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# Democracy & Education

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## Democratic Disagreements.

A Book Review of *Lived Democracy in Education. Young Citizens' Democratic Lives in Kindergarten, School and Higher Education*

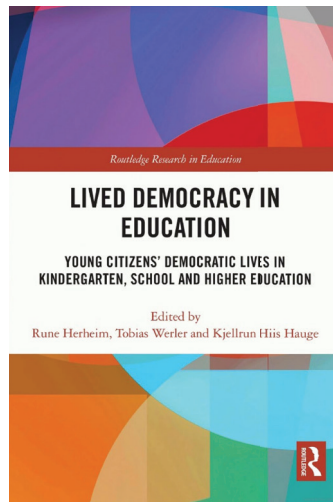
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**V**IRTUALLY ALL DEMOCRATIC educators agree that schools must provide opportunities to experience democratic practices here and now rather than teach about democracy only as an institution existing elsewhere. Experience is emphasized not only for learning but for the desire to understand democracy as a form of communal and societal coexistence deeply rooted in habits, attitudes, and practices. Such participatory, deliberative, or radical conceptions of democracy as a way of life (Dewey) have long been mainstream in the discourse of democratic education, while narrower electoral citizenship has remained democracy's dominant public and media image.

As the title *Lived Democracy in Education: Young Citizens' Democratic Lives in Kindergarten, School and Higher Education* suggests, this kind of deep and robust vision of democracy is also the shared conviction informing the research of the predominantly Norwegian writers of the book. The book's introduction, conclusion, and most of its articles emphasize deliberative democracy (Habermas and others). Still, overall, the book draws richly on other theoretical perspectives (e.g., Biesta, Gramsci, Klafki, Matusov, Mouffe, Nussbaum, Rancière). In justifying the term "lived democracy," the editors also refer specifically to Max van Manen's educational phenomenology of "lived experience"—although the book's chapters do not examine so much the experiences of children and young people as their communicative interactions.

The reader might expect the book editors, Rune Herheim, Tobias Werler, and Kjellrun Hiis Hauge, or the other authors to



eventually pause to reflect on the possible contradictions or incompatibilities between these very different theoretical perspectives (deliberation and agonism, *Bildung*, critical pedagogy, and dialogue theory, among many others). The dominant understanding of the nature of deliberative communication in the book is not based on assumptions about finding compromise through negotiation or consensus through convincing argument but on learning

to live with controversies in a "community of disagreement," so the multiple perspectives and theoretical differences within the book are not in tension with the book's message. One of the most frequently cited reference points is the well-known work by Hess and McAvoy (2015), which provides some insight into the premises and ethos of the authors for those familiar with it.

The book is based on a cross-disciplinary research project (by the same name) at Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, which brings together most of the researchers here. It is worth mentioning that several authors are experts in mathematics and science education, and some chapters integrate democratic education into STEM, which is a welcome endeavor indeed. The book is divided into two parts, the first focusing on theoretical

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considerations and the second on empirical cases and findings. However, most chapters draw on both theoretical and empirical perspectives, and a number of different empirical cases are analyzed in the book. The main case study consists of a visit to a school in the Lofoten islands, where the team collected data from student discussions. Various chapters are based on this material.

In what follows, we go through the chapters one by one, as it would be impossible to summarize the diverse topics and perspectives in a comprehensive review otherwise. This will hopefully give readers an idea whether the book contains anything of particular interest to them.

Chapter 2, by Tobias Werler and Åshild Berg-Brekhus, examines lived democracy, the book's central idea, in relation to educational goals and practices. The authors locate problems in neoliberal education policies and pedagogies that emphasize performance indicators and strip education of its transformative potential. Utilizing the capabilities approach (Nussbaum, Sen), the authors suggest that lived democracy is about giving students authentic opportunities to exercise their political and civil rights and to develop capabilities that enable them to participate in democratic life and deliberation. These goals are important, but in terms of conclusions, the chapter manages to offer little new to the theory of democratic education.

