

**Towards democratic culture and political
practice
in (early childhood) education**

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Long tradition of democracy in education

- educational 'giants' insist that democracy should be central to education, e.g., Dewey...Freinet...Korczak... Bloom...Freire...Malaguzzi

But democracy in education has been eroded and marginalised in recent years

- ❖ What do we **mean** by democracy in (early childhood) education?
- ❖ Why do we **need** democracy in (early childhood) education?
- ❖ How might we **work** with a democratic culture in (early childhood) education?
- ❖ What **conditions** might enable a democratic culture in (early childhood) education?

What do we mean by democracy in (early
childhood) education?

What do we mean by democracy in education?

- ❖ **Way of governing (method):** e.g., decision-making (including policies), managing services, accountability

- ❖ **‘Way of life’ and living together (relationship)**

*’[P]rimarily a mode of **associated living** embedded in the culture and social **relationships of everyday life**... A **way of life** controlled by a working faith...in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action if proper conditions are furnished’ (John Dewey)*

What do we mean by democracy in education?

❖ Culture

*“We are asking a great effort of teachers...so they can participate in building schools together with children, young people, parents and citizens. Schools that are living centres of open and **democratic culture**” (Loris Malaguzzi)*

Democratic culture

*‘Our approach, therefore, is to treat democracy not just as a relationship or a method, but more broadly **as a culture...an organic assemblage** of norms or **values, beliefs** and **attitudes** that **create** meanings, purposes, practices, and images, which in turn **produce** collective ways of being, doing, and thinking’ (Diana Sousa & Peter Moss)*

Democratic culture

- **Values**, e.g., equality and social justice; participation and dialogue; solidarity and interdependency; uncertainty and subjectivity; difference and multiple perspectives
- **Beliefs**, e.g., children are citizens with rights; born competent with 100 language; worth listening to; importance of the public good
- **Attitudes**, e.g., civility, conviviality, respect, caring

Democratic culture creates

- meanings and images
- purposes
- practices
- relationships... 'way of life' and living together
- ways of governing

and operates at all levels

- from macro to micro, government to classroom

Why do we need democracy in
(early childhood) education?

- ❖ Education enables democratic societies to reproduce and **renew democracy**: *‘Democracy needs to be reborn in each generation and education is its midwife’* (John Dewey)
- ❖ Renewed democracy urgently needed to respond to **converging existential crises**

‘We are living in a time of unprecedented danger, and the Doomsday Clock time reflects that reality. 90 seconds to midnight is the closest the Clock has ever been set to midnight, and it’s a decision our experts do not take lightly’
(Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists)

- ❖ To create a **democratic politics of education**...diverse perspectives and alternative positions are recognised and valued...**political choices** deliberated and contested

*'[Education is] always a political discourse...It is about working with cultural choices, but it clearly also **means working with political choices**' (Loris Malaguzzi), e.g.,*

Democratic political choices about, for example:

- What is our image of the child...educator...EC centre?

*‘A declaration [about the image of the child is] the **necessary premise for any pedagogical theory, and any pedagogical project**’ (Loris Malaguzzi)*

- What are the purposes of education?
- What do we mean by ‘education’...by ‘care’?
- What values and ethics for education?
- What pedagogy?
- What do we want for our children?

We need democracy in education, but

- Democracy in education and democracy in general eroded by 40 years of neoliberalism...weakened when most needed

What is neoliberalism?

- 'Political movement' ... 'theory of everything' ... 'successful story'

*“Neoliberalism now **configures great swathes of our daily lives and structures our experience of the world** – how we understand the way the world works, how we understand ourselves and others, and how we relate to ourselves and others... **We are produced by it**”* (Stephen Ball)

- Epicentre in US and UK (Reagan and Thatcher)...but spreads globally from 1980s

What is neoliberalism?

- **Economisation:** insertion of economic rationality into all spheres of life - *'the conversion of non-economic domains, activities and subjects into economic ones* (Wendy Brown)...everything and everyone becomes a tradable commodity
- **Values:** competition; (individual) choice; calculation
- **Ideal subject:** *homo economicus* - self-interested and competitive...independent and self-reliant...'market actor' and flexible worker...always calculating best interests

Neoliberalism and education

- ‘Global Education Reform Movement’: education wing of neoliberalism...emerged in 1980s and ‘*adopted as an educational reform orthodoxy within many education systems throughout the world*’ (Pasi Sahlberg)
 - ❑ Test-based accountability – desire for **measurement**
 - ❑ Standardisation – performance **standards** for pupils, schools, countries
 - ❑ Core subjects – **narrowing** of education
 - ❑ Corporate and business **management** models
 - ❑ **Market** logic

