



BUILDING DEMOCRATIC FOUNDATIONS: THE ROLE OF TEACHER RECONCILIATION, CHILD-CENTERED DIALOGUE, AND EMERGENT DEMOCRACY IN A DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

This article explores a democratic school, where the author studied the application of Philosophy for/with Children (P4C) in Irish Educate Together schools via in-depth study and discussions with teachers and students. I explain how teachers in these environments try to strike a compromise between their own beliefs about democracy and education and how they implement P4C. Through a "lived enquiry" study, in which the researcher and P4C practitioner fully immersed themselves in a school's everyday operations, several points of view were uncovered. Democratic processes are taught to pupils in classrooms where teachers have made an effort to strike a balance between their ideas and actions, resulting in an environment where democracy is not only demanded but also accepted as a way of life. It is my contention that there exists a "rough ground" of practice where different and unique points of view may be revealed when genuine, completely immersive, and compassionate approaches are used toward practitioners and their communities. I base my assertion on portions of data from teacher interviews that I used for my doctoral study. With an emphasis on the concepts of child-centeredness, conversation, and philosophical inquiry with young learners, the ways in which the P4C and Educate Together philosophies of education are connected are investigated. Expanding upon Biesta and Fielding's democratic educational concepts, I argue that there is a compelling philosophical and contextual relationship between P4C educators, the environment in which discussions with children can occur, and the possibility that students will learn about democracy in a different way as a result of their education.

KEYWORDS Democratic education, democratic education in Ireland, philosophy for children, philosophy with children, P4C, philosophy in schools

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1. INTRODUCTION

I am a philosophy graduate with a deep interest in the philosophy of education and childhood. An unsatisfactory experience of studying philosophy in university did not deter me from the belief that philosophy has something very important to offer

educationally, particularly in the education of children. I began searching for ways in which philosophy could be a means of developing and teaching critical thinking to children. It was only after I came across Lipman and Sharp's original Philosophy for Children programme that I became fascinated with the



idea of philosophy as a feature of education in Ireland. In October 2014, I enrolled in a doctoral studies programme at Plymouth University Institute of Education and started conducting social science research in an educational setting for the first time as a non-nationally qualified teacher and philosophy graduate and enthusiast.

My doctoral studies focused on the lived perspectives of P4C practice in Irish Educate Together schools in order to see what insights could be gained into teachers' understanding of the relationship between education and democracy. The term 'P4C' here is used interchangeably to refer to philosophy for/with children generally. A similar practice within an Irish context known as 'Thinking Time' is also used to refer to the practice of engaging in philosophical dialogue with children. Educate Together is the representative organisation for primary and secondary multi-denominational schools in Ireland. It is an independent NGO that operates and supports non-fee paying state-funded schools that guarantee equality of access and esteem to children 'irrespective of their social, cultural or religious background' (Educate Together, 2017). Educate Together schools endorse a child-centred approach to education and are run as participatory democracies, with respectful partnership between parents, pupils and teachers.

Teacher interviews were a main source of data for my research and were conducted in teachers' respective schools using a semi-structured design to enable an open-ended discussion guided by participants' responses with the goal of discovering teacher/practitioner experiences of conducting P4C sessions. The six teachers interviewed for my research taught in four different Educate Together schools spread throughout the eastern province of Leinster in the Republic of Ireland.¹ One school in particular, which I refer to as the 'lived' school, featured most prominently as the main research school where I practised P4C with the same class of 24 children for roughly 90 minutes a week between September 2014 and

June 2017. During this time, I established a deep relationship of trust and friendship with both the children and staff of the school. My research evolved from a philosophical enquiry into a lived enquiry—a deeply immersive reflexive practitioner study incorporating the social dimension of John Dewey's theory of enquiry, where a combination of lived experiences and dialogic exchanges were fused together by the social relationships formed throughout the research process.