In Chapter 3, by building on a theoretical framework based on Jacques Rancière's thinking, Karolina Starego and Łukasz Stankiewicz challenge both consensual and agonistic views of democracy and democracy education. Rancière focuses on democracy as subjectification and resistance to dominant, predetermined identities. The core of political experience, in challenging the status quo, lies in conflict and defiance. However, democratic politics is not limited to resistance, because it enables new ways of experiencing community. As an example of lived democracy seen in the Rancièrian way, the chapter points out the climate movements, such as the School Strike for Climate and Extinction Rebellion, fighting against the status quo in climate politics. Regarding schools and democratic education, the authors propose an approach that focuses on political emotions and dissensus, rather than reason and consensus, but that is not rooted in identity-based political disputes.

Solvejg Jobst and Anja Franz, in Chapter 4, discuss the role of intercultural education and intercultural educational research in the context of lived democracy and the erosion of participatory democracy. The authors approach the matter through Gramsci's concept of "cultural hegemony," Fraser's concept of "the public sphere," and Castells's analysis of "the power of identity." With the help of the findings from their previous research projects, they conclude that intercultural education is currently far from being able to counteract this erosion of participatory democracy, and accordingly, they rightly argue that a more critical and transformative approach is needed. Although the chapter was placed in the theoretical part of the book, the reader would have benefited from a more extensive presentation of the empirical dimension as the results of these projects were introduced rather vaguely amid the text.

Liv Torunn Grindheim brings the perspective of young children to the fore in Chapter 5. Based on research data gathered

in Norwegian early childhood education facilities, the author presents five theories leading the way to conceptualizing the data. Education for democracy can often be adult-centered and focused on formal skills and abilities, which are seen as a requirement for democratic participation. The author aptly argues that the conceptions should be broadened so that children's self-determined activities in ECEC settings are also recognized as democratic participation.

In the context of democratic education and especially STEM subjects, Chapter 6 discusses new challenges caused by societal, global, and environmental circumstances of unforeseen risks that cannot be controlled by scientific experts alone. Using the framework of so-called post-normal science, Kjellrun Hiis Hauge and Richard Barwell argue that recognition of uncertainty must be brought to the heart of the debate, seeking dialogue between experts, citizens, and politicians. They suggest three basic principles for teaching to face these challenges: "(1) exploring meaningful situations of risk and uncertainty; (2) exploring both scientific/mathematical concepts and societal perspectives; (3) exploring and learning through dialogue" (Herheim et al., 2022, p. 70). Real-life meaningfulness, subject integration, and dialogic teaching are hardly new ideas, but it is laudable to be reminded of their value in the context of STEM.

Hauge, Peter Götze, Ragnhild Hansen, and Lisa Steffenson, in Chapter 7, seek to advance the ideas of critical literacy in mathematics. They draw interestingly on critical (literacy) theorists such as Paulo Freire, previously applied to mathematics education by Ole Skovsmose, and build a useful framework for critical reflection when teaching climate change-related mathematical issues.

As the second text in the book that focuses on early childhood education, Chapter 8 by Alicja Sadownik and Karolina Starego discusses children's role-play as lived democracy through the discourse theory of Mouffe and Laclau. The interesting and relevant empirical material used is a transcription of a play situation between two children. According to the authors, democracy lived in the example of role-playing is about engaging with other discourses and meanings. They suggest promoting and exploring early childhood education practices and settings that enable children to encounter these different and conflicting discourses in an agonistic way.

In Chapter 9, Bodil Ravneberg and Toril Eskeland Rangnes present a fascinating research setting with Norwegian preservice teachers' experiences and their perspectives on teaching controversial issues in both Norwegian and South African classrooms. These countries differ substantially in their educational systems, controversial historical issues, and democratic education practices. Concepts like "disagreement communities" (Iversen) and definitions of power provide the theoretical frame for analyzing teacher trainees' reflections. The authors find that preservice teachers have difficulties raising sensitive issues in classroom discussions, which thus undermines attempts to foster communities of disagreement. Preservice teachers' ability to identify different power definitions depends on the cultural and societal context. Norwegian preservice teachers have more difficulty identifying system power in their national context in Norway than

in South Africa, where they visited as foreigners and outsiders. The chapter provides interesting perspectives on future educators' perceptions of democratic education. However, the reader might expect the authors to come up with concrete proposals for improving teacher training, which they fail to do.

