice.

1.1 Context: reflective rehearsals in teacher education

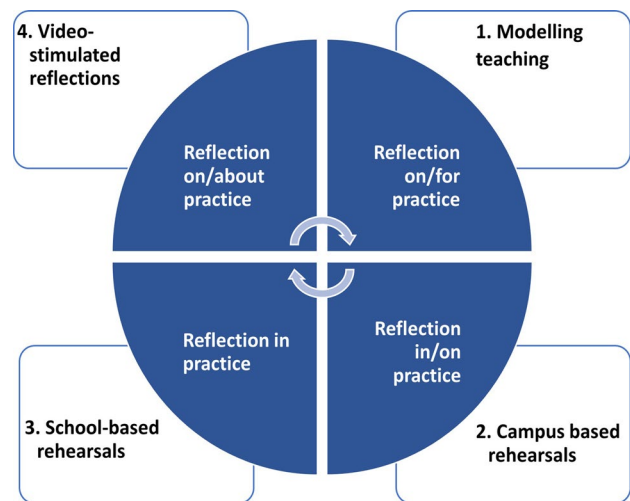
In teacher education one of the primary objectives is to equip pre-service teachers for continuous professional development as career-long learners [55]. Korthagen et al. [55] emphasize learning from experience as crucial for continuous professional development after teacher education. Teacher education has faced criticism for perceived gaps between theory and practice [45, 53, 59]. Research has argued that rehearsing teaching can enhance practice-centered education and facilitate the integration of theory and practice [3, 41]. Regarding preparation for democratic citizenship education, a dilemma arises: balancing "how to teach" with fostering autonomous professional judgment. Loughran [65] argues that teacher educators should allow pre-service teachers to grapple with uncertainty; simultaneously, this study acknowledges pre-service teachers' need for some explicit guidance regarding democratic citizenship education.

This study is one of three sub-studies in a PhD project researching the ReTPro project's implementation of rehearsal cycles in a Norwegian teacher education program. The PhD project is connected to the over-arching ReTPro project, but the PhD project has a distinct focus on pre-service teachers and democratic citizenship education. Rehearsal cycles were developed and implemented in the ReTPro project before this study took place. The ReTPro Cycle (Fig. 1) is inspired by the learning cycle introduced by McDonald et al. [66] and reflective practice [62]. Collaborating with local schools, ReTPro involves researchers, teacher educators, and practicum teachers who facilitate practicum periods for pre-service teachers throughout their five-year program. With funding from the Norwegian Research Council ReTPro has extended the existing collaboration between campus and local practicum schools by providing additional resources for practicum teachers and teacher educators involved in the project to attend additional meetings and lectures, form new ideas, discuss and plan rehearsals together and form a collective focus through rehearsal cycles. Practicum teachers, teacher educators and researchers in ReTPro have collaborated in the work of evaluating, adjusting and improving the cycle.

The ReTPro Cycle (Fig. 1) integrates pre-designed and open-designed activities targeting core teaching practices [38]. Rooted in the notion of "approximations of practice", this approach offers "opportunities to rehearse and enact discrete components of complex practice in settings of reduced complexity" [40]. Reflective practice serves as a fundamental element across all phases, facilitating adjustment and growth [62].

Each cycle focuses on a specific activity wherein a core practice is introduced, deconstructed and modelled (demonstrated) by educators together with pre-service teachers (phase 1). Subsequently, pre-service teachers adjust and rehearse this practice on campus with feedback from peers and educators (phase 2), before transitioning to school settings to rehearse again with pupils (phase 3). The fourth phase of the cycle entails collective reflection involving practicum teachers, teacher educators, and pre-service teachers, who utilize video recordings of the rehearsals as a

Fig. 1 The ReTPro Cycle: Teacher education cycle of enactment and investigation



basis for discussion. Research has found the use of video valuable for supporting collective analysis, reflection and professional development in teacher education [74]. Throughout a semester, pre-service teachers participate in 4–5 cycles in the subject of mathematics and English as a foreign language, enabling them to rehearse diverse teaching approaches.

1.2 Research background: the challenges of democratic citizenship education

Since the early twenty-first century, scholars have highlighted the importance of democratic citizenship education within teacher education and school practices [4, 9, 33]. Michelli et al. [69] emphasize that educating for democracy means preparation for seeing the problematic and acting on it. This is a normative position, which contrasts an instrumental view of educational purpose solely focused on the transmission of knowledge. A challenge that arises within this position is that the meaning of democratic citizenship is interpreted differently. This is emphasized by Sant [77] who presents eight versions of democratic education associated with political discourses, philosophical principles and educational practices. Schugurensky and Wolhuter [79] also point to tensions within citizenship education, for instance whether the aim is to maintain the status quo or promote change and if its focus should be on the national or global context.

The Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research [71] has prioritized democracy and citizenship both as a core value, a purpose of education and as an interdisciplinary topic in education. This is evidenced by NOU [73] and subsequent curriculum revisions. However, the problem of clearly defining what this means is evident in Norwegian educational policy as the core-curriculum can be critiqued for lacking both critical and transformative dimensions and a global perspective [18]. Michelli [68] identifies two prerequisites for democracy as an educational goal: First, public education must actively embody democratic principles, moving beyond mere rhetoric. Second, teacher education programs must be scrutinized to ensure teachers are adequately prepared for this task.