I. BACKGROUND TO MY STUDY

Most of my research activity was done within what I refer to as the 'lived' school—the school where most of the lived experiences and dialogic exchanges that informed my study were encountered. I refer to it as the 'lived' school because my experiences there were fundamental to my study evolving from a philosophical enquiry based upon John Dewey's theory of enquiry, to adopting a 'lived' enquiry approach that encompasses and emphasises Dewey's social dimension of enquiry. This school stood in contrast to the other schools I visited during the course of my research where I did not spend as much time practising P4C or engaging with the students and staff. The lived school was where deep relationships were forged and where I, as an outsider and researcher coming into the school to interact with and observe the children and staff was made to feel most welcome. The principal of the lived school was the second supervisor of my doctoral research and facilitated many aspects of my study. I spent a significant amount of time in the lived school interacting and practising P4C and my relationships with the children, teachers and the school community grew exponentially. I did not spend as much time in the other schools that were part of my study, usually only visiting them once or twice in order to meet, dialogue and interview participants, observe their P4C practice or facilitate a P4C session with their class.

There were many diverse people I encountered throughout the course of my research—educationalists, P4C practitioners, teachers, philosophy graduates and

enthusiasts—all of whom were interested in some way or other in the idea of philosophy in Irish schools. However, it was the Educate Together teachers whom I came across that revealed themselves to me as a unique ‘group within a group’. I recognised a commonality across six Educate Together teachers who, although they did not know one another, were all intensely eager for their schools and their teaching to be more democratic.

Aside from my presence in the lived school, I also sought out others and encountered different groups and social spheres, P4C practitioners, fellow philosophy graduates and educators, some of whom were teachers, many of whom taught in Educate Together schools, and all of whom were interested in the idea of philosophy in Irish education from a multitude of different perspectives and for different reasons and motivations. My encounters led me to co-found a group called ‘Philosophy Ireland’ with some of the people I met on my research journey. Philosophy Ireland is a network of educationalists, researchers and philosophically enthused individuals concerned with the advancement of philosophy at all levels of Irish society. My practice of P4C was not confined solely to the site of the lived school—I also practised P4C at workshops and seminars related directly and indirectly to my work with Philosophy Ireland in different modes such as researcher, philosophical practitioner, participant and co-enquirer.

II. RESEARCH CONTEXTS

There are several important contextual layers through which this research took place, ranging from broader sociopolitical and national contexts to the more specific individual school and teacher actions. As a reflexive practitioner study, there is an emphasis on what Dunne has referred to as the ‘exquisiteness of context’ (Dunne, 1997), meant here in terms of educational research, that focuses on sensing the unarticulated, hidden or new and different ways of understanding and conceiving democratic principles, organisational structures and

practices which were especially significant to my study.

Until more recent times, the Irish education system traditionally sought to embalm cultural identity within the authoritative and denominational ideology of those in charge of the educational provision of the state. Murphy (2008) asserts that ‘[t]he privileged position accorded to the Catholic Church in the provision of education in the Republic of Ireland allowed for the exercise of a type of cultural hegemony which enabled it to build itself into the very “vitals of the nation”’ (pp. 30–31). This situation gave rise to a mutual relationship between the church and the state, where both benefited from the church’s control of an education system that was pivotal to underpinning and cementing certain ideas around the generation of an Irish identity. These ideas revolve around the creation of an Irish culture determined mainly through its language and traditional sports, all under the wardship of a powerful church (Kearney, 2007). The goal of transmitting this particular ideology for the purpose of maintaining economic, political, moral and cultural influence was maintained through the functioning of the school system, and the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland has historically used the curriculum to reproduce its ideology. This context is especially undemocratic, where criticality has been absent and ideological positions have remained largely uncontested, standing in sharp contrast to the fostering and development of democratic values through education.

