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Democracy as First Practice in Early Childhood Education and Care

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Introduction

There is a long tradition of viewing democracy and education as inseparably interconnected: democracy as a basic value and practice in education; and education as a means to strengthen and sustain democracy. Democracy was a central theme for major educational thinkers of the last century, such as John Dewey, Celestin Freinet, Janusz Korczak, Paolo Freire and Loris Malaguzzi. Today it still has proponents (see, for example,[1,2,3,4]) and a number of countries make a specific commitment to democracy in curricula or other education policy documents (see, for example,[5,6]). However, the discourse of democratic education is marginalised by two other discourses, that of quality and that of markets, both of which have thriven under neoliberalism.[7] The discourse of quality is strongly managerial and understands education as a technology for delivering predetermined outcomes. It is concerned to bring children, teachers and institutions into conformity with expert-derived norms. While the discourse of markets understands education as a commodity for sale to parent-consumers, valuing self-interest, calculation and individual choice. As Carr and Hartnett observe, in their book Education and the Struggle for

Democracy:

Any vision of education that takes democracy seriously cannot but be at odds with educational reforms which espouse the language and values of market forces and treat education as a commodity to be purchased and consumed… (I)n a democracy, individuals do not only express personal preferences; they also make public and collective choices related to the common good of their society.[8]

What is democracy?

Democracy is a multi-dimensional concept, with different forms and practices linked to each dimension. It can be procedural, which is about formal rules of government that include practices such as: election of representatives to governing bodies operating at different levels (e.g., national parliaments, local councils, school governors), the rules determining the working of these bodies, and the various conditions associated with such democratic forms of government (e.g., an independent media, the rule of law). There is also participatory democracy, involving people directly in matters that affect their everyday lives. In this sense, democracy can also be understood as a mode of being in the world, as a form of living together. This is Dewey's idea of democracy as being more than a form of government, but rather "primarily a mode of associated living"[9] embedded in the culture and social relationships of everyday life and "a way of life controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature…[and] faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action if proper conditions are furnished."[10] This implies maximizing opportunities for sharing, exchanging, decision-making and negotiating perspectives and opinions. It also implies that democracy is a way of relating to the self and others, an ethical, political and educational relationship that can and should pervade all aspects of everyday life.

Democracy in the early childhood field

A vision of education that takes democracy seriously is not confined to later stages of education. It can, as the Swedish preschool curriculum states, be the basis of early childhood services.[11] As George argues:

Democracy and day nursery are two terms that are not immediately associated with each other. But where and when does democracy start?... The basis for a democratic everyday culture can indeed already be formed in the day nursery.[12]

Democracy in early childhood education and care (ECEC) can operate at several levels: not just the institutional that is, in the nursery or preschool, but also at national and more local levels. Each level has responsibility for certain choices, using "choice" to mean the democratic process of collective decision-making for the common good (to reclaim it from the neo-liberal usage of "choice" as decision-making by individual consumers.)[13,14] Democracy can be fostered and practiced at one level alone, but for greatest effect, all three should be engaged: each level should complement the operation of democracy at other levels. A democratic system also involves each level leaving space for democratic practice at other levels, with strong decentralisation from national to more local levels.[13]

At national level

The task at national level is to provide a national framework of entitlements, expectations and values that express democratically agreed national entitlements, goals and values, including democracy as a fundamental value; to ensure the material conditions to make these a reality; and to enable other levels to implement them in a democratic way. To take some examples: a democratic framework might include an entitlement to services for children as citizens, together with a funding system that enables all children to exercise their entitlement; a clear statement that early childhood services are a public good and responsibility, not a private commodity; a framework curriculum that defines broad values and goals, including democracy as a fundamental value, but allows local interpretation; a fully integrated early childhood policy, the responsibility of one government department; and a well educated, well paid and diverse workforce for all young children.

