How should we educate people in a democratic society?

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on Dewey's education theory and his understanding of democracy, this essay attempts to answer the question of how we should educate people in a democratic society.

Foregrounding the life and rights of the child as the core and 'all controlling aim' of education within a democratic society (Dewey 2010, p.16), this essay argues that the child's experience of democratic life inside and outside of the school classroom must connect. Moreover, in educating people in a democratic society, a progressive approach by all education stakeholders is encouraged which enables democratic ideals such as respect, equality, agency and justice to manifest throughout the fabric of school life, permeating leadership and the organisation of schooling, curriculum planning, pedagogical practices and assessment arrangements. Conversely, this essay rejects the dominance of essentialist and perennialist influences that promote teacher-dominated pedagogical practices and undynamic curricula as barriers to positive change which fail to recognise the individual nature, value and life experience of the child, and therefore stifle authentic development.

Keywords: Democracy, Dewey, Children's Rights

In examining the normative question of how we *should* educate people in a democratic society, we can presuppose that the current educational landscape within a democratically governed society is not wholly aligned to

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many of the values which underpin a democracy. We may also question the *need* to marry the process of education and the concept of democracy together. This necessitates an acute understanding of the conceptual basis of democracy as a system of government, way of life, and its implications for the educational experiences of all.

Dewey (1997, p. 34) purports that 'we have been taught that democracy is the best of all social institutions' – that its social arrangements promote a better quality of human experience based on fundamental principles of liberty, equality, and respect free from oppression, coercion and force. Dewey further asserts that democracy is 'more than a form of government; it is primarily a form of associated living; of a conjoint communicated experience' (2011, p. 50). According to Dewey, democracy rests on the organisation of social life through the conjoint communication of experience. The intention behind this communication of experience is that cooperation and collaboration between members of society will improve, leading to the eventual achievement of individual, group, and societal aims.

The case for an enduring democratic society is indubitably strong. However, the practical enactment of democracy within education has proven challenging. Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF 1989), an international human rights treaty, declares that education must be free, compulsory, and available to all. Whilst acknowledging that there is almost universal acceptance of children's rights across the world, Lundy and Brown (2020) make it clear that there is no country in the world – thus including democratic countries – where every child is receiving a high-quality education. Moreover, the privatisation of schools exemplifies the dichotomy that also exists within democratic societies between state-funded schools and privately funded schools. Privatisation denies the democratic right to equality of opportunity in education and thus breeds exclusion and marginalisation (Lundy and Brown 2020, p. 8). Indeed, as argued by Freire (1993), schooling can be interpreted as a process of colonisation by influential, cultural elites through various discourses of cultural hegemony perpetuated through insidious forms of oppressive, cultural action. As such, education is *still* transitioning towards a more progressive, truly democratic model as a counter to a traditional, elitist and unequal system.

As democratic countries and duty-bearers charged with the responsibility of educating the young, we must all confront the question as to whether we are *truly* democratic in *how* we educate. Lundy and Brown (2020) posit a key concern that the real problem lies in the actual

implementation of education rights and not in their justification and construction. In doing so, they highlight a common issue which Ball et al. (2011, p. 633) warn is the biggest challenge for educators – to translate policy aims into practice, which in this case is based on the administering of children's rights and democratic education to varying degrees at school and in the classroom. Democracy is a fragile yet simple concept; it needs nurturing without over-interference by those who would hinder the implementation of democratic education. In other words, the over-engineering of education at the hands of the power elite risks blurring the boundaries between democratic ideals such as choice, freedom, and human agency and over-prescription, over-complexity and competition.

Educational discourse continues to reflect the pressing need for an approach to education which is more compatible with a democratic society. Sterling asserts the need for a more 'humanist, democratic and ecological approach to education' (2001, p. 14) which encapsulates the sense that we are all implicated in the world; that we have to co-create our world together. Freire (1993) also advocates for a humanising pedagogy rooted in the ontological and historical task of becoming more fully human, requiring what he referred to as a radical pedagogy intended to develop *conscientização* – or the critical consciousness of students that Freire argues can help them identify oppressive elements within society and work towards transforming their social reality so that these elements simply can no longer exist.