Within the Irish National School System, the responsibility for determining the ethos of a school rests with the ‘Patron’. The main legislation that governs education in Ireland (Education Act, 1998) confers significant powers on school Patrons, such as establishing a new school, setting up its Board of Management, appointing staff and defining the ethos of the school. Under the Education Act, the Board of Management must undertake to run the school according to the ethos determined by the Patron. In addition,

one half hour period of teaching per day for children in the school is reserved for the Patron's exclusive religious curriculum. In the denominational schools that constitute the overwhelming majority of National Schools in Ireland, the Patron is usually the Bishop of the religion concerned. In Educate Together National Schools, however, the Patron is a company limited by guarantee whose activities are regulated by its memo and articles and the Companies Act, and whose decisions are made at general meetings of its members. The model of patronage adopted by Educate Together is seen to be more transparent and clearly defined in legal terms. The idea behind this model of patronage is that the Board of Management of an Educate Together school is bound to operating a school that delivers equality of access and esteem to all children, irrespective of their social, cultural and religious backgrounds. This creates a foundation for all policy and practice in a school such as enrolment policy, how the Board of Management operates, how codes of behaviour are developed or the manner in which the curriculum is delivered. Educate Together has become the fastest-growing educational charity in the Republic of Ireland and is the patron body to 'equality-based, co-educational, child-centred, and democratically-run' schools (Educate Together, 2017). The organisation was founded in 1984 for new and emerging multi-denominational schools established (albeit not unopposed) by parents in the late 1970s. According to Rowe (2000), it is as a result of the struggle against formidable difficulties by small local groups of parents, teachers and educationalists vital to establishing Educate Together schools that questions of ethos assume central importance in the life of an Educate Together school. The written statement of a school's ethos acts as a 'litmus test' for the appropriateness or validity of a wide variety of school practices and activities (Rowe, 2000, p. 4).

The system of education in Ireland may seem difficult to understand for the uninitiated, especially considering that the Irish state funds the vast majority of schools in Ireland

yet retains very limited control over what happens inside them (Hyland & Bocking, 2015). As of 2016, the vast majority of primary schools in the Republic of Ireland are owned by religious communities (or boards of governors). Of the 3200 primary schools in Ireland, only 2% are multid denominational. When compared with OECD countries, where private schools exist in parallel with those that are publicly owned and managed, in Ireland the vast majority of primary school-aged children attend privately owned yet publicly funded National Schools. It was out of this national context that the Educate Together movement emerged.

Neither P4C nor the subject of philosophy is an official feature of Educate Together schools or even the movement as a whole. There are pockets of P4C practice existing in several schools just as there are in many non-Educate Together schools throughout Ireland. However, the notion of child-centred education is a stated core principle of the Educate Together charter (Educate Together, 2004). Even though there is considerable variation in emphasis and approach to P4C practice globally (Haynes, 2020), I felt a certain common ground exists between Educate Together's child-centred approach to education and P4C's practice of providing opportunities for children to experience philosophical enquiry and dialogue with others. The Educate Together teachers I encountered were not as philosophically 'qualified' as others I met throughout my research journey, but they were unique in the fact that they talked about changing understandings of education and schooling. Through their classroom practice they seemed to recognise in P4C a possibility for change in democratic and child-centred ways. They struck me as being concerned with aligning themselves with and personalising the principles of democracy and child-centredness. I became interested in learning how these teachers were trying to find saliences in their practice, and doing things in order to be the kind of teacher they felt they could become in an Educate Together school.

Teachers and teacher educators who engage in P4C practice in Ireland have used various terms such as ‘philosophy’, ‘philosophy for children’ and ‘philosophy with children’ rather than the more globalised term ‘P4C’ to refer to their practice. In particular, ‘Thinking Time’ was the term used by several teachers and staff to describe their practice within the lived school and some of the other Educate Together schools I visited during the research process. Thinking Time stands as a unique approach to engaging with children philosophically and dialogically within an Irish educational context. According to Donnelly (2001). Thinking Time and the practice of P4C in Ireland have only been partially inspired by Lipman and Sharp’s Philosophy for Children programme rather than modelled explicitly on it (Donnelly, 2001). The emphasis is on dialogue as an art form (Donnelly, 2002), where an alert and aware type of listening, rather than merely hearing and waiting one’s turn to speak, paves the way for an unfolding drama (Donnelly, 2015). According to Donnelly (1998), a big advantage of the Thinking Time model for engaging in philosophy with children is that the children can communicate with each other without having to defer to the teacher.

