
TOWARDS DEMOCRATIC CULTURE AND POLITICAL PRACTICE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: THE CASE FOR TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE AT A TIME OF CONVERGING CRISIS

RUMO A UMA CULTURA DEMOCRÁTICA E PRÁTICA POLÍTICA NA EDUCAÇÃO
DE INFÂNCIA: O CASO PARA UMA MUDANÇA TRANSFORMADORA NUM
MOMENTO DE CRISE CONVERGENTE

HACIA LA CULTURA DEMOCRÁTICA Y LA PRÁCTICA POLÍTICA EN LA
EDUCACIÓN INFANTIL: EL CASO DEL CAMBIO TRANSFORMADOR EN UN
TIEMPO DE CRISE CONVERGENTE

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RESUMO

O artigo argumenta a importância da escolha de uma cultura democrática para a educação em geral e para a educação de infância em particular. Situa a sua discussão numa visão de cultura democrática no contexto actual de crises existenciais convergentes e de fim da hegemonia neoliberal, tornando a mudança transformadora, embora difícil, ao mesmo tempo urgente e possível. O conceito de “cultura democrática” é elaborado e é enfatizada a sua importância para a produção de significado para permitir uma mudança de práticas e pensamentos técnicos para práticas e pensamentos políticos. São consideradas algumas possíveis consequências da escolha de uma cultura democrática para a educação de infância, em termos das escolhas políticas que podem ser feitas no que diz respeito aos propósitos da educação, da pedagogia e da imagem das escolas, dos professores e das crianças. O artigo termina considerando possíveis processos de mudança transformadora para a educação de infância, fornecendo exemplos de projetos locais que evoluíram em direção a uma cultura democrática.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE educação de infância, cultura democrática, prática política, crise convergente

ABSTRACT

The paper argues the case for choosing a democratic culture for education in general and early childhood education in particular. It locates its discussion, and the case made for democratic culture, in a current context of converging existential crises and the ending of the neoliberal hegemony, making transformative change, though difficult, both urgent and possible. The concept of ‘democratic culture’ is elaborated and its importance for the production of meaning and for enabling a turn from technical to political thinking and practice emphasised. Some possible consequences of choosing a democratic culture for early childhood education are considered, in terms of the political choices that may be made with respect to the purposes of education, pedagogy and the image of schools, teachers and children. The article ends by considering possible processes of transformative change for early childhood education, providing examples of local projects that have evolved towards a democratic culture.

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RESUMEN

El artículo argumenta la importancia de elegir una cultura democrática para la educación en general y para la educación de la primera infancia en particular. Situa su discusión dentro de una visión de la cultura democrática en el contexto actual de crisis existenciales convergentes y el fin de la hegemonía neoliberal, haciendo que el cambio transformador, aunque difícil, al mismo tiempo sea urgente y posible. Se elabora el concepto de “cultura democrática” y se enfatiza su importancia para la producción de significado para permitir un cambio de prácticas y pensamientos técnicos a prácticas y pensamientos políticos. Se consideran algunas posibles consecuencias de elegir una cultura democrática para la educación de la primera infancia, en términos de las decisiones políticas que se pueden tomar con respecto a los propósitos de la educación, la pedagogía y la imagen de las escuelas, los maestros y los niños. El artículo finaliza considerando posibles procesos de cambio transformador para la educación de la primera infancia, brindando ejemplos de proyectos locales que han evolucionado hacia una cultura democrática.

PALAVRAS-CLAVE: educación de la primera infancia, cultura democrática, práctica política, crisis convergente

1 INTRODUCTION

Democracy as a principle productive of policies, pedagogies, images, and subjectivities, is part of a long tradition in education. Interpretations and practices of ‘democratic education’, ‘democratic pedagogy’, ‘democratic school’, and ‘democratic subjects’ were put forward in the past by a rollcall of leading educators, including Célestin Freinet, John Dewey and Loris Malaguzzi, amongst others who bestowed a vanguardist role to democracy in education. In this role democracy was considered a central contributor to the flourishing and survival of societies and to struggles against injustice, oppression, and exclusion. Entangled in the bounds of the relationship between education and society, democracy was approached and conjectured, by educators such as these, as a value, a relational ethic, and a practice that in schools can be expressed as both a way of self-governing and a pedagogy, and which forms and informs ways of thinking and living, is transmutable, and, within its diversity, can reinvent itself. Adopting this idea of democratic self-government and pedagogy, the school, in its broadest educational sense, becomes a strategic space for the development of critical awareness (*conscientização*/conscientisation) (Freire, 1998) of individuals as democratic subjects and collective social agents of transformation. In this logic, democracy has a role in the construction of education as relational ethics, influencing how individuals connect to each other’s necessities and the ways in which they contribute to the common good in society.

In this article, we recognise these visions and traditions of democratic education as “conjoint communicated experience” (Dewey, 1916, p.87) and push the debate further in a direction that can inspire us about the future. At a time of converging and inter-connected

environmental, political, social, and economic crises, we argue the urgency of renewing early childhood education (but also all education) as, first and foremost, a ‘political practice’ that is conducted as part of a ‘democratic culture’. Such a practice and such a culture are, we believe, best placed to protect us from unparalleled existential threats and to enable individuals, communities, and wider societies to survive and flourish.