While several Norwegian studies have addressed the first prerequisite, focusing on school practice [17, 51, 83, 85, 86, 88], the second prerequisite regarding teacher education has received less attention. In a systematic review of Nordic research from 2010–2020 Forsström and Munthe [36] identified only eight publications from Norway specifically addressing democracy and/or citizenship in teacher education for elementary and secondary schools. Past studies reveal that pre-service teachers often struggle to grasp the complexity of democratic citizenship education and demonstrate a “thin” understanding of democracy [11, 35, 92]. Biseth et al. [12] conclude that while pre-service teachers value interdisciplinary understood as knowledge of how to use methods of problem-solving across disciplines relating to democracy and citizenship, they report limited exposure to it during teacher education.

Given persisting challenges in teacher education regarding democratic citizenship education, this study seeks to investigate pre-service teachers’ expressed connection between a recent implementation of a rehearsal-based model for teacher education and their understanding of democratic citizenship education.

2 Theoretical framework

The theoretical underpinnings of democratic citizenship in education can be traced back to the work of Dewey [25], which progressed through his discussion with Walter Lippmann and other scholars. For Lippmann [64], the ideal of democracy was unattainable because the masses of citizens could not grasp its intricacies and could therefore not be entrusted with governing and decision-making. This viewpoint is bolstered by the “ignorance objection” and is linked to debating whether epistocracy or democracy is the preferable option, dating back to Plato’s critical arguments against democracy [93]. Dewey concurred with Lippmann on “the democratic problem”, but believed that Lippmann’s proposed solution, a technocratic system led by experts as advisors, would create a more significant issue. Specifically, Dewey argued that the very assertion that the public lacked rationality would render them even less capable of following the instructions of intellectuals [26]. And where should one find intellectual experts, Dewey argued, if not among the masses? Education therefore became the sole way to encounter the democratic problem.

In *The Child and the Curriculum* [28] Dewey replaces two contrasting pedagogical standpoints. Dewey rejects the idea that the subject matter should be emphasized at the expense of a child’s individuality and vice versa. Dividing these aspects into opposing viewpoints transformed a “truly serious problem—that of interaction” into an “unreal and hence unsolvable theoretical problem” [28]. He proposes a collective orientation that is not exclusive of individuality, but rather facilitates for a possibility for interaction between individuals. Dewey [25] defines democracy as a way of life shaped by shared, communicative experiences. He contends that the individualism traditionally associated with democracy renders equality quantitative and individuality something external and mechanistic rather than qualitative and unique [29].

In relation to this study democratic citizenship is not regarded as restricted to individual knowledge but rather includes a collective practice which could take place in reflective rehearsals. In the Norwegian core curriculum, democracy as an interdisciplinary topic, is primarily conveyed in individual terms [47]. However, I argue in this study that a collective understanding of the concept is essential to address the challenges associated with it. This implies an extension beyond what is referred to as a minimalist conception of citizenship [50] which solely focuses on educating politically informed citizens. Instead of viewing our dispositions and habits as accommodated to institutions, Dewey [24] argues that political institutions can be considered projectors or expressions of dominant habits and attitudes. In this study democratic citizenship education therefore concerns a link between the societal and the social self. While significant, Dewey’s contributions are not fully adequate to address the critical and transformative dimensions of democratic citizenship education which will be emphasized in the following sections.

2.1 Critical dimensions of democratic citizenship education

Arising from the Frankfurt School, critical theory has emphasized democratic citizenship education as a pursuit of social transformation, emancipation and social justice [34, 90]. Several scholars have conceptualized the critical approach towards democratic citizenship education. Carr’s [19, 20] differentiation between “thin” and “thick” democracy makes an influential contribution. The thin paradigm is primarily concerned with electoral processes, formal structures and political parties and often related to choice, individualism and maintaining status quo [19, 77]. The thick paradigm resides in power relations, identity and social change which embed critical engagement and problematization of pre-defined, traditional and national definitions of “a good citizen” [19]. Similarly, Andreotti [1] positions critical citizenship education in relation to soft citizenship education, where the critical dimension emphasizes critical scrutiny of ourselves and our traditions.

Critical theorists have been criticized for pre-defining what counts as critical thoughts and subsequently falling into their own trap of imposing pre-defined truths on others [77]. Still, critical theory has contributed to a clearer definition of the purpose of democratic citizenship education. While Dewey [29] points to democracy as an incomplete world in the making, he provides no further elaborations on how to promote a more just society. Critical theory specifies an educational responsibility and encourages educators to problematize existing structures of domination through education fostering active resistance and critical judgement [77, 90].

The critical dimension influences this study as it extends and specifies the purpose of democratic citizenship education. While a Dewian perspective of democracy as a way of life connects democracy to social practice and education, critical theory specifies a distinct purpose for democratic citizenship education, emphasizing a social

justice orientation [91, 96]. A critical dimension of democratic citizenship is coherent with, and not excluding of, a collective and social orientation. Veugelers [90] explains this by differentiating between individualistic citizenship and critical-democratic citizenship. Critical-democratic citizenship here emphasizes social awareness and reflection [90].

