

Child care – Early childhood education and care

Increasingly common, early childhood care plays an important role in children's development and provides a valuable support to families with young children. It is therefore important to understand the impact of these services and to ensure their quality and accessibility.

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Democracy as First Practice in Early Childhood Education and Care

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February 2011

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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, Paolo Freire and Loris Malaguzzi. Today it still has proponents,^{1,2,3,4} however the discourse of democratic education is in danger of being drowned out by two other discourses, that of quality and that of markets. 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. By contrast, the discourse of markets favors deregulation but understands early childhood education and care as a commodity for sale to parent-consumers. Neither discourse values democracy in the practice of early childhood education. As Carr and Hartnett⁵ 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.⁵

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 a fundamental value of early childhood services. As George⁶ 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.*⁶

What is democracy?

Democracy is a multi-dimensional concept, with different forms and practices linked to each dimension. There is representative democratic government with its traditional practices: election of representatives to governing bodies operating at different levels, the working of these bodies (e.g., national parliaments, local councils) and the various rules and norms 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 them. In this sense, democracy can also be understood as a mode of being in the world, as a form of living together, that is, a Deweyian idea of democracy as more than a form of government, as "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."⁷ This implies maximizing opportunities for sharing, exchanging and negotiating perspectives and opinions. It also implies that democracy is a way of relating to 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

Democratic practice in early childhood education and care must operate at several levels: not just the institutional that is, the nursery or preschool, but also at national or federal, regional and 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.)^{8,9} Each level should support the operation of democracy at other levels.

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 provide 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 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. A democratic system also involves each level leaving space for democratic practice at other levels, with strong decentralisation from national to more local levels.⁸

At local government level

What does democratic practice in early childhood education and care (ECEC) mean at local levels of government? It may mean developing a “local cultural project of childhood.”¹⁰ 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.

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 John Dewey’s principle that “all those who are affected by social institutions must have a share in producing and managing them.”¹¹ 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,¹² or elected boards of parents involved in pedagogical, budgetary and staffing issues.¹³ But apart from formal governing bodies, children or adults may also be involved in decision making about everyday or major matters (see Clark¹⁴ 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.”^{15,16} Pedagogies of “invention” or “listening,” open to unpredicted outcomes and new thought, are necessarily inscribed with democratic values and practices.

3. The evaluation of early childhood work through participatory methods. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence¹⁷ 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), 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, and planning and democratic practice.¹⁸
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 supervisors – 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’”.¹⁹

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.”²⁰

Conditions for democracy

Early childhood services offer an ideal space for participatory democratic practice: the rule of all by all. This space 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.*²¹

Other understandings are also important, for example the image of the child, parents and workers. 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 too 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.”²¹ Workers assume what Oberhuemer²² 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.

Conclusions

Democratic practice needs certain values to be shared among the community of the early childhood institution, for example:

- Respect for diversity, which relates to the ethics of an encounter, a relational ethics described by Dahlberg and Moss²³ in their discussion of ethics in early childhood education;
- Recognition of multiple perspectives and diverse paradigms – 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;
- 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.”²⁴ 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.²¹

Implications

An important implication of this approach is the need to examine the values framework of early childhood and education systems. It is insufficient to be content with identifying “what works;” one needs also to examine constantly the purposes of education, not only 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 societies. The nurturing of democratic practice in early childhood institutions – such as the involvement of parents and respect for the natural learning strategies and agency of young children – needs also certain material conditions. Examples include: adequate and stable public funding, a well-qualified workforce educated to be democratic professionals; critical support structures, such as the pedagogistas of northern Italy;²⁵ and appropriate pedagogical tools, such as pedagogical documentation.^{17,18}

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How to cite this article:

Moss P. Democracy as First Practice in Early Childhood Education and Care. In: Tremblay RE, Boivin M, Peters RDeV, eds. Bennett J, topic ed. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online]. <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/child-care-early-childhood-education-and-care/according-experts/democracy-first-practice-early>. Published February 2011. Accessed June 10, 2018.

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Topic Editor:

John Bennett, M.Ed., PhD, OECD, France

Last update: March 2018

Topic funded by:



Margaret & Wallace McCain
Family Foundation

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