At local levels

What does democratic practice in ECEC mean at more local levels of government? It may mean developing a "local cultural project of childhood."[15] This term captures the idea of political commitment, citizen participation and collective decision-making to enable a community to take responsibility for its children and their education (understood in the broad sense), responsibility not just for providing services but for answering critical pedagogical questions: What is our image of the child, the educator and the early childhood centre? What do we understand by knowledge and learning? What are our fundamental educational values? Several Italian communes (including, but not only, Reggio Emilia) have undertaken such collective, democratic ventures and, no doubt, there are examples in other countries. It also means actively supporting

the implementation of democracy in local early childhood services.

At the level of the early childhood centre

Bringing democratic politics into the nursery – or the crèche, preschool, kindergarten, nursery school or any of the other terms we use to describe ECEC services – means citizens, both children and adults, engaging in at least five types of activity:

1. Decision-making about the purposes, the practices and the environment of the nursery, addressing Dewey's principle that "all those who are affected by social institutions must have a share in producing and managing them."[16] This is closest to the idea of democracy as a principle of government, in which either elected representatives or all members of the group have some involvement in decision-making in specified areas. Examples might be nurseries run as cooperatives by a staff or parent group,[17] or elected boards of parents, staff and other citizens involved in pedagogical, budgetary and staffing issues.[18] But apart from formal governing bodies, children and adults should also be involved in decision making about everyday or major matters (see Clark[19] for an example of children's and adults' participation in the design of early childhood environments).
2. Understandings of learning. Democratic practice goes beyond seeing learning solely as reproducing pre-determined content and skills, but views children as "active constructors of their own learning and producers of original points of view concerning the world."[20,21] Pedagogies of "invention" or "listening," open to unpredicted outcomes and new thought and valuing wonder and surprise, are necessarily inscribed with democratic values and practices.
3. The evaluation of early childhood work through participatory methods. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence[22] contrast "quality" as a technical language of evaluation with the more democratic language of "meaning making." The "language of quality" involves a supposedly objective observer applying externally determined norms to an institution in order to make a decontextualized assessment of conformity to these norms. By contrast, the "language of meaning making" speaks of evaluation as a formative, democratic process of interpretation, involving all stakeholders (including children), and making practice visible and thus subject to reflection, dialogue and change. Such an approach is embodied in the practice of pedagogical documentation, with its potential not only for evaluation, but also for participatory research, professional development, planning and democratic practice.[22,23]

4. Contesting dominant discourses, what Foucault terms “regimes of truth,” which seek to shape our subjectivities and practices through their universal truth claims and their relationship with authority and power. These regimes of truth are backed by privileged groups – often the State and its expert gate-keepers – who claim a privileged position of objectivity and knowledge. Contesting these powerful discourses means striving to make core assumptions and values visible and “welcoming and affirming ‘thinking-otherwise”.[24]
5. It is through contesting dominant discourses that the fifth democratic political activity can emerge: opening up for change by developing a critical approach to what exists and envisioning utopias and turning them into utopian action. Giroux speaks of “critical democracy,” through which people can “produce the conditions of their own agency through dialogue, community participation, resistance and political struggle.”[25]

Conditions for democracy

For a democratic early childhood education and care to evolve and be sustained requires attention to creating enabling conditions, for example adopting an understanding that early childhood services offer an ideal space for democratic practice. This space, so understood, offers opportunities for all citizens to participate – be they children or parents, practitioners or politicians, or indeed any other local citizen.

This idea of participation, therefore, defines the early childhood centre as a social and political place and thus as an educational place in the fullest sense. However, this is not a given, so to speak, it is not a natural, intrinsic part of being a school. It is a philosophical choice, a choice based on values.[26]

This choice is of a particular image of the early childhood service: not as a business selling commodities on the market, not as a factory applying technologies to children to produce predetermined outcomes, but as a public forum in civic society, a place of encounter for citizens of all ages.