Reflective rehearsals in teacher education could be of relevance for developing pre-service teachers' awareness of democratic citizenship education. Through reflective rehearsals, one could position democratic citizenship education as a critical and social practice. The following section will explore the relationship between reflection and democratic citizenship education.

2.2 Reflective thinking and reflective practice in education

Reflection has been highlighted as crucial for developing teacher identity, professional behavior and growth competence in teacher education [54, 56]. Reflective thinking, according to Dewey [32], is fundamentally social, as solitary existence restricts opportunities for reflection. It encompasses both cognitive processes and values such as curiosity, communication, empathy, open-mindedness, patience, self-awareness, and willingness to experiment [25, 27]. He underscores the contextual element of thinking and its inseparability from experience, stating that meaningful experience inherently involves thinking, with reflection making transformed intuitions explicit [30]. Experience and reflection are seen as necessary for developing in new directions [31].

Schön, building on Dewey's theory, argues that teachers, in some cases, develop standard solutions unconsciously to experienced problems, which can stagnate their professional development [81]. He demonstrates how reflective practice is connected to learning from experience. Reflection-in-action, as described by Schön [80], involves an element of confusion and adjustment in uncertain situations to generate new understanding and change. This resonates with Biesta's [8] notion of thoughtful "on-the-spot" decision making. Reflection-on-action, according to Schön, involves evaluating knowledge-in-action retrospectively [80]. This form of reflection is evident in the ALACT model [56], which describes the reflection process through the steps of action, looking back, gaining awareness, creating alternatives and trying them out in practice.

Drawing on Dewey's social view of reflective thinking and Schön's and Biesta's focus on practical aspects, this study advocates a collective approach to reflection in education. Reflective rehearsals highlight a collective and social understanding of educational practice through sharing one's individual reflection in a community. Through rehearsal cycles, teacher education could utilize different forms of reflection for fostering awareness of democratic citizenship education. However, reflection while teaching and after teaching may not be sufficient when dealing with the critical dimension of democratic citizenship education, as this demands developing a critical stance and awareness of how societal structures of power influence teaching [1]. Integrating reflection-*about*-action [62, 95] as a means for teachers to reflect on the social, political, and economical context that surrounds teaching, learning and schools could further enhance pre-service teachers' awareness of democratic citizenship education and its purpose.

3 Methodical approach

3.1 Participants and data sample

This study analyzes two focus group interviews with a total of 24 pre-service teachers, aligned with the research question concerning pre-service teachers' perspectives. The focus group interviews were conducted in May 2022. The participants had almost completed their first year of teacher education and had been involved in the ReTPro project for 9 months at that time. They had experiences from rehearsal cycles in Mathematics and English, the two courses within this teacher education program that had integrated rehearsal cycles as a part of the ReTPro project. These courses completed 2–3 cycles per semester each, going through the four phases, as described in Sect. 1.1. These phases entailed an introduction to and modelling of a teaching activity by teacher educators or practicum teachers, rehearsals with co-students on the university campus, subsequent rehearsals in practicum schools, and a joint reflective conversation with teacher educators and practicum teachers. The participants knew each other from attending the same courses.

Throughout these cycles, the pre-service teachers had also completed written exams and mandatory assignments, such as analyzing video recordings of their own rehearsals, writing reflective notes, and identifying "golden moments" used and lost. Since the rehearsal cycles had only been implemented systematically in this teacher education program for one year at that time, there was a limited number of pre-service teachers who had participated in the rehearsals. These 24

pre-service teachers were all asked to participate in focus group interviews, as they had experiences with the reflective rehearsals throughout their first year of teacher education. They all gave their informed consent to participate, and the sampling therefore relates to a “comprehensive representation” [48, 70] of pre-service teachers in ReTPro’s rehearsal cycles.

3.2 Focus group interviews

Focus group interviews were chosen because they can be an ideal method for examining human experiences, expressions and opinions [52]. Participants, in a group setting, can express themselves through interaction and build upon each other’s contributions [13]. This can highlight differences of opinions, agreements, nuances, and new insights among participants. The focus-group interviews were based on a semi-structured interview guide [57], where three main topics were emphasized: (1) The use of ReTPro’s cycles, (2) Reflective rehearsals, and (3) Democratic citizenship education. The aim was to let the participants steer the conversation freely around these topics, similarly to what Hays and Singh refer to as a “guided conversation” [48]. A semi-structured approach with open-ended questions was chosen as it may produce fuller and deeper responses [75]. Open-ended questions can support the construction of a situation that protects the participants’ integrity, which is central when interviewing [57]. The risk of social desirability bias [75] is always to be considered when conducting focus group interviews. Asking open questions could help reduce the risk that the participants’ expressions reflect a desire to provide a “correct” answer, thereby strengthening the quality of the data [2].

