

Early childhood education and care democracy as first practice in early childhood education and care ^[1]

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Excerpted from 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 thrived 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

Region: International ^[4]

Tags: democracy ^[5]

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