Our approach, therefore, is to treat democracy not just as a value or a relationship or a method, but more broadly as a culture. As a broad concept, we describe culture as 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. Culture, so understood, is ‘superorganic’ and shapes how individuals understand and relate to the world.

Its individual expression inheres in meaning making, assigning meanings to things in different settings on particular occasions. Meaning making involves situating encounters with the world in their appropriate cultural contexts in order to know "what they are about." Although meanings are "in the mind," they have their origins and their significance in the culture in which they are created. It is this cultural situatedness of meanings that assures their negotiability and, ultimately, their communicability. Whether "private meanings" exist is not the point; what is important is that meanings provide a basis for cultural exchange. On this view, knowing and communicating are in their nature highly interdependent, indeed virtually inseparable. For however much the individual may seem to operate on his or her own in carrying out the quest for meanings, nobody can do it unaided by the culture's symbolic systems. It is culture that provides the tools for organizing and understanding our worlds in communicable ways. (BRUNER, 1996, p.3)

A ‘democratic culture’ is embedded in relationships that foreground interconnectedness and interdependency, conviviality and collegiality, and respect for difference. A democratic culture of education is one that sees change in a way that recognises belonging and mutuality, and which can only be realised in association with others. It is open to diversity, uncertainty and permanent provisionality, which enable a recognition of the languages, changes, and experiences that children and adults go through in their educational journeys. It is about understanding that education is always positioned as a cultural and political practice that confronts us with choices, something well appreciated by Loris Malaguzzi when he said that the early childhood education in the city of Reggio Emilia means

for us (at least for me it means) that pedagogy is not totally cultural, and that politics plays the role it has to play, so that our discourse inevitably is also always a political discourse whether we know it or not. It is about working with cultural choices, but it clearly also means working with political choices. (MALAGUZZI, in CAGLIARI et al., 2016, p.267)

In a democratic culture these political and cultural choices can enable and empower forms of difference, equity, social justice, freedom, participation and solidarity, which are

framed within particular political and ethical conditions that foster questioning within diverse areas of social life. Establishing a democratic culture demands constant interrogation to allow for the acknowledgement of subjectivities while enabling understandings of the origins of production of knowledge and its dissemination in education and society. As a political discourse and practice, adopting a democratic culture, as an unfinished, continuous, inclusive, and reflexive process, raises critical and emancipatory possibilities for political and pedagogical practices. We consider some of these possibilities later in the article.

2 CONDITIONS OF THE TIMES: A WORLD OF CONVERGING CRISES

A democratic culture of education provides access to various ways of living and thinking, which given the current conditions of the times, can support a recognition of problems and foster the civic courage and moral responsibility needed for transformative change. But what are these conditions? For like Malaguzzi, we believe it is imperative that education is based on and relevant to an analysis of contemporary conditions.

Our conception of pedagogy [must be] dynamic, not mummified. Either pedagogy – like all the human sciences – is remade, reconstructed and updated based on the new conditions of the times, or it loses its nature, its function, its proper capacity to correspond to the times it lives in, and above all to foresee, anticipate and prepare the days of tomorrow. (MALAGUZZI, in CAGLIARI et al., 2016, p.143)

It seems to us that the ‘conditions of the times’ are dominated by converging and existential crises, crises that are global in scope and/or consequence, though often manifesting themselves and experienced differently at regional or local levels. In January 2023, the Doomsday Clock was moved to just 90 seconds to midnight³, the closest it has ever been set to midnight, influenced by “Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the increased risk of nuclear escalation...[but also by] continuing threats posed by the climate crisis and the breakdown of global norms and institutions needed to mitigate risks associated with advancing technologies and biological threats such as COVID-19” (Spinazze, 2023) – an important but by no means exhaustive inventory of the environmental and other crises facing humankind.

These crises have been exacerbated by the devastating consequences of neoliberalism, the dominant political culture of the last 40 years, including increased

³“Founded in 1945 by Albert Einstein and University of Chicago scientists who helped develop the first atomic weapons in the Manhattan Project, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists created the Doomsday Clock two years later, using the imagery of apocalypse (midnight) and the contemporary idiom of nuclear explosion (countdown to zero) to convey threats to humanity and the planet. The Doomsday Clock is set every year by the Bulletin’s Science and Security Board in consultation with its Board of Sponsors, which includes 11 Nobel laureates. The Clock has become a universally recognized indicator of the world’s vulnerability to catastrophe from nuclear weapons, climate change, and disruptive technologies in other domains.” (MECKLIN, 2022, p.2)

inequality, insecurity and alienation and the undermining of democracy, solidarity and public services. As a doctrine which follows the rules and values of free-market capitalism and deregulation; “a set of financial practices and exchanges” concerned with “money and profit” (Ball, 2012, p.23); and a commodified view of the world which has transformed the last forty years of political landscapes, everyday lives, and personal identities (Mouffe, 2018),

[n]eoliberalism 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 (BALL, 2021, p.xv)

As an ideology, movement, and culture, promoting the economisation of everything, ‘the conversion of non-economic domains, activities and subjects into economic ones’ (Brown, 2016, p.3), neoliberalism has valued competition, individual choice, calculation, certainty and control. As a form of authoritarianism which “does not tolerate doubt, critical enquiry, or knowledgeable judgements” (Giroux, 2022, p.5), the past forty years of neoliberal culture which has permeated deeply into public and political thought, has been especially harmful for education.