According to Haynes (2020), ‘[c]ritical research on teachers’ understanding and perspectives on P4C and their thinking about associated educational philosophies and practices is lacking, in spite of large numbers having taken part in professional development’ (p. 8). This may be to do with teachers being overly concerned with immediate results and/or measurable impacts of P4C in their classrooms to justify its introduction to the ‘powers that be’ that oversee a system that prioritises educational attainment. My research examined teacher perspectives of their P4C practice in Irish Educate Together schools, interpreting the unarticulated sense of new and different understandings of democracy as unfixed and emergent within participants’ interview excerpts.

III. TEACHER RECONCILIATION

Focusing on the perspectives of teachers engaging in P4C like this locates discussion about the possibility of democratic education at the site of the teacher, their classroom and their individual school. The term ‘teacher reconciliation’ used here does not refer to a resolution of two opposing positions or the settlement of some conflict—rather it refers to how teachers arrange and order multiple viewpoints, how they collate their understanding of their role as both teacher and citizen. I use ‘teacher reconciliation’ as a means of emphasising Alt and Reingold’s view of teachers as moral and democratic leaders, as ‘nurturers of common moral democratic values’ (2012, p. 1). Advocating for a Deweyan-inspired progressive approach to moral and democratic education that links individual autonomy with social concern, Alt and Reingold (2012) contend that a society sustains itself through continuous self-renewal taking place by way of the educational growth of the youngest members of the group. The role of the educator in this process becomes dominant in emphasising open moral discourse on values and norms:

[A] progressive approach places social responsibility on the shoulders of the teacher in the process of educating for and through democratic values by raising personal interest in social norms and needs, with special regard to the individual’s autonomy, reflection and judgement instead of externally imposing them on him/her. (Alt & Reingold, 2012, p. 2)

As my lived enquiry unfolded, it became clear that there was a kind of merging of the respective educational philosophies of both P4C and Educate Together through the actions of these teachers. The atmosphere within participants’ particular Educate Together schools seemed to have had a substantial impact on how they both viewed and practised P4C and, more broadly, their enactment of education and democracy. Expressions of how participants viewed the role of the teacher were specifically sought during interviews. There emerged a sense that these teachers were striving for their teaching to be more democratic in some way, and they

saw P4C/Thinking Time broadly as instrumental in achieving this. One of the teachers, a teaching principal called Declan, told me that P4C for him 'is a fine-tuning of methodologies', a 'tweaking' of what 'teachers would be doing' already (Motherway, 2020, p. 397. He believed that: Declan : [By just] start[ing] to tweak things slightly, some methodologies and pedagogies that you're [teachers] using, you'd only have to tweak it slightly to push it into the area of philosophy and that type of questions and discussions. (Motherway, 2020, pp. 397–398). Aiden, a teacher in Declan's school, saw P4C as 'a good thing for teachers' (Motherway, 2020, p. 413) as well as children, particularly in regard to offering opportunities for imagination and imaginative thinking. For another teacher, John, his P4C practice was inspired specifically by meeting and listening to Josephine Russell (2007) at the launch of her book about her exploration of children's moral development through the medium of Thinking Time. John said that 'everything she was saying was just what I was thinking' and 'from that moment I just thought "I'm not going to let this moment pass without immediately trying to initiate it into my own class"' (Motherway, 2020, p. 458). John believes his P4C practice:

John : definitely fosters a kind of an atmosphere of relaxation in your own skin, in your own thoughts and what's coming out of you. . . [it] is a method of teaching, a method of learning more importantly, that does engage everyone . . . a form for them to express themselves, for them to have the stage, for them to have a turn, for them to be listened to, particularly by their peers and their teachers, (Motherway, 2020, p. 461).

He talked about what he called 'bingo moments':

John : [where a child] that doesn't or won't engage or is afraid to engage but is happy to listen [eventually] want[s] to share some opinion or they want to initiate some discussion by coming up to you quietly and giving you a note saying they'd love to talk about this [subject] or they'd love the group

to talk about this [topic]. (Motherway, 2020, p. 463).