The two focus group interviews, lasting 65 min each, were conducted inside “the rehearsal room”. This room is located on the university campus, with built-in microphones and video recording equipment in the ceiling. The rehearsal room has been used by pre-service teachers when they rehearsed teaching on campus. Since recordings can be a disturbance to the conversation [75], it was helpful that the equipment was built-in and that participants were used to expressing themselves in this room. I conducted these focus group interviews as a PhD candidate together with a professor in the ReTPro project. Neither of us had been involved as educators for these pre-service teachers, which we hoped contributed to the pre-service teachers expressing themselves freely. If, and when, the conversation between the participants paused, we asked follow-up or new questions to prompt further discussion, clarify points, or provide examples. As emphasized by Rubin and Rubin, follow-up questions can strengthen the richness and quality of data and reduce misunderstandings [76].

3.3 Analysis

The process of analysis followed an abductive approach, influenced by the hermeneutical emphasis on interpretation [37], reflexive thematic analysis [15] and the six-phase process of thematic analysis [14, 16]. This resonates with the priority of reflexivity in analysis and the opportunity for subjective and reflexive construction of meaning, described as a “thought-out adventure” [15]. It embraces qualitative research within criteria of trustworthiness, ethical awareness and reflexivity as primary aims, rather than seeking “truth” in a traditional sense of reliability [16, 57]. As underscored by Byrne, reflexive thematic analysis involves interpretation at the intersection of the dataset, underlying theoretical assumptions, and the analytical resources of the researcher; therefore, each researcher is expected to produce different codes and themes [16]. The analysis in this study, conducted by the author, is thus a construction influenced by my identity and positionality within educational research.

Transcription was conducted using the professional Norwegian transcribing service “Totaltekst”. The material, which totaled 76 pages, was subsequently reviewed in accordance with the interview recordings to ensure it reflected my interpretation of nonverbal cues such as frustration, laughter, emphasis, pauses, and contextual information [60]. The process of analysis also included in-depth reading before the transcribed material was initially coded in NVivo. Open coding was chosen instead of coding the data to fit a pre-existing coding frame. This choice was grounded in the aim of better representing the meaning as communicated by the participants [22]. The initial coding was followed by rounds of reframing, adjusting and reviewing the initial codes, sometimes going back and forth between recordings, transcription and codes. From this foundation, I interpreted meaning across the material and constructed sub-themes and, eventually, distinct themes.

In line with Braun and Clarke’s approach [15], themes were not pre-defined before coding but were produced by organizing codes around commonalities or concepts interpreted from the data. Themes are thus generated through reflection and are not to be understood as existing and discovered within the material itself [15]. The material was then synthesized in a Word document, including my own reflections on how the themes were relevant for exploring the

research question. Writing qualitative research can be understood as an interwoven aspect of analysis [14]. Through writing, it became relevant to discuss the material as presenting both opportunities and challenges.

The material has been analyzed in its original language with consideration for nonverbal communication but is presented here in English. In the process of translation from Norwegian to English, I encountered problems related to language, culture, oral and written norms, and contextual meaning. To ensure that quotes were readable and understandable after translation, I chose to lean more towards intelligent verbatim [67] when presenting quotes from participants.

3.4 Limitations and ethical considerations

All participants provided their informed consent. The project's data gathering and management were ethically reviewed and legally approved by Norwegian Centre for Research Data and Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, following a detailed description of the study. Our responsibility as researchers does not end with obtaining informed consent; it requires an ongoing evaluation of benefit versus harm, while preserving the participant's well-being and rights [82, 89]. The power imbalance between participants and researchers should not be overlooked, particularly within an educational system where participants (pre-service teachers) are collaborating with researchers employed at their university. Focus group interview is a method that can support participants in expressing sensitive perspectives and strengthen their position in relation to the researcher [58].

The limitations of this study include the context-specific nature of the empirical material, which cannot be used to produce generalized findings across different teacher education programs. Different versions of the learning cycle [66] and rehearsal-based approaches have been developed across national contexts. Such practice-oriented approaches are understood, interpreted and practiced very differently [94]. This study serves as an example from ReTPro's reflective rehearsal cycles. A comparative design examining different programs could be of interest for future research.

Participants in this study had experience with reflective rehearsals after their first year of teacher education for primary and secondary education. In Norway, such programs involve an obligatory master's thesis and take five years to complete. As participants were in the early stages of their education, the empirical material does not reflect the final outcomes of their education but rather provides insights into pre-service teachers' understanding during their initial education.

4 Findings

4.1 Democratic citizenship through modelling practice

During the first phase of the rehearsal cycle (see Sect. 1.1) pre-service teachers have been modelled examples of teaching activities focused on core practices [39, 42] by teacher educators or practicum teachers. In both focus groups, participants expressed modelling as being introduced to a diverse range of teaching approaches. Participants highlight talk moves, teacher-in-role, play and communication, argumentation, and deliberation. One participant notes: "We have different teaching opportunities" (Participant 10, Group 2). This expression is here interpreted as an expression of the rehearsal cycle as diverse and not restricted to one particular way of teaching. The pre-service teachers refer to experiences with activities oriented towards democracy where pupils' questions, thoughts, knowledge, and backgrounds guide the lesson.