Under neoliberalism, education, from early childhood to adult education, has become fully economised, its purposes “re-defined in terms of a narrower set of concerns about human capital development, and the role education must play to meet the needs of the global economy and to ensure the competitiveness of the global economy” (Rizvi and Lingard, 2009, p.10). This has had profound effects on education, spread around the world through what has been termed the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM), premised, according to Sahlberg (2012), on five principles: market logic and competition; standardisation; a focus on core subjects as “determinants of perceived success or failure of pupils, teachers, schools, and entire education systems”; business management models for schools; and test-based accountability (ibid.).

Through its economic ends and restrictive means, neoliberalism fosters and “thrives on modes of education geared towards certainty, rigidity, unquestioning loyalty to authority, cultism, and instrumental reason” (Giroux, 2022, p.5). Education in this perspective is reduced to, first and foremost, technical-scientific “training rather than educating” (Freire, 2004a, p.19), with emphasis placed on human technologies and strong management to achieve unquestioned and predefined outcomes, while in parallel being transformed into a private benefit and tradeable commodity which serves as a tool of domination and control by those in power (Giroux, 2022). Education has, in short, become first and foremost a technical practice.

The emphasis of neoliberalism on the technical is matched by its denial of the political, combining “an insidious and seductive economisation of the social and depoliticization of the political” (Ball, 2021, p.xv). For since ‘there is no alternative’ to neoliberal culture (to use a phrase much used by Margaret Thatcher), the only choices left concern deciding on ‘best buys’ and ‘what works’. But like much else in the world, education is never neutral, innocent, or devoid of alternatives: it is always political, always requires (as Malaguzzi asserted) “working with political choices”.

The consequences of neoliberalism in education are not only structural, but also pedagogic, as it hinders the potential of education to “...challenge the learner to critically think through the social, political and historic reality within which he or she is a presence” (Freire, 2004a, p.19). This means that education framed through neoliberal lenses provides less opportunities to experience collective realities and develop critical understandings of the same, within the intersubjectivity of learning as a social and cognitive process involving co-construction, rather than an individual competitive race. In the words of Giroux, this denial of political responsibility means that “[c]ritical agency and social justice are undermined in a neoliberal society in which ethics and justice are viewed as a private affair rather than a public good” (Giroux, 2022, p.69), impeding the development of public education systems that contribute to a vision of a future where we can reimagine new ways of being and relating, and where we all belong and feel included. (For a fuller discussion of the effects of neoliberalism on education, especially early childhood education, see Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021).

It seems to us, and others, that the neoliberal hegemony is now nearing an end: “its promises did not survive the test of the real world...[and today] are largely exhausted” (Beckert, 2020, p.322), while its devastating effects on people, communities and societies are increasingly evident (Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021). We are put in mind of Gramsci’s conclusion “that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear” (Gramsci, 1930); proffered nearly 100 years ago, his diagnosis resonates strongly today. The interregnum that Gramsci spoke of is upon us, and the new must be born, made all the more urgent by the perilous state of the world. In these circumstances transformative change may be very difficult – but it is also very urgent and very possible, for we have entered a time where the ‘politically impossible has become the politically inevitable’ (Friedman, 1962/1982). An essential part of that transformation, in our view, must be the birth of a democratic culture and politics regaining its position as first practice – in education, but also throughout our societies. In the next sections we discuss some of what this complex and demanding transformation may mean. We question and argue for a democratic culture in education acknowledging that such transformative change means building bridges and being open to both the strengths and fragilities characteristic of democracy, such as uncertainty, unpredictability, and surprise.

3 WHAT TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE: A DEMOCRATIC CULTURE AND POLITICS AS FIRST PRACTICE

In our earlier definition of culture, we argued that “[c]ulture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates.” (Anzaldúa, 2012, p.38). In other words, cultures, with their attendant norms, beliefs, attitudes and ways of seeing the world, produce the meanings, purposes, practices, and images that form the realities we navigate and create our ways of being and belonging, doing and thinking. Considering “the role of schools as places for encouraging the concept of educability, not just in terms of acquiring a shared culture, but also as producing a culture” (Malaguzzi in Hoyuelos, 2013, p.23), it becomes indispensable for our survival that we engage in the writing and rewriting of narratives that disrupt ideas of one perception, one perspective, and one picture of reality – so typical of neoliberal culture. This awareness of production of meanings through culture is essential not only because within our human subjectivities we have already “internalised appropriate rules and ideologies, have accommodated ourselves to dominant power relationships, and are more concerned with performing expected actions than with analysing them” (Cherryholmes, 1988, p.6) - but also because questioning our beliefs and actions will enable us to see a variety of realities in new ways.

In this perspective there is the recognition that the strong neoliberal culture that dominates most of our lives today is very different from the democratic culture that we advocate for. A neoliberal culture in education values competition and individual choice, certainty and control; it believes in market logic and provision by private business, and in the need to achieve predetermined and standardised outcomes guaranteed to enhance human capital; it assumes test performance and return on investment are the optimal criteria for success; and it strives to produce an ideal subject, *homo economicus*, self-interested and calculating, forever seeking to further their own interests and maximise their own personal advantage. By contrast, a democratic culture in education values equality and cooperation, sustainability and complexity, diversity and uncertainty, participation and collective choice; it judges success in terms of creativity and new thought, individual benefit and public good; and it strives to produce a subject who combines *homo politicus* with *homo carens*, a political being who lives with relationships of care.