How these teachers went about engaging with the idea of P4C as a means of enhancing their democratic teaching and the way they chose to act upon their similar educational and democratic ideals and outlooks resonates with Higgins' (2011) and Dunne's (2005) assertion that teaching constitutes a practice—that is, a professional ethics of practice and a form of human action containing, in an Aristotelian sense, an ethical core. According to Higgins:

. . . [p]ractices are . . . our ethical sources: they are the sites where aspects of the good are disclosed to us as well as the primary scenes of our ethical education. (2011, p. 9)

This means that the steps taken towards engaging with children's voices must involve a type of self-regard that teachers deem ethically desirable to foster in their students. In this way, endeavours like P4C can be conceptualised as a practice, one that contains an ethical undercurrent.

Although there was certain divergence amongst the views of teachers in this study regarding the aims and purposes of their P4C practice, I got the impression that in general very little distinction was being made between learning about and enacting democracy in their classrooms. They told me that they felt, to some degree or other, that their schools actively encouraged and enabled participation with democratic values and practices, to the point where participants were at ease enough to be able to focus on philosophical discussion during normal class time. There was a deep congruence of views between some participants with regard to their experience teaching in Educate Together schools when compared with their previous teaching experiences in what might be considered more established denominational school communities in Ireland. There was also congruence towards participants seeing P4C 'fitting in' with their daily school activities, particularly via Educate Together's 'Learn Together' curriculum—a curriculum developed by the Educate Together organisation taught in place of religious

instruction programmes in Educate Together schools. Educate Together describes this as a programme that helps learners to develop critical awareness and understanding of moral decision-making, and a heightened awareness of social, ethical and moral issues and standards (Educate Together, 2011). A final point of congruence was found through some participants' encouragement of collaborative discussion within their classrooms being underscored by broader views on education and democracy that go beyond merely 'permitting' children to discuss and ask questions during class time

My research uncovered how teachers and practitioners working in an Educate Together/P4C context seemed to have opened a kind of experimental democratic space within their classrooms. The contexts surrounding such spaces were found to contain different features relating to teachers' individual schools, classrooms and P4C practice. Such spaces enable the facilitation of democratic living, whereby democracy is seen as both the means and the goal of teaching, and where students learn in and through a democratic process. From living and practising within these spaces, enacting democracy in the everyday, participants revealed a new and emergent sense of what I have interpreted as democracy as 'becoming'—an unfixed, ongoing and transformative understanding of democracy as a way of life in which the citizenry 'become' democratic.

CHILD-CENTRED DIALOGUE

How, then, might a teacher willing to embrace the sort of reconciliation and harmonisation mentioned in the previous section ground their actions? For the teachers in my study, engaging in philosophical dialogue with the children in their classrooms was a personal and meaningful practice enabled through the purposefully unfixed and dialogically inclined approach to an open interpretation of child-centredness within the Educate Together context. For instance, John told me that he discovered P4C after:

John : . . . always looking for avenues with which to engage children. . . [after discovering

P4C] this is exactly what I've been thinking— . . . how to get children not to 'behave' in a certain way, but how to interact with each other in a certain way or to experience education in a different way. (Motherway, 2020, p. 458)

It was striking to see how John's P4C practice involved dialogue between the children in his class without the need or expectation to defer to John as their teacher. They did not seek nor was there any expectation that they should seek his intervention or authority. Their dialogue flowed like a river, twisting and turning as it encountered obstacles, as John listened intently, occasionally interjecting to share a viewpoint or an idea. Another teacher, Merriam, told me that her P4C practice Merriam : . . . where we teach children that they have a voice, that they have value . . . that it's ok to say no, to be different. (Motherway, 2020, p. 432)

Reconciliation here involved not just a kind of suspension of adult authority as guardian of knowledge creation, but an outward move towards active listening with children, dialogical engagement with the children in their classrooms and providing opportunities for these things to take place. The embeddedness of the notion of child-centredness within the Educate Together charter as non-prescriptive—unfixed and diversely interpreted—provides a backdrop here for teachers to embrace the idea of opening a space for dialogue with children.