However, a challenge arises as pre-service teachers may not fully grasp the explicit purpose of the teaching activities. They more often focus on teaching "successfully" over teaching as a means to reach broader educational goals such as democratic citizenship. Participants seldom problematize or question potential conflicts between educational practices, goals, and societal contexts:

We learned some short teacher-in-role activities. They encouraged us to try them in practice, we could base it on a competence aim, I guess. (Participant 9, Group 1)

Regarding an activity aimed at stimulating pupils' reflection on inequality and unjust distribution of resources, the connection to democratic citizenship was unclear for pre-service teachers. Describing the activity where four pupils were given cake slices while others received none, then having the excess thrown away, one participant explains, "They thought it was unfair. I think they understood that reality is different for people, and people experience it in different ways." (Participant 3, Group 2). When asked about its relation to democracy or citizenship, participants had not considered it in that light.

4.2 Reflective rehearsing as participation or replication?

Pre-service teachers describe reflective rehearsals within the ReTPro project as a unique form of educational practice, distinguished by two main characteristics: ownership over the rehearsal process, and the opportunity to experience a version of the teacher role. Participants have engaged in assignments involving video recording of rehearsals on campus and in practice schools, aiming to stimulate reflection and introduce educational research. They discuss the thorough process of material gathering, transcription, and coding, and reflect on their experience of using material for self-reflection:

I see every little mistake I do, and then it is easier to correct them later. One knows what one must do differently. One sees oneself as a teacher clearly. It is scary to be filmed, but you get used to it. And then you learn that it is only a means for you to practice teaching. (Participant 1, Group 1)

It has been useful to watch and listen to what others say. To see your body language, you notice things you wouldn't otherwise. I think it absolutely has been very useful (Participant 6, Group 1)

You get to hear how you use your voice, see how you stand, how you look at the pupils, and that is something you don't always think about. You get to see yourself in third person, almost. (Participant 7, Group 1)

It is a good way of reflecting. When we film the rehearsals, then it is like, you can write down a lot, but you still don't register it all. Because while you're writing, they (teacher educators, co-students, or pupils) may say something important that you should pay attention to. With the recordings I can go back, and then adjust the lesson and my teaching. (Participant 8, Group 1)

Pre-service teachers describe taking ownership of rehearsals also outside of assignments, engaging in self-evaluation and deciding what to rehearse in upcoming cycles:

We also get to rehearse elements we do not get feedback on. I have not been told that I often say "eeh", like I become uncertain. Afterwards I have realized that maybe I can manage to not say it all the time. (Participant 1, Group 1)

I have noticed time for thinking, to give pupils time to think. If I feel that the pupils don't know the answer, I'd rather ask a new question, than to give them more time. So that is something I will rehearse more. (Participant 2, Group 1).

Reflective rehearsals provide an opportunity for participants to embody a teacher role. When asked about the characteristics of reflective rehearsals, participants emphasize "To be a teacher. To enter that role." (Participant 2, Group 2) and "You get more, to create a conversation with others, the chance to teach." (Participant 1, Group 2). A comparison between subjects with and without reflective rehearsals highlights the active and experiential nature of the rehearsal approach. A participant states that in other subjects one "sat down to learn" while in subjects connected to the ReTPro project "we got up and rehearsed." (Participant 5, Group 2). The same participant then concludes that in the former setting "there was no room for such rehearsals" (Participant 5, Group 2). A co-student encourages the opportunity for teacher educators to make room, also in other subjects that are currently not a part of the ReTPro project, saying it is indeed possible "if they'd challenged us to try more" (Participant 12, Group 2). Another participant suggests that they should talk to their teacher educators about this topic to "make something work" in the other subjects that do not yet implement reflective rehearsals (Participant 3, Group 2).

Both focus group interviews reveal examples of reflective rehearsals providing an environment for experimentation and adaptation, rather than merely replicating activities modelled by teacher educators or practicum teachers. Pre-service teachers describe taking initiative for rehearsals beyond mandatory assignments, reflecting, and adjusting their practice accordingly. However, a challenge arises as some pre-service teachers prioritize efficient and comfortable teaching over embracing failure and growth. This approach aligns with Loughran's notion of "how to teach and doing it right." [65]. For example, one participant expresses:

We used it for assignments and that sort of thing. From my perspective, I had no use for the rehearsing on campus. I got feedback commenting that it went well, but I usually get that in the reflection phase afterwards. I have not used it at all. (Participant 9, Group 1)

In this instance, rehearsals are perceived as necessary only when "corrective action" is required. Some participants view rehearsals as "useful" if these are relevant for exams and assignments in teacher education, indicating a focus on performance rather than growth: "We were supposed to perform a play. We used it for the exam." (Participant 10, Group 1).

4.3 A safe community for becoming a teacher

A strong group identity has emerged among pre-service teachers in ReTPro, evident in their expressions. This fosters discussion, comparison, and exploration of differences stemming from shared experiences. Their reflections often emphasize collective development through feedback from educators, peers, and interactions with pupils. One participant underlines the importance of observing co-students and inspiring each other (Participant 11, Group 2).