We shall look in the next section at what this turn to a democratic culture might mean for education. But here we want to suggest that one important consequence of this change is a move from technical to political thinking and practice. Throughout the past forty years, the neoliberal pessimistic and fatalist tone of ‘no alternative’ has led us to believe that “we have no choice but to adapt both our hopes and our abilities to the new global market” (Aronowitz, 1998, p.7). In the same logic, Freire (1998) argues that “[t]he fatalistic philosophy

of neoliberal politics...is a case in point of how human interests are abandoned whenever they threaten the values of the market” (Freire, 1998, p.93). Since neoliberalism offers this totalising ideology that claims to explain and determine everything, all that is left to decide is which technology to select and deploy to secure the best economic returns.

But the democratic culture assumes and values diversity and therefore alternatives, often conflicting, not least about substantive matters of the public good, such as purposes and goals, values and ethics in education. It assumes and values, too, a public domain of common interests and shared benefits, populated by citizens who are protagonists in political practice. The democratic culture insists on the primacy of political practice and political choices, not dispensing with technical practice, but relegating it to a subsidiary role, to be worked with after politics has had its say. The turn to a democratic culture, therefore, opens up to a politics of early childhood (and all) education as a project of hope that enables the restoration of education as a political discourse and practice. One that in light of recent claims of neoliberalism’s deep crisis and terminal decline reclaims forgotten dialogical opportunities and recognises collective power and responsibility as integral for social, economic, environmental, and cultural transformation.

A democratic culture in which politics is first practice enables the framing and discussion of new political questions, or rather old questions that have fallen into abeyance during the neoliberal hegemony. In contrast to neoliberalism’s obsessive technical question of ‘what works in education’, democratic cultures ask open questions, such as ‘what do we mean by education?’, ‘what is the purpose of education?’, ‘what are the goals that education should strive to achieve?’, ‘what ethics for education?’ and ‘what do we want for our children, here and now and in the future?’. These questions are open because posed from a position of uncertainty, inquisitiveness, and welcoming of the unknown.

It is the uncertainty embraced in democratic cultures that is so hard to accept for those who strive for control. Democratic cultures of education are open for surprise and always ask questions, for which they do not know the answer. In this sense they align with Bruner’s concept of ‘culturalism’ which

takes as its first premise that education is not an island, but part of the continent of culture. It asks first what function "education" serves in the culture and what role it plays in the lives of those who operate within it. Its next question might be why education is situated in the culture as it is, and how this placement reflects the distribution of power, status, and other benefits. Inevitably, and virtually from the start, culturalism also asks about the enabling resources made available to people to cope, and what portion of those resources is made available through "education," institutionally conceived. (BRUNER, 1996, p.11)

This implies the recognition of the complexities of culture and results from the democratic culture's norm of listening, which is not only a form of recognising rights, but also of increasing possible opportunities. In this sense, actions such as participation, rather than an adjective of democratic culture, become a norm. The question is then, how do educational settings/schools enable inclusive practices of participation between adults and children alike?

Participation also connects with another cultural norm, the importance given in a democratic culture to respect for diversity; if a neoliberal culture seeks standardisation in education and the imposition of homogeneity, a democratic culture embraces diversity by fostering heterogeneity, and welcoming the attendant enhanced possibilities for the unpredicted, the surprising, and the generation of new thought through encounters with difference. This is particularly important in a social world which is currently torn between the logics of instrumental and economic rationality, and the humanistic and ethical responsibility towards the natural and social problems of the world. This is where democratic culture has the potential to emerge as an ethos of social relationship which embraces transformative change through political action.

In saying this, we argue for political practice within a democratic culture as an emancipatory purpose for education, providing a critical vision of who we are and who we can be as a society. This marks a change of direction for education: instead of a hegemonic conception of knowledge production and distribution, we can conceptualise an education that crosses cultural, political, and theoretical borders while providing the conditions for students and teachers to develop and understand themselves as informed critical citizens and agents of transformation. Moving towards politics as first practice within a democratic culture provides a "framework that makes visible the question of human development, of learning, which is to say, the pedagogical function that democratic discourse and institutional practices might play in the constitution of individual and collective identities" (Hernandez, 1997, p.33). It restores to its rightful place the idea of education as a public good in the public domain, after neoliberalism's long struggle to privatise it; and it restores too the value to democracy and politics of plurality and difference, contestation and dissensus, dialogue and listening. In sum, a democratic culture as a political choice, that in turn opens up ever more areas of political choice, leading to more unforeseeable possibilities.

4 WHAT DOES TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE MEAN FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION?

The turn to democratic culture and politics as first practice means, first and foremost, a struggle to create and maintain a democratic politics of early childhood education – indeed of all education. This will involve, following Chantal Mouffe, an agonistic idea of democratic politics, in which there are always differences of perspective, interest and power, which are made visible and, therefore, contestable in a continuous process. But this prospect

should not be cause for despair because the desire to reach a final destination can only lead to the elimination of the political and the destruction of democracy. In a democratic polity, conflicts and confrontations, far from being a sign of imperfection, indicate that democracy is alive and inhabited by pluralism (MOUFFE, 2000, p.34).