Despite these aspirations, Lundy and Brown (2020, p. 4) argue that there is a prevailing outlook that adults must control children in order to maintain order and respect for others which is antithetical to the democratic ideals of freedom and human rights. Indeed, suspicions around the exercise of children's rights as a threat to adult authority or adult competence (Lundy and Brown 2020, p. 12) illuminate the insidious, oppressive elements deeply embedded in democratic societies. According to Freire, teachers' own intentions and attempts to bring dialogic and critical practices into classrooms risk marginalisation 'even in ostensibly democratic countries' (1998, p.15).

There is, therefore, a clear disconnect between the human experience of democracy as a way of life inside and outside of the school classroom. Dewey (2010), however, offers an uncomplicated theory to harmonise education with democracy, arguing that:

> When nature and society can live in the school room, when the forms and tools of learning are subordinated to the substance of experience, then there shall be an

> opportunity for this identification, and culture shall be the democratic password. (Dewey 2010, p. 25)

Dewey (2010, p. 16) expresses the need for the life of the child to become the 'all controlling aim' of schools, that schools should excite, nurture, and direct the instincts, interests, and activities of the child rather than impose prescribed, idealised, undynamic knowledge that has no relevance to the authentic life of the child. Dewey (2010) makes an epistemological distinction between passively absorbing knowledge and becoming actively absorbed in the process of the discovery of knowledge influenced by and towards a life-experience – the latter of which he favours. We cannot divorce school from the life experiences of the child within society and, equally, we cannot segregate their experiences in school. If we as a society value democracy, then education must provide opportunities for the communication of experience that enables democratic life both in and out of school.

Dewey's (2010) progressive ideas are sound and well-grounded but when Lundy and Brown (2020, p. 2) claim that there is little recognition of children's voices as essential to the construction of education, there is a justified need for more robust and urgent action to effectively implement Dewey's ideas into the school system.

In this paper, I argue that the life of the child should be the core and 'all controlling aim' (Dewey 2010, p.16) of education within a democratic society. Dewey's (2010) imperative statement reinforces the need for a child-centred response:

> Let the child's nature fulfil its own destiny, the case is of the child. His present powers, capabilities, and attitudes – exercised and realised. (Dewey 2010, p. 77)

The realisation of children's rights based on an equitable partnership between the teacher and the student (Freire 1993) should critically underpin this aim, for 'educational relationships are a microcosm of the interaction between the child and the state, where foundational understandings of citizenship and democratic values are learned' (Lundy and Brown 2020, p. 13). In recognition of these two approaches and both tensions and synergies between them, I argue for a progressive approach to education which ensures democratic ideals manifest clearly in the fabric of school life, permeating leadership and the organisation of schooling, curriculum planning, pedagogical practices and assessment arrangements.

Turning first to the aims of education in a democratic society, it is critical to identify the desired outcome of the experience of education for the

child and wider society. Article 29 of the UNCRC (UNICEF 1989), locates the life of the child as central to its outlined aims of education: 'The preparation of the child for a responsible life in a free society' (UNICEF 1989). Its core principles seek to embed children's rights within society so that all children experience unequivocal respect, feel protected from discrimination, and enjoy the right to life and development.

Dewey's (1997) aim for education is similarly based on instilling these ideals of democracy in each individual. Dewey explains that 'the ideal aim of education is the creation of power of self-control' (1997, p. 64). Dewey (1997) prioritises human agency to think and act independently over an idealist or realist perspective which favours the transmission of idealised, static knowledge as their aim and purpose. To realise educational aims through the perspective of an idealist in a democratic society is therefore misaligned; to enact the process of education merely through one's own mind or purely through observation is to isolate oneself from shared learning experiences which foster democratic values. As such, it is imperative that the most appropriate aim for education, rooted in a firm philosophical foundation, directly corresponds to the present and future needs of a democratic society and adds value to the life of the child as active citizens in the here and now.