The social environment within the Rehearsal Room is described as safe and supportive, allowing participants to experiment and learn without fear of judgment: "It was a very safe environment in the class because no one laughed if you made a mistake, and no one judged you for what you did." (Participant 8, Group 2). Reflective rehearsals serve as a means for participants to navigate unfamiliar territory, providing a sense of safety and comfort:

It's not something we have rehearsed before, to be the kind of person we are supposed to be in the classroom. We have been on the other side. The fact that we get to rehearse here, before we actually... It feels a bit safer. (Participant 2, Group 2)

Because you have already talked to teacher educators, and you have talked to others about what you are going to do. You in a way get to see it, and then you feel a bit safer when you stand there in front of a whole class. (Participant 7, Group 1)

You get to feel it, try a bit, challenge and be challenged. (Participant 12, Group 2).

Although the collective identity and rehearsal experiences are mainly expressed as positive aspects and as helpful tools, some regard being together as a challenge that entails some uncomfortableness (Participant 10, Group 2). Entering the teacher role is described as both meaningful and uncomfortable. While reflective rehearsals on campus do not fully replicate real teaching, participants recognize the importance of pushing through discomfort:

When we had it (the rehearsal) here (campus), we felt it became more artificial, because then everybody knew what the session entailed. But with the pupils, it was more natural, because it was a new experience for them. And then you also became kind of stuck because you are supposed to think and try to keep the conversation flowing, and not let it stop too much. That could crash with the experience of a rehearsal here (campus). Then we're in it, and we must push through. (Participant 12, Group 2)

This pre-service teacher explains how the rehearsals on campus differ from the rehearsals in practicum schools, characterizing the latter as more "natural" and simultaneously more challenging. Rehearsals in schools involve a more unpredictable setting which demands attempting professional judgement on the spot.

4.4 Democratic citizenship: An overarching but forgotten concept

Pre-service teachers emphasize democratic citizenship as an overarching purpose in education: "What I'm saying is that what we did during the rehearsals are things that, and this really applies to everything we do in the teaching profession, it should be related to critical thinking and democratic citizenship." (Participant 10, Group 1). Participants discuss how democratic citizenship aligns with their experiences in teacher education and the ReTPro project:

You get the pupils to listen to each other. In the explorative conversations we have had with them, we tried to bring up questions like: Are you agreeing with what this person said? And if not, then it's like: Why do you disagree? That is critical thinking; they should not blindly believe what others believe, or have the same opinion as others (...). It is about letting them explore and disagree with each other, but also accept that people have different opinions. (Participant 7, Group 1)

We lead a lesson on argumentation. That was perhaps the most direct democratic citizenship and critical thinking you can get. They used the word "because". They were supposed to reason for themselves, think critically and figure out why ... It must not be their only opinion, but it can be *one* opinion. They should think and position themselves in others' situations, others' arguments. (Participant 10, Group 1)

Participants relate democratic citizenship to pupils' engagement in conversations, argumentation, reasoning, tolerance, and critical thinking. They discuss practical challenges encountered in practicum schools, such as establishing effective communication in different grade levels:

If we go back into first grade, we have thought about creating smaller groups. We could also allow them to speak their mind, and answer when they want without raising their hand. This way we would have more discussion. (Participant 5, Group 1)

In fourth grade we tried to make them not argue for their own opinions. They got the assignment: You shall argue that dogs are the best, and you shall argue that cats are the best. Then they discuss with their learning partner and afterwards we lift up the discussion in the whole class. It becomes a form of roleplay. They do not have to decide their opinion, they only need to decide to find reasons. (Participant 11, Group 1)

The concept of democracy is mainly understood as connected to individual rights and skills such as free speech, argumentation, and independent reasoning. The pre-service teachers do not express how these aspects might be of relevance for a democratic society. Dimensions of conflict, social justice and value commitment are not highlighted in participants' conversation:

With the assignments that we've been given, it has been a lot of explorative assignments. The pupils get to say exactly what they mean and think, and that has something to do with democracy. Because often there are no right or wrong answers with democratic thinking. In a democracy nothing is right or wrong. People just think in different ways, and that is fine. You can still get to an answer. (Participant 9, Group 1)

Although participants sometimes relate democratic citizenship to educational practice, their understanding of the concept's content often comes across as vague, unclear, simplified, difficult to explain or forgotten:

I feel like we touched upon democratic citizenship, but I don't remember much. (Participant 3, Group 2)

It was not emphasized. (Participant 12, Group 2)

We also had something about racism and democracy. (Participant 10, Group 2)

We had some of it in the beginning, it was a trip and everything, but it just vanished. It became a bit difficult. (Participant 1, Group 2)

Wasn't it like... I just can't remember anything. (Participant 2, Group 2)

I think we need some guidance on that concept, in relation to what we remember, because I think it has been forgotten. (Participant 3, Group 2)

These last expressions indicate that democratic citizenship education is perceived by participants as knowledge taught to them, but later forgotten. Analysis of two focus group interviews shows that participants express reflective rehearsals as a model of practice in teacher education which highlights some opportunities and some challenges for enhancing democratic citizenship education. These are discussed in the following sections.