In this context, political questions are debated and contested, with an acknowledgement that alternatives always exist, that these alternatives are often in conflict, and that political choices must therefore be made.

It is not the aim of this article to draw up a comprehensive list of political questions, still less to offer answers, but rather to argue the importance of defining and posing such questions and of the process of making choices between the often-conflicting answers that may be put forward to them. However, we can provide a few examples of this democratic political discourse, both questions and choices, starting with one of the most fundamental political questions: ‘what is early childhood education for?’ One possible purpose, out of many possibilities, is of particular relevance to the subject of this article: to nurture and sustain a democratic culture and offer opportunities for the practice of politics. This echoes the words of John Dewey that “[d]emocracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife” (Dewey, 1900) and of Celestin Freinet that “one prepares the democracy of tomorrow by democracy in the school” (Freinet, 1947).

Choosing the invigoration of democracy and politics as one of the purposes of education has implications for choices made in response to another political question: ‘what is the image of the school?’. As always with political questions, there are many possible answers, some that conflict with a democratic purpose for education. There is a long tradition of schools being places of repression, of imposition, and of the reproduction of inequality and injustice; under neoliberalism, the image of the school, it has been argued (Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2020), has become that of a business marketing a commodified education to parent-consumers and a processing plant delivering predetermined and standardised outcomes - the school as an ‘exam factory’.

But there are other images that are enabled by and commensurate with a democratic culture – not, it should be emphasised, inevitabilities, but rather possibilities if certain political choices are made and acted upon; images that ‘may’ or ‘can’ be chosen, not ‘must’ or ‘will’. Keri Facer, for example, has argued that

[the school] as a physical space and a local organization...may be one of the most important institutions we have to help us build a democratic conversation about the future. A physical, local school where community members are encouraged to encounter each other and learn from each other is one of the last public spaces in which we can begin to build the intergenerational solidarity, respect for diversity and democratic capability needed to ensure fairness in the context of sociotechnical change (FACER, 2011, p.29).

For Facer, a Professor of Educational and Social Futures, a democratic education and school can play important roles in creating the conditions for ecologically sustainable and socially just futures – two further purposes for education. Facer’s image of the school is a place of encounter for citizens, a public meeting place for engaging with important public matters, a public space inscribed with democratic culture and intended for political practice. A similar image is chosen by Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2013, p.78) when they write that “[e]arly childhood institutions can be understood as public forums situated in civil society in which children and adults participate together in projects of social, cultural, political and economic significance” – projects that include democratic conversations, conversations that build, and are enabled by, “democratic capability” or democratic culture. Their understanding has much in common with Henri Giroux (2016, p.201) who proposes an image of schools

as a polity, as a locus for citizenship . . . [defining] them as public spaces that seek to recapture the idea of critical democracy and community . . . By ‘public space’ I mean, as Hannah Arendt did, a concrete set of learning conditions where people come together to speak, to engage in dialogue, to share their stories and to struggle together within social relations that strengthen rather than weaken possibilities for active citizenship.

If they are to fulfil an educational purpose of furthering democratic culture and to act as public spaces, then this has further implications for schools and other educational institutions. A culture of democracy is proclaimed and permeates every aspect of school life: as Alex Bloom (1948) wrote of St-Georges-in-the-East, his secondary school in East London, “[The intention is to create a] consciously democratic community...where democracy is a lived experience”. The school as public space must be open to all children and their families in the area they serve, creating an inclusive public school that has been termed the ‘common school’ (Fielding and Moss, 2011). This was Dewey’s concept of the school, believing that

individuals can only learn to understand themselves as democratic individuals by becoming members of a community in which the problems of communal life are resolved through collective deliberation and a shared concern for the common good. For this reason, *a democratic school is a common school providing a broad social community to which children of different race, class, gender and religion can belong*. Democratic schools thus offer a ‘mode of associated living’. (CARR, 1998, p.335; emphasis added)

As “living centres of open and democratic culture” (Malaguzzi, in Cagliari et al., 2016, p.180) schools must be governed in a democratic way, such as the ‘social management’ model of Reggio Emilia’s municipal schools, with

management councils (*consiglio di gestione*) [that] are made up of parents, teachers and citizens elected by other parents, teachers and citizens at public elections held every three years. The responsibility of councils is to promote participation by other families, assist teachers in decision making and realising projects, and develop relationships with the local area and with other *nidi* and *scuole dell’infanzia* in the city (RINALDI, 2006, p.44).

Such participatory forms of governance are premised on recognising ‘the citizen’s right to engage in the discussion of social issues that concern everyone’ and recognising too their competence to do so “because they have and develop their own experience, points of view, interpretation and ideas...[that] are the fruit of their experience as both parents and citizens” (Cagliari, Barozzi and Giudici, 2007, p.30).