Other understandings are also important, for example the image of the child, parent and worker. From a democratic perspective, the child is understood as a competent citizen, an expert in her own life, having opinions that are worth listening to and having the right and competence to participate in collective decision-making. Parents are seen as competent citizens “because they have and develop their own experience, points of view, interpretation and ideas…which are the

fruits of their experience as parents and citizens."[26] Workers assume what Oberhuemer[27] has termed "democratic professionalism," understanding their role as practitioners of democracy. While recognizing that they bring an important perspective and a relevant local knowledge to the democratic forum, they are also aware that they do not have *the* truth nor privileged access to knowledge.

Implementing democracy also needs to be supported by what has been called a 'competent system', which is a system of "reciprocal relationships between individuals, teams, institutions and the wider socio-political context…[that provides] support for individuals to realise their capability to develop responsible and responsive practices that respond to the needs of children and families in ever-changing societal contexts".[28] An example of a potentially important component in such a system is the role of the *pedagogista* in northern Italy, an experienced educator working with a small number of schools to help develop understanding of learning processes and pedagogical work through, for example, pedagogical documentation.[29,30] Another example is to be found in Portugal, where a strong commitment to democracy in education at national and individual setting levels is complemented by MEM, the *Movimento da Escola Moderna* (Portuguese Modern School Movement). MEM is a pedagogical movement that "constructs contemporary responses to a school education intrinsically orientated by democratic values of direct participation, through structures of educational cooperation".[31] Born out of the struggle for freedom from dictatorship, inspired by Freinet's democratic and cooperative pedagogy and today recognised by national government, the organisation supports teachers from all levels of education through national, regional and local activities that connect teachers' pedagogical practice with opportunities for professional development through dialogue and reflection and that promote democracy.

These examples point to one other key condition: the nurturing of democratic practice in early childhood institutions needs certain material conditions. Examples include: adequate and stable public funding; a well-qualified workforce educated to be democratic professionals; and appropriate pedagogical tools, such as pedagogical documentation.[22,23]

Conclusions

Democratic practice in ECEC means the adoption and enactment of democracy as a fundamental value. Its success is likely to be associated with certain other values being shared among the community of the early childhood institution, for example:

- A commitment to cooperation and solidarity, dialogue and listening;
- Respect for diversity, which relates to the ethics of an encounter, a relational ethics described by Dahlberg and Moss[32] in their discussion of ethics in early childhood education;
- Recognition of multiple perspectives and diverse paradigms,[33] acknowledging that there is more than one answer to most questions and that there are many ways of viewing and understanding the world;
- Welcoming curiosity, uncertainty and subjectivity – and the responsibility that they require of us;
- Developing a capacity for critical thinking, which in the words of Nikolas Rose is "a matter of introducing a critical attitude towards those things that are given to our present experience as if they were timeless, natural, unquestionable: to stand against the maxims of one's time, against the spirit of one's age, against the current of received wisdom…[it is a matter] of interrupting the fluency of the narratives that encode that experience and making them stutter."[34]

The importance of such values for fostering democratic practice is captured in these words by the three pedagogistas from Reggio Emilia already quoted, on the subject of participation in their municipal schools:

Participation is based on the idea that reality is not objective, that culture is a constantly evolving product of society, that individual knowledge is only partial; and that in order to construct a project, everyone's point of view is relevant in dialogue with those of others, within a framework of shared values. The idea of participation is founded on these concepts: and in our opinion, so, too, is democracy itself.[26]

Implications

An important implication of this discussion is the need to examine the values framework of ECEC systems, and to do so in a democratic way – as part of a democratic politics of early childhood education that recognises, in the words of Loris Malaguzzi, "[pedagogy is] always a political discourse whether we know it or not…it clearly means working with political choices".[35] It is insufficient to be content with identifying "what works"; it is also necessary to examine constantly the purposes of education; not only focus on the literacy and science skills necessary for the development of our economies, but also the fundamental values and attitudes that our

children will need to sustain open, democratic and sustainable societies and to help address the converging crises – environmental, political, social and economic - of our times. This means starting from political practice, asking political questions (such as what is your image of the child, the parent, the early childhood institution? What are the fundamental values of education?) and making political choices, before moving on to technical questions: in other words putting ends before means.

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