5 Discussion

This study finds that pre-service teachers express opportunities and challenges with reflective rehearsals as a model for enhancing awareness concerning democratic citizenship education. As a summary of the key findings from the focus group interviews, the table below presents an overview of the identified opportunities and challenges associated with reflective exercises in teacher education. These findings have been discussed in the preceding sections (see Sects. 4.1 to 4.4), and the table provides a concise visual representation.

Starting with the opportunities mentioned in the table above, one of these is referred to as *a space for fruitful errors and attempting change* which relates to participants' expressions of how rehearsals and feedback are utilized to develop their teaching practices, as discussed in Sect. 4.2. Another opportunity that is identified in Sect. 4.2 *a growing ownership over professional development*, relates to pre-service teachers' expressions of how they independently rehearse to form their practice based on what they have noticed through self-reflection. The opportunities *a safe way of encountering the uncomfortable* and *a space for exercising professional judgement* are demonstrated through participants' descriptions of how rehearsals on campus create a safe environment for entering a teacher role and how rehearsals in school settings challenge them to exercise judgement on situated dilemmas, as discussed in Sect. 4.3.

The challenge *connections between practice and purpose* is identified in Sect. 4.4 where participants express their experiences of teaching practice as always related to democratic citizenship without a communicated awareness of why or what potential societal purpose this might hold. The challenge of *connecting practical experiences to taught knowledge* is also highlighted in Sect. 4.4, where participants express practical experiences as related to democratic

citizenship without referring to, or recalling, what meaning these concepts may hold. As discussed in Sect. 4.4 and 4.1, participants express an *individual oriented understanding of democratic citizenship* as they refer to individual rights such as free speech and self-reasoning and knowledge they might have forgotten. The challenge *learning how to teach and “doing it right”* is identified in Sects. 4.1 and 4.2 where some participants express the value of reflective rehearsals as related to completing their exams or to follow instructions by educators. In further sections the implications of these opportunities and challenges are discussed.

5.1 Opportunities of reflective rehearsals

Findings in this study point to some expressed opportunities with reflective rehearsals in teacher education. Emphasized as a space for fruitful errors and attempting change (Table 1), the reflective rehearsals can foster pre-service teachers' development of actor-competence [72]. This means a potential for rehearsing not only how to define, discuss and think about democratic citizenship education but also rehearse how it could be practiced, as Participant 5, Group 2 states: “we got up and rehearsed” as opposed to sitting down to learn. To rehearse teaching in school settings created a space for exercising professional judgement (Table 1). Pre-service teachers have been presented different possible “answers” to practical educational issues, as Participant 10, Group 2 refers to as “teaching opportunities”. Deciding on which opportunity to use in real school settings provides a space for exercising judgement based on their previous experiences with analyzing and evaluating activities [72]. Reflective rehearsals may provide a space for exploring and problematizing possible implications of practice together with peers and educators, attempting to change practice and participate in educational discourse. These elements are related to the core values of democratic citizenship [43].

Participants also show a growing ownership of rehearsals for professional development (Table 1), as pointed out by Participant 1, Group 1: “We also get to rehearse elements we do not get feedback on.” Reflective rehearsals may support pre-service teachers' participation in formation of their teacher identity. Teacher identity concerns a sense of self as a teacher and an understanding of how this sense of self fits into a larger context involving others [5]. Identity can be regarded as both stable and dynamic at the same time [61]. Reflective rehearsals foster self-awareness, as explained by Participant 7, Group 1: “You get to hear how you use your voice, see how you stand, how you look at the pupils (...)”. Self-awareness and reflection are key for exploring and shaping teacher identity [5]. These aspects are valuable for teacher education as they may lead to increasing self-knowledge, which is emphasized as important for teacher development and growth competence [54, 63].

Finally, reflective rehearsals are highlighted as a safe space for encountering the uncomfortable (Table 1). With space, opportunity, and encouragement for more than one attempt to overcome uncomfortable situations and make use of experiences, reflective rehearsals can foster a supportive emotional environment. As explained by Participant 2, Group 2: “The fact that we get to rehearse here, before we actually... It feels a bit safer.”. A safe emotional space is emphasized as crucial for teacher development [62]. Hargreaves argues that emotions are at the heart of teaching [46]. Reflective rehearsals can enhance an understanding of the emotional aspect of teaching. This is highly relevant for democratic citizenship education as Denzin notes that emotionality is basic to our understanding of others and the actions we take towards them [23]. Emotions are therefore a fundamental part of the moral foundations of society and its institutions [23]. While this study's findings highlight opportunities with reflective rehearsals as a model for enhancing awareness of democratic citizenship education in teacher education, they also emphasize some challenges. These are discussed in the following section.

