

EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP: THEORY AND TEACHING PRACTICE

Session 7A: Title: PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION_UTH

Authors:

Kostas Magos & Magda Vitsou

University of Thessaly

SESSION 2: Teaching and Learning Democratic Values in Early Childhood Education

1. Indicative incidents in the early childhood class

In International as well as in Greek bibliography, one encounters various incidents and practices linked to the treatment and teaching of topics that pertain to democratic values in early childhood education. In most cases, practices mainly focus on discussions among educators and students, prompted by some event that occurred in the kindergarten during the school day. Since preschool age is a period of time when intense self-regarding sentiments may show up, students' interactions in the kindergarten provide plenty of opportunities for reflection on matters of democracy. Ribaeus and Skånfors (2019:241) mention such a characteristic episode:

Maria, Vilma and Ally play with four mattresses in the big room. Some boys come and want to play with the mattresses, but Ally says that they can't have any. They discuss this for a while. Lasse and Rickard say they want two. (...) Vilma eventually offers the boys two mattresses. Lasse says thanks. The boys are about to leave as Miriam (the kindergarten teacher) asks the girls if the boys can take the mattresses.

Vilma: Yes, those two.

Miriam: They'll have two, and you'll have two. Hey, that's great.

Andre: Two for us, two for them.

Miriam: That's great; then you fixed that.

The boys leave.

Ally: But we want... I want so many...

Miriam: Yes. You have to share, you know... a little bit. You can't have them all. That's the way it works here in our preschool. It's not like at home.



A short while later Vilma and Ally pretend to be sharks. Elin asks if she can join in, which she can. They play for a while. Some dispute arises, and the girls turn to Miriam. Soon, the girls return, talking about who is in charge. Ally says that all of them are in charge.

Elin: *But you have to listen to your friends sometimes, that's how it is... you know, that is how it is but...*

Ally and Elin say that everyone is in charge.

Ally (turns to Elin): *You can be in charge too and you (points at Vilma) and me.*

Elin: *I think everyone can be in charge all the time.*

The above incident highlights two separate minor instances that offer children the opportunity to understand the meaning of democracy. In the first one, while the three girls initially object to the boys' request to get mattresses for themselves, they resolve this problem by sharing them ('two for us, two for them'), which the kindergarten teacher corroborates as an effective way to handle the situation. As the children continue playing, issues of democratic values arise again in the framework of the three girls' game as to who will be the leader. The question of handling leadership is a common phenomenon in preschool children's play, while it provides an excellent opportunity for discussing matters pertaining to democracy. In the above-mentioned incident, the three girls find a democratic solution by themselves, whereby all three of them will be leaders simultaneously. This is a decision, which is also quite common in the framework of children's play.

Incidents such as the above interestingly trigger children to comprehend the meaning of democracy and the democratic resolution of their disputes. Kindergarten teachers' discreet interventions, through their affirmation of the children's right decisions without didactic messages or any particular praise, advocate the teaching and learning of democratic values as a natural process within the framework of human relations management. Evidently, when students have serious disputes, and when they themselves cannot reach a democratic solution, the practitioners' intervention is necessary, both for the smooth resolution of the incident and for its employment as an opportunity for learning. Such an incident might be the following, as it describes a particularly common episode that might occur anywhere in the world, in any class of pre-primary education.



Two boys, Nikos and George, play with lego bricks. Nikos has a larger physique than George as well as a more intense personality. He has gathered many more bricks at his side than George has, even though he has not used them, yet. At some point, George asks Nikos to give him some bricks, so that he can complete his lego creation. Nikos refuses, but George insists. Nikos gets up and pushes George, who breaks into tears.

If the practitioner observes an incident such as the above, s/he should pay attention and act with due care. Beyond helping the two children find a solution to their dispute, s/he could employ this incident, in order to discuss matters concerning democracy with the whole class. According to Ramsey (2004), children have already developed a sense of justice at preschool age; therefore, they can easily see to it that justice is done in situations linked to their experiences. The kindergarten teacher could ask her students to suggest democratic solutions, in order to resolve the differences between the two children. Such solutions could be a fair share of the material right from the beginning, the two children's cooperation as they make their creations, and understanding each other's needs and 'borrowing' each other's material. To this effect, children should understand that their reaction - in this case, physical attack - is utterly contrary to all democratic principles; and the practitioner needs to make it clear that whoever acts in a similar way will bear the consequences of their actions.

In many kindergartens, at the beginning of the new school year, practitioners and students together set the class rules, usually writing them in simple words. These rules are illustrated on a piece of cardboard, and are then centrally placed in the classroom. Even if children cannot read them, they can recognize the content of each rule, for they have gone through these rules in depth and agreed upon them as a team. It is important that children gradually come to realize that they need to respect the rules, not out of fear for punishment, but because they fully understand the significance of the rules' content and the necessity to observe them, so that the class can function effectively. Of course, it is essential that educators keep to the rules and implement the consequences agreed upon when these rules are broken.