Moreover, Freire describes humans as 'transforming rather than adaptive beings' (1993, p. 94); as historical, autobiographical beings whose transformation occurs in their own existential time. These two perspectives of humankind – that value the authentic development of individuals – support the argument that the aim of education must be student-centred, rooted in the present and aligned towards the future whilst acknowledging an understanding of individuals' subjective, historical experiences and future aspirations. As such, the aim of education in a democratic society must reject the dominance of essentialist and perennialist influences that promote teacher-centred practices and undynamic curricula and embrace more progressive approaches as a means to encourage change, acknowledge the individual nature and life of the child and foster progress towards the future.

Lundy and Brown state firmly that 'democratic behaviours and values need to be reflected in the formal and hidden curriculum, mission statement, codes of conduct and democratic classroom' (2020, p. 6). The duty-bearers must create the necessary conditions within which democratic behaviours and values permeate throughout the school institution so

that children can learn how to live and communicate together in a democratic society.

When Quennerstedt (2010, p. 75) describes education policy as particularly unreceptive to children's rights, it is unsurprising given the deeply entrenched hierarchy of power rooted in education systems. Schools are traditionally hierarchical in structure but democracy as a form of associated living (Dewey 2011) is antonymous with hierarchy. Representative democracy, in which elected persons represent the views of the people, presents a more acceptable foundation upon which to construct a form of hierarchical structure. However, with the focus on the life of the child, children's views of how well the organisation is led and by whom are rarely accounted for. Lundy and Brown (2020, p. 5) state that children are defined and limited by their low status in educational hierarchies and are excluded from dialogue around discipline and school conduct.

In prioritising the democratic rights of children, Lundy and Brown thus call for the eradication of 'traditional hierarchies and power structures which give adults exclusive control over time, space and activities' (2020, p. 6). Democratic behaviours can only thrive if the foundations of an institution enable them to. Freire (1993, p. 155) warns, however, that while organisations do require a level of authority, it cannot be authoritarian. Therefore, there is a need for a radical overhaul of the education system to counter the complexities that arise when there is an attempt to marry it with democratic ideals. Fullan (2015) encapsulates this by describing the 'too tight, too loose dilemma' in which too much freedom can lead to a vague sense of direction whilst defined structures can be too constraining. Balancing authority and leadership in a democratic society is therefore a delicate process whilst realising democratic education within a traditional hierarchical system is a huge challenge – both warrant further research in their implications for education.

By way of illustration, the historical execution of educational leadership has had clear ramifications for the current education workforce in Wales, one of the UK's devolved systems, and its democratic approach to curriculum planning. The Welsh Government (2019) rightly sought to foster teacher agency and student voice in the new Curriculum for Wales by actively involving the profession in its design through a cross-sectional network of Pioneer Schools. As an education workforce historically conditioned to accept top-down leadership and prescription in subject-matter since the implementation of the National Curriculum in 1988, the task has proven problematic. Media discourse (William 2019) highlights teachers'

feelings of exclusion by a small team of senior staff and pioneer schools, which plays directly into the hands of Ball's argument of neo-liberal governance 'giving the appearance of freedom, in a devolved environment' (Ball 2003, p.217). Moreover, reports from the NASUWT, the Teacher's Union, describe how their members 'have lost faith in the progress and development of the reforms and that trust and belief in the process has been seriously undermined' (William 2019). Such problems demonstrate the struggle to sensitively bridge a democratic approach based upon a conjoint, communicated experience (Dewey 2011) in which teachers, leaders, pupils and community work together through authoritative leadership and organisation.