Table 1 Main findings from analysis of focus group interviews in this study

Opportunities	Challenges
A space for fruitful errors and attempting change	Connections between practice and purpose
A growing ownership over professional development	Connecting practical experiences to taught knowledge
A space for exercising professional judgement	An individual oriented understanding of democratic citizenship
A safe way of encountering the uncomfortable	Learning how to teach and “doing it right”

5.2 Challenges of reflective rehearsals

The findings of this study align with previous Nordic research [11, 35, 92], indicating that pre-service teachers often possess a “thin” understanding of democracy. In this study this is highlighted as an individual-oriented understanding of democratic citizenship (Table 1). This can be exemplified through the statement by Participant 9, Group 1: “In a democracy nothing is right or wrong. People just think in different ways, and that is fine.” This statement indicates that democracy is regarded as unlimited personal freedom, moral ties and foundational values that protects groups and individuals from oppression, discrimination and unfair distribution of goods are thus not recognized. Castoriadis explains how individual freedom and collective freedom are interdependent dimensions, which makes democracy a form of government built upon self-limitation [21]. Individuals in democratic societies must therefore limit the egoism inherent in their personal interests to reach a wider social perspective [87]. As the current educational system often communicates citizenship as individual opportunity [84], making it difficult to address broader societal issues, it is crucial for teacher education to address the collective dimension. The focus on measuring individual outcomes in education, as criticized by Habermas [44] and Biesta [7, 8], contrasts an orientation of democratic citizenship education which emphasizes collective engagement as it rather fosters individual competition. To deepen pre-service teachers’ awareness of democratic citizenship education, reflective rehearsals should foster critical scrutiny of education and society, encouraging open dialogue and new perspectives [8, 29]. This entails moving beyond individual orientations towards democratic citizenship education and recognizing it as a collective endeavor.

A second challenge, to build a connection between practice and purpose (Table 1) is interrelated with the challenge previously mentioned. This challenge is evident as pre-service teachers do not communicate a purpose of, or a reason for, democratic citizenship education. There may be multiple understandings, and sometimes conflicting positions, in regard to what the purpose of democratic citizenship education should be [77, 79]. The critical dimension of democratic citizenship education demonstrates a clear purpose oriented towards social justice and a “thick” understanding of citizenship [19, 20, 96]. Teaching democratic citizenship involves critically examining one’s own role and position, as well as developing an understanding of societal structures and historical contexts that shape educational expectations and worldviews [20, 90]. Emphasizing reflection-about-action [95] may foster a more critical educational discourse in rehearsal cycles, enhancing the understanding of democratic citizenship’s underlying purpose.

The challenge of connecting practical experiences to taught knowledge (Table 1) is demonstrated by pre-service teachers as they express the concept of democratic citizenship as taught to them, but later forgotten: “I think we need some guidance on that concept, in relation to what we remember, because I think it has been forgotten.” (Participant 3, Group 2). Some express knowledge about how to teach in relation to it, but often without their awareness of the relation between teaching practice and democratic citizenship (see example in Sect. 4.1). While participants describe their teaching practices as “always” related to democratic citizenship (participant 10, group 1), this is not yet explicitly linked to a clear definition of what this means. An understanding of democratic citizenship as transmitted but forgotten knowledge implies that they do not yet recognize it as collective events occurring. Understanding democracy as a thick, critical and relational concept [20, 90], may grant the possibility for pre-service teachers to connect democratic citizenship education to their own experiences.

A focus on learning how to teach and “doing it right” (Table 1) presents a challenge in reflective rehearsals as Participant 9, Group 1 states: “We used it for assignments and that sort of thing”. This can be interpreted as an instrumental understanding of the reflective rehearsals. Democratic citizenship education understood in collective terms opposes the expressed understanding of teacher education as learning “how to teach and doing it right” [65], as it rather presents this as an ongoing question. Because teaching practices are situated and dependent upon the teachers’ and learners’ backgrounds, values, emotions, experiences and beliefs the question of how to teach cannot be encountered with a single universal answer. Teacher education should, however, engage with the question of how to teach in a critical and reflective manner. From this position, one can argue that pre-service teachers learning how to teach in accordance with democratic citizenship, for instance different ways of fostering resistance against oppressive structures and enhancing critical judgement [77, 90], is not the problem. Meanwhile, it is highly problematic to imply that there is *one* way of doing it *right* and that this could be adapted, understood and measured as an individual competence in, and the preferred outcome of, teacher education.

6 Conclusion and implications

In summary, focus group interviews with pre-service teachers highlight opportunities with reflective rehearsals as they are expressed as active exploration of different teaching approaches. Reflective rehearsals are experienced as a safe space for developing professional judgment and enhancing self-awareness amongst pre-service teachers. Rehearsals may lower the threshold for pre-service teachers' exploration of practice and promote ownership over their formation process as becoming teachers in teacher education. However, challenges arise from an understanding of democratic citizenship as individual knowledge and competence among pre-service teachers, who struggle to explicitly link their practical experiences with a societal purpose. This study highlights the need for an explicit discussion of educational purpose in teacher education, and to shift away from narrow, individual and uncritical understandings of democratic citizenship education. Reflective rehearsals should encourage critical scrutiny of education, facilitate open dialogue, and thereby enhance democratic citizenship not restricted to something we know about, but rather something we practice through our interactions.

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Data availability The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available due to reasons of sensitivity and protection of anonymity. They are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Data are located in controlled access data storage at Western Norway University of Applied Sciences.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate All participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. The study has been approved by both the Norwegian Centre for Research Data under SIKT (Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research) and the Western Norway University of Applied Sciences.

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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