In the case of Nikos and George's class, if no rules have been set prior to that incident, the conflict between the two children may well be the cause for the creation of such rules. At the same time, however, and before 'distancing' herself from the particular occurrence, the



kindergarten teacher should demand that Nikos apologize to George. Even if Nikos is 'made' to say he is sorry, the message that his behavior towards George was inappropriate and that he should make amends for it gets across to children.

The creation of an agreement of policies, also known as "The Constitution of our Class" in many kindergartens, is one of children's momentous educational procedures about democracy. The kindergarten teacher can draw on the content of the 'Constitution' and the way it was created, to explain, in simple words, the role of the Constitution as a fundamental requirement for a country's democratic regime to the students. The teacher can also approach this subject matter through other activities, such as reading books related to this particular subject, narrating stories, showing relevant films and using other teaching strategies and means.

Derman-Sparks & Ramsey argue (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006) that some practitioners prepare folders containing equally distributed supplies prior to handing them out to their students. In this way, they discourage children's conflicts that may arise due to their getting unequal amounts of materials for an artwork, e.g. lego bricks, markers, beads, etc. Although this strategy actually does create fewer conflicts, it is considered as non-effective, since it deprives the class of a significant opportunity to discuss democracy. It will be more effective if practitioners lay all the materials on a big table and have children pick what they need. Through this procedure, some children will take more materials, which they will possibly not need for their creation; some will pick fewer and some no materials at all. This situation is bound to cause intense reactions among children. Nonetheless, it will give kindergarten teachers the opportunity to discuss with them issues on democracy and the democratic handling of differences. If such discussions recur systematically, one expects that in the end children will be picking only the items they need from the materials on the table, while keeping in mind that there should be enough supplies for all of them.

Coming to grips with a situation like the one mentioned above, one assumes that the family environment, in which children grow, plays an important role. Thus, children who are not familiar with sharing in their home environment - as is often, yet not always, the case with those who are an only child - will allegedly find it more difficult and will need more time to adapt than other children will. Collaboration between kindergarten and family may prove to be particularly helpful, raising children's consciousness about the aforementioned issues in a shorter space of time.



Ramsey (2004:161) describes another incident in a kindergarten classroom, where children had the opportunity to approach the topic of democracy, as well as other relevant subject matters, such as social inequality or social justice.

The kindergarten teacher (Laura) and the children had co-created a small garden, where they had planted vegetables: Laura asked if anyone wanted to say anything about the garden. One boy said: “What about all the people in the world who are hungry? I think we should give some of the food from the garden to them”. The conversation continued for a few minutes about how they might donate some of their produce to a local shelter. Then, Laura asked if anyone had any ideas about why some people did not have enough food. Rose talked about how her grandparents were forced off the land in Ireland by rich landowners, who wanted all the land for themselves, and that was how they eventually came to live here in the United States. “Yeah, like the English grabbed all of the land from the Indians”, chimed one child.

Children’s comments, such as the ones referred to above, stimulate discussions on matters of democracy, social inequities and human rights. In this case, the kindergarten teacher’s simple question, whether any of the children wished to say something with regard to the school garden, spurred a series of responses and comments by the children. Eventually, the core of the subject matter shifted to social inequities, reasons for immigration and forms of relationships of authority between the dominant group and the minority groups, instigated by the last comment. Based on the children’s questions, the practitioner might not only initiate an interesting discussion on the aforementioned topics but also think about planning a project of a longer duration, since children’s comments appropriately occasioned something like that. The educator maintained her flexibility, something, which is especially important regarding preschool age. In this case, not only did she *not* label as irrelevant the student’s question - statement with regard to the garden (*“What about all the people in the world who are hungry? I think we should give some of the food from the garden to them”*), but exploiting this, she spurred on the other children’s interest, thus urging them to reflect on and talk about the same subject, through asking them relevant questions.

2. The role of the kindergarten teacher



In the above episode, two significant components are highlighted, concerning matters of teaching and learning of democratic principles in early childhood education. The first component concerns the role of the kindergarten teacher, while the second focuses on the curriculum and the educational material. In order to teach democratic principles to children, the kindergarten teacher has first to have endorsed them herself, to advocate them, and - as Van Ausdale & Feagin (2001) point out with reference to educators of all levels - s/he should fight for them through engaging in collective actions of the community and activism. Hence, s/he needs to be socially and culturally conscious, to express her opinion without fear, reflect on her viewpoints and her attitude and be empathic. According to Magos & Simopoulos (2009), these constituents comprise the general traits of an educator with intercultural competence. The above are not self-evident characteristics of an educator; on the contrary, they are subject of a systematic, life-long learning and development. Therefore, kindergarten teachers' basic training and further education must also include subject matters that pertain to students' education on democracy, human rights, cultural diversity and other relevant issues.