Chapter 10 serves as an introduction to the Lofoten project, also discussed in Chapters 11, 12, and 13. Helle Alrø and Marit Johnsen-Høines focus on the role of researchers as facilitators of the plenary debate from which the main data for the research project was collected. The authors point out discursive moves that a debate facilitator must utilize to encourage the students to participate, reflect, and communicate democratically.

In Chapter 11 Tobias Werler examines secondary school students' activities and debates about risks and controversial issues during the researchers' visit to Lofoten. The starting point is the previously mentioned scenario-based plenary discussion on the risks of oil drilling in the Lofoten area. The chapter discusses what happens in this student-driven political debate about potential oil exploitation in a local community. It examines how students argue and respond to each other and develop different collective patterns of orientation toward the issue. Unfortunately, the analysis of the chapter remains narrow and leaves the reader wondering how the presented results, especially on the student capability development, have been obtained.

Chapter 12, by Kjersti Maria Rongen Breivega, Hauge, and Marit Tjomsland, also employs the "post-normal" science framework, which underscores societal and environmental problems' complexity and value-bound nature. The authors analyze students' discussion using Stephen Toulmin's well-known argument model. It may be pointed out, however, that the Toulmin's model analyzes the pro and contra arguments (of a debate) separately, and thus the authors' way of combining them into the same argument structure deviates from the original intent of the model and also somewhat distorts the meaning of some of its concepts. Fortunately, this does not undermine the points of their analysis. They show that the students used various argumentative approaches during the debate, forming a "community of disagreement" to inquire about a pressing problem: "The combination of expressed values, uncertainties, and complexity in the course of a coherent argument sheds light on how lived democracy can take place in a classroom. Because risk issues are complex, they give room for a plurality of ideas, meanings, and perspectives, and because it was a risk issue pertinent to the students' local community, they could contribute with local knowledge and with aspirations for their own future" (Herheim et al., 2022, p. 150).

Building on Dewey's educational views emphasizing social interaction and habitual change, and especially using Vygotsky's concept of the "zone of proximal development," Yasmine Abtahi and Rune Herheim examine in Chapter 13 how the presence of others enriches students' shared agency within a conversational democratic space. They point out how this sort of open

argumentative discussion can create a reciprocal "zone of proximal development" without a need for a designated knowledgeable other (teacher, peer, or external authority).

In Chapter 14, which precedes the conclusion, Marit Johnsen-Høines and Helle Alrø discuss the relationship between teaching methodology and research methodology in educational research projects. The chapter also provides further background on the researchers' Lofoten case study. Perhaps this chapter could have initiated the empirical part of the book, covering the essential information and overview of the main case study, thus eliminating unnecessary repetition that now exists to some extent in the chapters. In sum, and as exemplified by the Lofoten project, the authors reasonably emphasize how in experimental case studies, the methodological choices in neither teaching nor research can be locked in before the project; researchers must retain the capacity to react flexibly to the process as it unfolds.

Overall, the book contains a rich selection of perspectives on democratic social interaction and argumentative discussion in educational settings. Nevertheless, one may wonder whether the concept of lived democracy brings something new to the table and whether it reflects the contents. As the editors note, most democratic educators today typically emphasize that schools must provide experiential and action-oriented opportunities to learn *through* democracy for democracy in value-laden contexts with a sense of real-life meaningfulness. It would have strengthened the book's import if these contexts were also approached ethnographically, phenomenologically, or through interviews and queries to shed light on the actual experiences of the pupils and students. Most texts analyze discussions and communication between students. This is undoubtedly useful but does not fully correspond to the stated idea of the book. At the same time, more thorough copy-editing would have enhanced the reader's experience—for example, by refining the book's structure to avoid unnecessary repetition.

From the point of view of teachers who put educational ideas into practice, the direct pedagogical applicability of the book's texts is rather limited and mainly implicit. Thus, it differs, for instance, from Klafki's *Bildung*-based didactics, which the editors bring up as a close reference point of their approach. Therefore, we would not recommend the book as a pedagogical tool for teachers. Its most appropriate target audience is other teacher educators, researchers of democratic education, and perhaps, in particular, readers interested in the integration of democratic education and STEM subjects.

## References

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