Such an understanding lies at the heart of questions regarding what it is about child-centredness that relates to discussions about democratic education and how such an orientation might imply democratic living. Haynes (2008) makes the same case regarding the consequences of including children 'in the now' rather than preparing them for future citizenship by 'provid[ing] a vehicle for exploring many of the issues that are synonymous with being a participating citizen of a democracy' (Haynes, 2008, p. 116).

By nurturing democratic principles in students for citizenship, education becomes part of a wider social responsibility, where schools as

institutions and teachers as practitioners undertake discourses of moral and ethical importance. These discourses and dialogues work in preparing citizens, disseminated through classroom practices in conjoint communities that work together in their fostering of a strong democracy through education:

. . . democracy . . . becomes a referent for understanding how public life organizes differences and what this means for the ways in which schools, teachers, and students define themselves as political subjects, as citizens who operate within particular configurations of power. . . the language of radical democracy provides the basis for educators not only to understand how differences are organized but also how the ground for such difference might be constructed within a political identity rooted in a respect for democratic public life. (Giroux, 1988, p. 153)

IV. THE DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL: COMMUNITIES OF POSSIBILITY

The three themes presented above of teacher reconciliation, child-centred dialogue and emergent democracy makes it possible to see how P4C as a democratic practice may exist in certain given contexts, acting as a kind of signifier for educators of the democratic 'collectivity' of their P4C activities and the environment (school) in which they practice. But what does the relationship between these things ultimately mean for teachers, educators and P4C practitioners in the everyday, particularly in terms of paving the way towards enhancing children's democratic experiences and democracy in schools?

Following Biesta (2007), there are several assumptions about democratic education and some commonly held views on what constitutes a democratic person that require reconsideration. According to Biesta (2007), much of the focus of democratic education centres on the preparation of children for their future democratic life by cultivating a particular set of knowledge, values and dispositions. How this might be done is the subject of much debate, but can be described

as either simply teaching children democracy (educating for democracy) or participation in democratic structures and processes (educating through democracy). Although certain emphases within these two approaches may differ, both essentially view democratic education in either instrumentalistic terms (education as an instrument that brings about democracy) or individualistic terms (education equipping people with the requisite skills for democracy); that is, with regard to how the individual democratic person or subject might be engendered.

Both instrumentalistic and individualistic conceptions of democratic education create several problems for the relationship between education and democracy. First, education becomes the instrument for producing democracy and hence the object of blame for any democratic failings. This besets schools with the responsibility of making children 'ready for democracy', an unrealistic and unfair burden to carry where entire democratic futures are supposedly determined (Biesta, 2007, p. 742). Second, the individual becomes the centrepiece of all educational efforts where the entire focus is geared towards equipping individuals with the requisite democratic skills, knowledge and dispositions. This removes completely people's relationships with others and the socio-political context in which we learn and act. Third, viewing democratic education in such a way presupposes that 'the success of democracy depends on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of individuals and on their willingness as individuals to act democratically' (ibid.). This means that democracy can only be possible if all citizens are educated and act in a certain way according to a single common identity with a pre-defined set of skills. In other words, democratic education becomes centred on the production of the democratic person, precipitating major problems to actualising democratic education in schools. Biesta believes it is important to challenge such an understanding of democratic education:

. . . not only because of the unrealistic expectations it raises about what schools can actually achieve, but also because of the fact that it puts the burden for the future of democracy too much on schools and too little on society at large. (Biesta, 2007, p. 743)

By focusing on a democratic school rather than more collective notions of democracy in schools, discussion can move away from the 'production' idea of the democratic person. In this way it is possible to attain a more grounded view of how the instrumentalism and individualism that pervades democratic education might be overcome, shifting the emphasis towards a plurality of difference rather than an identity of sameness. If the idea of being democratic is considered not as an individual but as an individual in community with others, as a quality of human interaction rather than as an attribute individuals possess or own, by being democratic with others it becomes clearer to see why plurality and difference is important here—the subject of democracy moves away from the individual towards the interaction between people that aims to remove any obstruction to the opportunities for others to bring their initiatives into the world. Therefore, if the subject of democracy is a quality of human interaction itself rather than a set of skills an individual possesses, the task of democratic education should not be to equip individuals with such skills but instead to focus on the ephemeral situations where democratic subjectivity and democracy in community with others was achieved (Biesta, 2007).