Public or common schools within a democratic culture mean that all citizens assume responsibility for the education of the society’s children and young people, recognising that education and schools are of more than individual benefit, but are a public good. This in turn places a responsibility on schools to be democratically accountable to citizens, meaning “the ideological and ethical concept of a transparent school and transparent education...[A political idea] that what schools do must have public visibility; thus “giving back” to the city what the city has invested in them” (Catarsi, 2004, p.7). Which calls for tools to enable such democratic accountability, tools that foster participation, dialogue and contestation about the work of the school, tools such as pedagogical documentation, emanating in Reggio Emilia but now widely worked with, offering as it does

an extraordinary tool for dialogue, for exchange, for sharing. For Malaguzzi [one of its originators] it means the possibility to discuss and dialogue “everything with everybody” (teachers, auxiliary staff, cooks, families, administrators and citizens)...In fact sharing opinions by means of documentation presupposes being able to discuss real, concrete things – not just theories or words, about which it is possible to reach easy and naïve agreement (HOYUELOS, 2004, p.7).

Such schools, operating in and for a democratic culture, not only foster solidarity and cooperation among children, educators and citizens (note Facer's reference above to their role in building 'respect for diversity' and 'intergenerational solidarity'), but solidarity and cooperation between schools, working together in collaborative networks and supported by 'competent systems'. This is a far cry from the neoliberal culture, with its pursuit of competition between schools understood as autonomous advantage-seeking businesses. Indeed, the public or common school operating within and promoting a democratic culture is incommensurate with the school as private, for-profit business, but will be provided either by democratically accountable public bodies (municipalities, communes, local authorities) or else by non-profit private organisations who have entered into an agreement with such public bodies.

Operating within and with a democratic culture that stimulates political practice will have other implications for schools. An image of the teacher as a 'democratic professional' is chosen, an identity that 'foregrounds collaborative, cooperative action between professional colleagues and other stakeholders...[and] emphasises engaging and networking with the local community" (Oberhuemer, 2005). This means recognising, welcoming and respecting diversity of values, of ideas, of understandings; as Paulo Freire writes, "I must respect positions opposed to my own, positions that I combat earnestly and with passion" (2004b, p.66). The educator-as-democratic professional may offer their 'reading of the world', but at the same time their role is to "bring out the fact that there are other 'readings of the world', different from the one being offered as the educator's own, and at times antagonistic to it" (ibid., p.96). This refers back to our earlier discussion about recognising the competencies of parents as citizens.

A democratic culture of and for education, in a democratic school and with a democratic professional, generates a further political question, 'what pedagogy?' Clearly not a pedagogy of transmission, where the child is seen as a passive and empty vessel to be filled with knowledge to achieve predetermined outcomes with performance measured through standardised testing – Freire's 'banking model' of education in his critique of traditional education systems in 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed', with its metaphor of children as containers into which educators must deposit knowledge. This is a pedagogy of mastery and control, certainty and predictability, where everything is predetermined and there are no alternatives. This is a pedagogy whose image of the child is a reproducer of knowledge and values, a child whose future is already foretold and whose present consists of being constantly readied for the next stage on a linear progress towards that certain end point.

But a democratic culture of education brings forth a very different image of the child as protagonist, who can think and act for themselves, a subject “active in constructing the self and knowledge through social interactions and inter-dependencies” (Malaguzzi in Cagliari et al., 2016, p.377), engaged in co-constructive processes of meaning-making and moving to an untold future. For this child, education is

conceived not so much as the attempt to master and control experience but as the means to create new, unpredictable experience... Through Arendt’s, Dewey’s and Foucault’s converging understandings, we shall come to see how education, far from being captured in preconceived frameworks, opens one’s self toward the undefinable and ever-growing territory of one’s own possibilities (D’AGNESE, 2018, pp.91, 163).

This child and this education, products of and conditions for a democratic culture, require pedagogies of interaction and interconnectedness, research and experimentation, critical thinking and questioning, taking different perspectives seriously (if not uncritically) and valuing the unexpected, the surprising, the creation of new properties. Such pedagogies have been called, *inter alia*, ‘a pedagogy of listening and relationships’, ‘a pedagogy of emancipation’, a ‘pedagogy of transgression’, a ‘critical pedagogy’, a ‘pedagogy of invention’ (Biesta and Osberg, 2007, p.46).

Such pedagogies share the sentiments expressed by an *atelierista* in the municipal schools of Reggio Emilia, who writes that it is

important to society that schools and we as teachers are clearly aware how much space we leave children for original thinking, without rushing to restrict it with predetermined schemes that define what is *correct* according to a school culture. How much do we support children to have ideas different from those of other people and how do we accustom them to arguing and discussing their ideas with their classmates? I am quite convinced that greater attention to processes, rather than only the final product, would help us to feel greater respect for the independent thinking and strategies of children and teenagers. (VECCHI, 2010, p.138)

Space precludes going further into what transformation to a democratic culture and politics as first practice might mean for early childhood (and all) education. We have attempted to show, by example, how it creates a cascading effect, of one political choice leading to another. But it is not only space that precludes a comprehensive account: it is also time. Transformation to a democratic culture is both immense in scope and entails a process of ‘permanent provisionality’, for democracy as “a way of living in, apprehending and changing the world is never finished, but always open to the necessity of critique and transcendence in our quest for the good society” (Fielding and Moss, 2011, p.155). Which takes us from the meaning of transformative change to processes of such change.