This case has shown that the transition from prescription against a background of managerialist control, to a degree of autonomy has proven challenging in Wales and thus warrants further research. Winch explains the current official conception of teaching as 'an uneasy amalgam of a kind of a craft and of a technical pursuit which involves putting into practice prescriptions worked up by empirical researchers' (2012, p. 16). Winch (2012) depicts the idea of teachers as implementers of policy rather than shapers. So, to be *handed* freedom and the opportunity to exercise agency, whilst grappling with the forces of history, is significantly different from *developing* the conscious understanding to use the newly gained freedoms as a collective.

There is an urgent need for systemic change in which education leaders seriously embrace democratic ideals rather than superficially tokenise them, and this also includes how they relate to the wider community beyond the school confines. Dewey (2010) assertively claims that there is a misuse of education in relation to the life of the child as a result of poor organisation, and he refers specifically to the squandered opportunity by schools in how they connect themselves as a community of individuals with society at large.

Turning now to curriculum planning, this accordingly must reflect the values of the democratic society which envisions and produces it. Dewey (2011) clearly states that:

> The scheme of a curriculum must take account of the adaptation of studies to the needs of the existing community life: it must select with the intention of improving the life we live in common so that the future shall be better than the past. (Dewey 2011, p. 106)

Dewey (2011) is clear that the curriculum cannot be divorced from the reality of the child's entire socio-cultural world and their place within it.

As such, it must also remain a work in progress to reflect the dynamic nature of changing societies. Indeed, Bron and Veugelers (2014, p. 136) concur in their view that 'an effective curriculum is situational and temporary. It is something that develops in practice.' Moreover, Dewey (2011, p. 107) implores that 'a curriculum which acknowledges the social responsibilities of education must present situations where problems are relevant to the problems of living together'. Dewey's (2011, p. 50) description of democracy as a form of 'associated living' is not merely a notion; it is an unequivocal fact. When we juxtapose this awareness with Sfard's (1998, p. 5) indication of how 'since the dawn of civilisation, human learning is conceived as an acquisition of something', the inherent narrowness of that conception is striking when society demands much more than mere acquisition of facts. Freire (1993, p. 44) vividly describes how, in his banking concept of education, 'the teacher's task is to fill the students with the contents of his narration'. This blatantly disregards the needs of a democratic society and frivolously disrespects the unique nature and ability of each individual student. This directly conflicts with Freire's pre-requisite for an educator – to respect children and what they already know (1998, p. 3). Freire (1993) powerfully depicts students as objects waiting to be filled with knowledge – imposed upon them from above – thus perpetuating an alienating intellectualism entirely devoid of their own life experiences and without recognition of them as conscious, subjective, historical beings in their own right.

Dewey's (2011) and Freire's (1993) respective suggestions to democratise traditional curricula are both grounded in a conviction that the child is an active citizen who has a right to play their equal part in the construction of their lives and the societies within which they live. Moreover, in respecting that 'all studies arise from aspects of the one Earth, and the one life lived upon it, that we live in a world where all sides are bound together' (Dewey 2010, p. 34), a holistic curriculum which recognises the interwoven, ecological nature of life, would reflect Dewey's (2011, p. 50) view of democracy as 'a conjoint, communicated experience'. Curriculum design should integrate knowledge and skills through educational experiences as well as the lived experiences of pupils outside of school, creating a unity of curriculum and experience for the child.

Taking account of Freire's (1993, p. 101) description of humans as 'communicative creatures' and Dewey's (2011) concept of democracy in which the communication of experience is key; we can interpret the teacher (subject) / student (object) contradiction argued by Freire (1993)

within the contemporary classroom as inherently undemocratic, and it is to the pedagogical enactment of a democratic curriculum that I now turn.