Neoliberalism and education

- **Economised education**... *‘From the Global Education Reform Movement to its...policy police in the PISA testing program, we have seen one goal trump the others. Nowadays the uniform message is human capital uber alles’* (David Labaree)
- **Depoliticised education** – priority for technical practice and management, e.g., ‘what works?’, standardised outcomes, measurement of performance, readying



No place for democracy or political practice in education

Neoliberalism and democracy

- Some neoliberals argue **markets provide the purest form of democracy** through consumers exercising individual choice...democratic choices are best exercised by buying and selling

BUT OTHERS DISAGREE

*‘The behaviour of consumers in a market where their aim is to satisfy their needs...should not be conflated with democracy, which is about **public deliberation and contestation about the public good and the just and equitable (re)distribution** of public resources’ (Gerd Biesta)*

*‘Our preoccupation with making individual choices is undermining our ability to make **collective choices**. Our democracy is suffocating itself ‘ (Tom Bentley)*

Neoliberalism and democracy

- Neoliberalism erodes democracy:
 - Increases inequality and influence of money
 - Insists ‘there is no alternative’
 - Values individual and private...devalues common and public

How might we work with a democratic culture
in (early childhood) education?

Building a democratic culture is

- an unfinished, continuous and reflective process...no programme or manual, no end point
- a process of continuous and inclusive experimentation and research...**'democratic experimentalism'**

*“the organisation of a **collective experimental practice from below**...Democracy is not just one more terrain for the institutional innovation that I advocate. It is the most important terrain”* (Roberto Unger)

Building a democratic culture encompasses

- policy-making...national and local
- education and development of teachers
- management
- curriculum
- pedagogy
- assessment

Many examples to inspire and provoke

Some examples to inspire and provoke

- ❖ ‘Curriculum for the preschool’ (Sweden)

*‘The preschool is part of the school system and rests on the **basis of democracy**...Education should be undertaken in democratic forms...creating a democratic climate in the preschool’*

- ❖ ‘Te Whariki’ - participatory production of an innovative bicultural early childhood curriculum; ‘**Learning stories**’ – democratic assessment method (New Zealand)

- ❖ ‘**Mosaic approach**’ – multi-method approach for listening to young children and enabling participation
- ❖ ‘**Demokratie Leben**’ project with children under 3 years (Germany)

*“[W]here and when does democracy start? In day care? In school? Or only when people are old enough to vote? Knowledge and insights gained from the evaluation of the project ‘Living democracy in day care centres’ show that the **basis for a democratic everyday culture can indeed already be formed in the day nursery**” (Michael Priebe)*

❖ Reggio Emilia's democratic culture

- democratic political choices, e.g., image of 'rich child'
- democratic 'pedagogy of listening'
- democratic research and assessment: pedagogical documentation
- democratic management: '*gestione sociale*'
- democratic local project of '*democratic experimentalism*'

❖ Portugal's democratic culture

- central role for democracy in curriculum
- *Movimento da Escola Moderna Portuguesa* (MEM):
 - national association of teachers from all sectors
 - supports development of schools and pedagogy based on solidarity, cooperation and democracy

*“Following core principles of cooperation, solidarity, socio-cultural integration and initiation to democratic practices, MEM sees adults and children as having the **right to participate actively in the construction of inclusive and democratic school culture**”* (Sergio Niza)

What conditions might enable democratic culture in (early childhood) education?

Democratic culture as a 'Real Utopia'

- ❖ Three elements to make transformative change happen – to achieve a 'real utopia' (Erik Olin Wright):
 - **desirability**: desired values and goals – “*people make democracy by wanting it*” (Timothy Snyder)
 - **viability**: theoretical models of how particular social structures and institutions would work or empirical studies of actual cases
 - **achievability**: conditions needed to achieve social change on a wide scale

What conditions for achieving democracy in (early childhood) education?

- **passing** of neoliberalism
- **collaborations:** between schools and teachers + 'competent system' to support both
- **materials and practices**, e.g., curriculum, pedagogical documentation, learning stories
- initial and continuing **education of teachers** + **image of teachers** as 'democratic professionals', researchers and critical thinkers
- **time**... '*Slow Pedagogy and the Unhurried Child*' (Alison Clark)

??

Passing of neoliberalism

'[Neoliberalism's] promises did not survive the test of the real world. Today, they are largely exhausted...[But] there are currently no politically strong narratives that would point to alternatives to the neoliberal logic of competition, markets, and coercion in ways that are firmly guided by the principles of social justice and a democratic polity' (Jens Beckert)

Democracy as part of an alternative narrative to the
'neoliberal logic'

Transformation is not really an option

*“We have learnt that transformation can draw knowledge, strength and passion from the past and present, whether from innovative thinkers and practitioners or prefigurative practices and projects, providing proof of viability. Last but not least, it seems that **transformation is not really an option**; as Ruth Levitas reminds us ‘for those who think that utopia is impossible, what really is impossible is to carry on as we are’” (Diana Sousa & Peter Moss)*

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