5 TOWARDS A DEMOCRATIC CULTURE: PROCESSES OF CHANGE

We end this article with reflections on how a democratic culture, in which politics is first practice, might evolve in early childhood education or indeed across all education. In doing so, we start with an important proviso: that such transformative change in early childhood education should not be seen in, nor be expected to take place in, isolation. Our analysis is that we are in a period of transition, from an old and failing neoliberal regime to a new alternative (though as yet undefined) regime, during which “the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable”; and that this process of transition involves not only all sectors of education, but all aspects of our lives, including the economy, the environment, the welfare state, and how we govern our societies. Transforming early childhood education, therefore, must be one part of a larger transformation; sectoral projects of change must form part of wider societal change. Moreover, transformatory processes of change are neither uniform nor linear nor predictable. They will move at different speeds and with different priorities in different places; they will make irregular advances, with occasional retreats; they will build on existing ideas and documented experiences, but also create new ideas and take unexpected directions – such ‘lines of flight’ occur when something new and different comes about (Olsson, 2009). That is why we say that transformation to a democratic culture is “a process of permanent provisionality.”

One way to describe this process of change is ‘evolutionary’, which indicates the time scale of transformation and its contingency, a gradual and unpredictable process of trial and error, experimentation and research, adaptation to experience and changing conditions. A number of concepts can help us to envisage how such evolutionary change might come about over time, concepts such as ‘prefigurative practice’, ‘real utopias’ and ‘democratic experimentalism’. All of these contribute to a model of change by what Mouffe terms ‘radical reformism’, a transformation through democratic procedures that is “clearly different, both from the revolutionary strategy of the ‘extreme left’ and from the sterile reformism of the social liberals” (Mouffe, 2022, p.4). All attach an important role to local projects that demonstrate the possibility of change, of doing things differently, and that produce new knowledge that can maintain the momentum of transformation. All contain, one could say, an impatience and desire for transformation, not waiting until all the necessary social engineering has been done, and the planned widespread social change brought about.

‘Prefigurative practice’, for instance, as an approach to social change suggests that innovative educational projects could, through the experiences they offer and the expectations they create, prefigure, in microcosm, more equal, just and fulfilling societies. From this perspective, schools need not “merely reflect the world of which they are a part, but be critical of it, and show in their own processes that its shortcomings are not inevitable,

but can be changed” (Dale, 1984, p.17). In his writing on ‘real utopias’, Erik Olin Wright argues the importance of three criteria: desirability, viability and achievability. Desirability is about laying out desired values, ethics and goals; achievability is about the conditions needed to achieve social change on a wide scale; while the crucial intermediary stage of viability is about designing new policies and institutions based on desirable principles. It is

a response to the perpetual objection to radical egalitarian proposals ‘it sounds good on paper, but it will never work’...[The exploration of viability focuses] on the likely dynamics and unintended consequences of the proposal if it were to be implemented. Two kinds of analysis are especially pertinent here: systematic theoretical models of how particular social structures and institutions would work, and empirical studies of cases, both historical and contemporary, where at least some aspects of the proposal have been tried. (WRIGHT, 2007, p.27)

One source of the cases to be studied and of instances of prefigurative practice can be the third concept of ‘democratic experimentalism’, advocated by Roberto Unger for the provision of public services,

an innovative collective practice, moving forward the qualitative provision of the services themselves. That can no longer happen in our current understanding of efficiency and production by the mechanical transmission of innovation from the top. It can only happen through 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 (UNGER, 2005b, pp.179,182).

For Unger, experimentation is an essential element of what he terms ‘high energy democracy’, which should include “vastly expanded opportunities to try out, in particular parts of the country or sectors of the economy, different ways of doing things” (Unger, 2005a, p.78).

Whether conceptualised as prefigurative practices, cases of viability or instances of democratic experimentalism, we already have examples, past and present, that we can draw on to help us imagine and further build a transformed early childhood education with a democratic culture and politics as first practice. We name here but a few of many, readers will doubtless know of many more. There is the past work of educational thinkers and practitioners committed to a democratic culture of education such as John Dewey, Célestin Freinet, Janusz Korczak, Alex Bloom, Paulo Freire and Loris Malaguzzi. Malaguzzi’s legacy lives on today in the municipal schools of Reggio Emilia, with their world-famous early childhood education, a network of some 50 public schools that has demonstrated how, with careful attention to the right conditions, an education inscribed with a democratic culture and espousing an explicitly political understanding, can not only survive over many years (since 1963) but continually evolve and flourish – a vivid example of democratic experimentalism.

One product of Reggio Emilia's project has been pedagogical documentation that we referred to earlier as an example of a tool to enable democratic accountability of schools. Another example of a participatory approach to enabling a 'transparent school' and 'transparent education' has been 'learning stories' in New Zealand "a strength-based assessment approach that can be formative of democratic communities of teaching and learning" (Carr et al., 2001, p.29) in a number of ways. They can

- construct and highlight valued outcomes for living in a democracy.
- assist participants in the community to develop trajectories of learning.
- provide opportunities for children to self-assess.
- can provide spaces for families and community to contribute to the curriculum.

This approach to assessment has followed on from the earlier (and highly participatory) production of an innovative bicultural early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education (New Zealand), 1996), covering all of New Zealand's services for children under six years.