In terms of the individual school, this means that in order for such ephemeral situations to arise a school must attain a character as a 'democratic learning community'. This is where democracy is both the end and the means, the purpose and the practice, of education (Fielding & Moss, 2001). How this can be materialised is a matter of constant negotiation, administered democratically by those responsible for educational policy and most certainly by those working in the schools themselves. Even then however, it is

important to note that '... schools can neither create nor save democracy. They can only support societies in which democratic action and democratic subjectivity are a real possibility' (Biesta, 2007, p. 744). Although no two democratic schools are alike, I am assuming a conventional conception of the school—as a public institution accommodated in a designated building to serve the educational needs of the local community. One essential feature that all democratic schools need to instantiate, however, is empowering students to participate in issues of school governance and in the development and implementation of policies and practices related to teaching. Teachers and school staff should share with students the administration of school affairs in a democratic school, as doing so helps foster the development of democratic virtues and encourage understanding of democratic ideals and practices.

How might one be sure that this can happen? Advocates of radical or progressive education, following Dewey, connect progressive education with democratic education, which, according to Nicholls (1989), involves 'forms of cooperative learning that emphasize the involvement of students in negotiation of tasks, methods, and solutions to problems' (p. 168). The expectation here is that this kind of approach to education will help students develop autonomous ways of thinking and enhance mental, social and cooperative faculties. Nicholls suggests that, 'student choice, cooperative learning, and participation in decisions about curriculum are all consistent with the democratic emphasis of progressive education' (p. 170). However, he also points out that, even though personal competence and the importance of taking responsibility for one's actions is encouraged in this type of environment, there is also an emphasis on students learning how to cooperate with others, compromising where there is disparity, and the cultivation of responsibility for and valuing of collective and collaborative projects and activities.

V. THE DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL: AN EXCEPTION TO THE NORM

The overarching question facing the possibility of the democratic school then, becomes one of why is this form of school association and educational approach the exception, rather than the rule? According to Bourgois (2009), educational administration and leadership remains undemocratic, being based upon autocratic and technocratic values that permeate social thought and action, to the point that 'modern leadership practices advance an epidemic plaguing many. . . school cultures: that of traditionalistic, bureaucratic, positivistic, autocratic pedagogical approaches to teaching, learning, and leading' (p. 361). Michael Apple, who is primarily concerned with the North American context, has been working to combat a conservative direction taken by a worldwide political discourse, maintaining that at the centre of such discourse is a transference of the 'true realm of freedom' to the market and not, as before, to democratic politics (Apple, 2013, p. 3):

Schools are seen in a very contradictory way. They are seen to be key elements of the causes of our problems. Thus radically changing them (through an odd combination of privatization and competition and stronger central control) is imperative. 'Good' schools are those and only those that hew to a corporate agenda and a corporate image. 'Bad' schools are all the rest. And the people who work in them need a good dose of competition and tighter control. But through it all, what is evident is the loss of commitment to collective responsibility. It's almost as if schooling itself as a collective process is an enemy, a source of pollution that threatens the purity of market solutions and possessive individualism. (Apple, 2013, p. 4)

If, as Horn (2009) suggests, public schools reflect the conceptions of democracy within which they are confined, it becomes clear to see how the dominant forces in education might strengthen the idea that democratic schooling are very difficult indeed. Liberal and conservative political values call for increased accountability in schools, prompting more