Dewey (1997, p. 61) decried the fixed arrangements of the typical traditional classroom with their rows of desks, for example, for its restrictive effects upon intellectual and moral freedom. In executing Freire's (1993) banking model of education, these spaces lend themselves to a teacher-dominated pedagogy. Freire (1993) juxtaposes his banking concept of education – that teachers deposit information, anti-dialogically, into the empty minds of children – with his problem posing concept of education which he posits as an 'instrument for liberation' (1993, p. 7). Within Freire's (1993) problem posing concept of education, critical thinking is fostered for the purpose of and practice of freedom; the act of depositing information is replaced with the posing of problems that human beings encounter in their relationship with the world. Through dialectical discourse and account of their subjective experiences, students reconstruct a new social reality based on social justice, equality, and freedom.

Dewey (1997, p. 62) is equally critical of the 'enforced quiet and acquiescence' which suppress the true natures of students in such learning environments. Dewey (2011, p. 102) further argues that 'the problem of teaching is to keep the experience of the student moving in the direction of what the expert already knows'. At the classroom level, the traditional teacher now works concomitantly – unwittingly perhaps – with the aims of the 'oppressor' (Freire 1993) by imposing their own purpose for student learning. Indeed, from a young person's perspective of living and being in a democratic society, they see parent and teacher authoritarianism as inimical to their own freedom (Freire 1993, p. 127). Achieving a level of social control which does not violate individual freedoms is therefore key (Dewey 1997, p. 54). In Dewey's (2010, p. 71) opinion, an educator should guide the students' intelligence as an aid to freedom and not a restriction upon it.

In further response to these issues, Freire (1993, p. 141) advocates a dialogic pedagogy which positions teachers and students in an equitable, dynamic relationship based on essential communication. Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and students-of-the-teacher cease to exist, and a new term emerges – teacher-student with students-teachers (Freire 1993, p. 53). This, in turn, forms a powerful, reciprocal partnership which also enables a student voice initiative focused on curriculum and pedagogy – the absence of which Lundy and Cook-Sather (2016, p. 4) were critical. Freire's (1993) representation of the co-construction of a

pedagogy of the oppressed – forged *with* the oppressed – foregrounds his idea for a more humanising pedagogy based on co-intentional education. Freire (1993) believes that a humanist, revolutionary educator must partner with students as equal and active participants. As such, the role of oppression in this relationship is nullified.

Finally, there is an urgent need to ensure the design of assessment reflects the purpose of a democratic curriculum and child-centred pedagogical framework. When set against a background of neo-liberalism and managerialism which prioritise competition and performativity (Ball 2003), there is a direct conflict between what and how the teacher [who now reverts to the role of the oppressed] wants to facilitate learning and what leaders and policymakers who institutionalise forms of cultural hegemony exercised by cultural elites [the oppressors] want to achieve at school and society level. In such cases, society abandons the vision of the child as an active citizen in the here and now and surrenders educational experiences solely to the perceived need to produce and prepare adult consumers for the future. As a consequence, this blunts the professionalism of the teacher and quashes the democratic ideal of respect for the individual worth of the child. Such competitive conditions engender:

> The type of teaching that is focused primarily on the accumulation of knowledge, leading to an excessive burden of work on children, which may seriously hamper the harmonious development of the child to the fullest potential. (Lundy and Cook-Sather 2016, p. 4)

In examining how we should educate people in a democratic society, this paper argues for systemic change and strong commitment amongst all duty-bearers and stakeholders involved in education to urgently shift attitudes, beliefs and actions to progress and centralise the life and rights of the child. This paper advocates the need to be aware of oppressive elements within society (Freire 1993) and to be mindful of the ostensible appearance of freedom (Ball 2003). In educating for a democratic society, the aims – underpinned by democratic ideals – must foreground curriculum design, pedagogical practices, and the nature and function of assessment. By focusing on the experiences of the child, there is power to engender change so that children may enjoy their rights *ad infinitum*. Children – *with* their teachers – share a collective power to subvert oppressive elements by practising freedom in the classroom, thereby forcing change beyond the school community to wider society at large, in order to create a new future within and for a thriving democracy. This relies, however, on the collective will of all to vehemently uphold the principles of democracy.

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