Another example combines local and national levels of organisation. The Portuguese Modern School Movement (*Movimento da Escola Moderna Portuguesa – MEM*) is an active pedagogical movement that embraces democracy as a fundamental value. Founded in 1966, at a time of repressive dictatorship, MEM was legally established in 1976, after Portugal's democratic revolution, as a 'pedagogical association of teachers' and other education professionals; like many examples of prefigurative practice, therefore, MEM is the product of a particular historical context and of resistance to repression. MEM is permeated with a democratic culture:

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 (Vilhena 1998; Niza 1998c)...Vilhena (1998) explains that MEM is sustained by a deep belief in a 'democratic cooperative school' that is profoundly humanised by the participatory construction of knowledge that results from the relationship between adults, children and the community. MEM is, therefore, a pedagogical movement, which 'proposes to construct contemporary responses to a school education intrinsically orientated by democratic values of direct participation, through structures of educational cooperation' (NIZA 2009, p.602).

MEM works through interaction between the cooperative *formação* [professional development] of teachers and their pedagogical practice (Santana 1998). *Formação* takes place at local, regional and national levels, with teachers from all sectors of education coming together to reflect upon their educational practices and to create new knowledge, ideas and tools. These are then put to work in MEM's pedagogy which

is enacted through direct democracy. In other words, cooperative interactions between teachers and young people are lived in the form of direct participation and not in the form of representation or delegation. Democracy is experienced as an ethical dimension based on a moral interaction woven in mutual help, respect and solidarity (Niza 1998b). Consequently, young people, independently of their level of education, are responsible for actions such as collaborating with teachers in the planning of curricular activities; interacting in the learning that results from their study, their research and their participation in projects; and evaluating their own work. (SOUSA, 2020, p.160).

There is, we believe, no shortage of such examples of viability. Some have been well documented and widely referenced; others less so, an untapped potential for further inspiration and provocation. Viability is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for transformation. In addition to the wider documentation of such examples, transformation requires more attention to Wright's 'achievability'. This "asks of proposals for social change that have passed the test of desirability and viability, what it would take to actually implement them" (Wright 2007, p.27) – what conditions might spread a democratic culture through education? what conditions might sustain the maintenance and evolution of such a culture? Attending to achievability was well understood by neoliberalism's disciples, one of whom, Milton Friedman wrote in the 1960s, when neoliberalism was but a fringe movement, that

[o]nly a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable. (FRIEDMAN, 1962/1982, p.ix)

Now is the time, as we are entering a period of actual converging crises, for the development and drafting of alternative policies, policies that are supportive of achieving transformative change in education (and beyond), policies that set out what we must do to translate what is desired and what is viable into what is generally available.

A final point about the process of transformative change. Mouffe (2022, p.19) has argued that the Left in politics has, unlike Right populism, failed to recognise the importance of affects: "everything that has to do with the realm of emotions, with affective attachments, is deemed [by the left] inconsistent with the advance of progress under the guide of Reason". This is apparent in the field of early childhood education, whose policy prioritisation in recent years has been warranted by an affect-less discourse – technical, transactional, economic. This dreary discourse, which has been termed 'the story of quality and high returns' (Moss, 2014) and is intoned alike by governments, international organisations and experts, has reduced early childhood education to a lifeless subject, drained of passion, desire and vitality by a deadening vocabulary of words such as 'outcomes', 'quality', 'testing', 'assessment',

‘interventions’, ‘programmes’, ‘evidence-based’, ‘best practice’, ‘investment’, ‘human capital’, ‘preparation’, ‘readiness’ and ‘markets’.

A turn by education to democracy and politics requires a rediscovery of affect, revitalising education as something that is emancipatory, exciting and life-affirming, expressed in a discourse that draws on a rich vocabulary of words such as ‘wonder’, ‘joy’, ‘pleasure’, ‘subjectivity’, ‘uncertainty’, ‘unpredictability’, ‘complexity’, ‘interconnectedness’, ‘culture’, ‘experimentation’, ‘holistic’, ‘flow’, ‘process’, ‘ferment’ and ‘democracy’. The vocabulary we use to talk about education (or any other subject) is a political choice that expresses a wider culture. To contest a culture means contesting the vocabulary; for something new to be imagined and realised, for transformation to occur, means working with a new culture and a commensurate vocabulary.

Having urged the importance of language, a final word of caution is in order, too. Neoliberalism has shown a great capacity to expropriate and turn to its own purposes the language of democratic culture. Words such as “diversity”, “cooperation”, “participation”, and “creativity” can readily be paraded as part of an emancipatory rhetoric deployed by neoliberalism. Within a democratic culture, therefore, language and its meaning must always be carefully defined and subjected to contestation, to protect it from such misappropriation.

6 IN CONCLUSION

This article can be seen as an exercise in utopian thinking, understanding utopia ‘as the expression of the desire for a better way of living or of being’ and an imagining of what human flourishing might mean. From this perspective, our desire for a democratic culture is very different to the desire for a neoliberal culture, in its time presented as a utopian project that, in the view of many, has turned out to be a dystopia - and a stark warning of an incipient danger of utopias, especially those whose proponents allow for no alternative. By its democratic essence, we would hope that our Utopian goal is less vulnerable to such totalitarian thinking, but that is always a possibility and the first signs of infallibility must be vigorously contested.

We have learnt from the neoliberal experience that transformation needs preparation to ensure ideas are lying around when crises come. From elsewhere 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” (2013, p.xii).

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