centralized control over public schools and more standardisation of the curriculum and teaching practices. It can be argued that this increased control over schools works to lessen the grip of public interest and support for them, adding to the more individualistic or isolated understanding of citizenship that is currently taught in schools. What of the utopian ideal of the democratic school? Fielding and Moss widen the chasm between the dominant market discourse and the democratic school even further by stressing that, 'current education and schooling are not accidental. They are socially reproduced by powerful discourses and institutions, which education and schooling in turn help to reproduce. Education cannot be seen in isolation from wider social and economic forces, and the former cannot change substantially without the latter' (Fielding & Moss, 2001, p. 166). By looking towards the potentiality of a 'transformation toward a radical education and common school', they espouse a cautious optimism amongst the constraint and restriction of the 'dominant but failed and dysfunctional discourse about education and the school' (p. 3). While acknowledgement of the deep restrictions that inhibit movement towards the democratic school show there is much to be pessimistic about, withdrawal and a reluctance to engage in the difficult and utopian work of the democratic school are surely equally disheartening. Although very much the exception rather than the rule, and most certainly in the minority, against such odds democratic schools do exist. If social institutions and prevailing practices really do shape and define culture and society, that means that education, as a site of cultural change, is also possible. This is not to say that education becomes the most pivotal dial from which all social transformation is exercised, but merely that education and public schools bear considerable significance in terms of cultural reproduction and, as a result, the potential for change. This places the focus on public schools as opposed to other domains of

struggle and confrontation as the realm within which democratic change is possible.

Similarly, another observation about what hope there might be for increased democracy and democratic schools relates to the seemingly paradoxical idea that through global political policies and practices that work to dislodge and undermine democratic change, there emerges a political landscape that 'is now more favourable to participatory ideals than in the recent past' (Warren, 2002, p. 679). Opportunities for democratic activity have materialised through the fog of increased polarity within societies, globalisation and economic complexity, such that 'increasing disaffection from formal political institutions seems to be paralleled by increasing attention toward other ways and means of getting collective things done' (2002p. 682). Lefrançois and Ethier (2010) also see reasons to be hopeful through the possibility of narrowing the gap between the democratic reality of current political societies and the democratic ideal, the seeds of which are contained within the former, including in public schools:

. . . democratic education in the schools is imperfect, but perfectible, like democracy itself. Such an education can materialize through pedagogical activities that, even with defects, permit the active integration of students into the management of the normative and institutional structure of the classroom and of the school establishment. (Lefrançois & Ethier, 2010, p. 272).

This optimism regarding existing traditions and emerging practices points to the discussion of democratic education towards democratic schools themselves, in their various modes and configurations, specifically the classrooms and teachers within them. There is critical scope within every tradition of practice, and prevailing democratic and pedagogical practices are not excluded from this. Although democratic schools stand in stark contrast to the ideological landscape within which they are situated, the idea that citizens can be free and equal, and that the school can expose children to democratic

experiences, endures as a source of inspiration and legacy for those who aspire to a stronger and more robust democracy than that which we benefit from today. For those individuals who wish to advance a democratic way of life and the immanent values such a form of living might encapsulate, it can be assured that transforming public schools will be a long and tiresome endeavour, but one where the site of struggle is well chosen. To encounter these ideas in their fullness necessitates an 'exquisite contextuality' (Dunne, 1997) within the overlapping domains of education and democracy, and culminating at the site of the democratic school. This 'exquisite contextuality', meant here in terms of educational research of the type presented in this paper, must be able to sense the unarticulated, the hidden, the new and different ways of understanding and conceiving democratic principles, organisational structures and practices.

Democratic education is possible in an emergent way in schools in Ireland, and most likely elsewhere, now—not at some point in an ever-distant future in which children are resigned to be citizens-in-waiting, but as democratic coarbitrators of knowledge, where individual schools and educators are initiators of democratic transformation. Studies like the one presented above contribute to the cohesion of theory and practice in P4C, creating new opportunities for aligned thinking within the entanglement of P4C, education and democracy. When we consider that in most contexts P4C exists on the periphery of educational convention, listening for and hearing the perspectives of practitioners active within this periphery re-focuses educational discourse on the human community. Democratic experiences of education and opportunities to be co-arbiters of knowledge through philosophical dialogue and enquiry are limited or mostly absent from children's lives. Therefore, the task of transposing insightful and meaningful connections between teacher reconciliation with P4C, child-centred dialogue and emergent views of democracy to broader

contexts, national and international, and to different schools and communities thus becomes a philosophically compelling endeavour.

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