The kindergarten teacher needs to have been educated, and hence, to know the most effective way to pass on values and skills, relevant to the above topics, to children. Teaching aiming at didacticism does not aid children to acquire the desired behaviors; on the contrary, it frequently causes reactions that have quite the opposite result. Therefore, approach to subject matters concerning dispositions and values must needs be in ways that do not stress moral labelling of the kind: 'Good children share their toys', and so on. Messages of this type, especially when systematically repeated during the school course, often wear children down and finally lead them to adopting an attitude of indifference to the kindergarten teacher's moral exhortations. On the other hand, narrating a story, in which the heroes' actions highlight the desired values and stances, can have a more positive influence on children, since they can identify with the protagonists and wish to imitate their actions (Magos, 2012). Of course, having a conversation with the class, inspired by the content of the stories or an incident that happened in the kindergarten, such as the ones hitherto presented, is a very good way to increase awareness in little children. A suitable environment, in which to hold fruitful conversations, should be available, especially when topics like democracy require particular focus and comprehension on the part of the



children. An environment is suitable for effective discussions, when it provides the appropriate ambience for children and their families to speak their mind, while feeling safe and knowing that what they say will be respected, and that their 'voice' has power.

Given that the kindergarten teacher is a significant 'other' and a model to the children, the messages s/he gets across to them are of utmost importance – not only through what s/he says but through what s/he does. Therefore, if s/he wants to teach children about democracy, then, her actions and the way s/he handles various situations within the framework of her job should be inspired by democratic values. Some indicative examples of principles and practices of democratic treatment are the following:

- A common disposition towards all the children, regardless of the cultural, social, religious or other background
- A common disposition towards all the families, acceptance and respect of cultural diversity
- A common disposition towards all the members of families, regardless of sex, family role, age, or other differences
- Promoting messages of collectivity versus individualism, cooperation vs antagonism
- Appropriate educational response to children's behavior when excluding one of their classmates in the framework of play
- Appropriate educational response to authority relationships, often created among children
- Supporting all children, to participate in discussions and, primarily, to express their feelings
- Resolving disagreements and conflicts through democratic procedures.

3. Indicative didactic approaches

The Conflict Solution Chairs

With regard to the last example of principles and practices of democratic treatment, Paidá (2010) suggests an interesting method about the democratic resolution of conflicts. The method is called "Conflict Solution Chairs" and was created by the Israeli educator Chetkowsky. It focuses on developing the skills of presentation, listening and debate, pertaining



to the content of a conflict between two children in kindergarten. In one part of the room, there are two small chairs, an 'ear chair' and a 'mouth chair'. Children have to resolve a conflict, alternating sitting on the two chairs and presenting their personal view of the conflict. The child-listener hears his/her classmate out; then, after exchanging chairs, s/he will talk about the facts from his/her point of view. The kindergarten teacher and the rest of the children watch the whole process and have the right to ask questions or make suggestions, in order to help towards the conflict resolution. The way they will use to resolve the conflict has to encompass the 'Class Constitution', which has been discussed and become accepted by children since the beginning of the school year.

It is worth noting that, after using the 'Conflict Solution Chairs' over several sessions, children tend to invite their classmates on their own, without the practitioner's intervention, in order to have a debate over a conflict that may have occurred between them.

Thus, when children sat on the chairs, they discussed various kinds of disagreements and conflicts - insults, mockery, exclusion from play, and other. In this way, children had an alternative tool at their disposal, so they could express their complaints and their discontent, and at the same time, they could try to find a solution that would satisfy both sides. Even though the kindergarten teacher's intervention frequently helped resolve a dispute, the procedure followed by the children through alternate listening - speaking and understanding the position of the 'other' were their first acquaintance with the principles of democracy.

The Persona Doll Approach

Another significant tool to deploy effectively in early childhood education is the Persona Doll, the doll that has an individual identity (Brown, 2001). This is a tool, which can help minimize discrimination, stereotypes, and racism as well as encourage a first contact with democratic values. The difference between the Persona Doll and the other dolls, with which children play in the kindergarten classroom, is that usually the Persona Doll helps children confront a problematic situation, to which they are called to find a solution. The practitioner makes use of the doll and elicits information from the children about situations that they



themselves have experienced, by using dialogue. The children think about the particular situation and express their emotions; they acknowledge the doll's feelings and, by giving a solution to the problem, they advise him/her what to do. In this way, they are taught about positive behaviors (Allen & Whalley, 2010); they are informed about matters of equality, democracy and justice, and learn to support people who have experienced discrimination (Brown, 2001). The Persona Doll method aims for each child to develop:

- Respect and self-esteem
- Empathy with people who are from different cultural backgrounds
- Critical thought and resolution of matters concerning bias
- The ability to stand for him-/herself and others, confronting injustice (Smith, 2009)

Children regard the Persona Doll as if he/s/he were a real child and a team-member, since its features make it convincingly realistic. The doll is safeguarded and taken care of, while children are reminded to treat him/her as if s/he were a real child, with love and respect (Halligan, 2012). One characteristic feature of the Persona Doll is its size: he/s/he is approximately 75 cm tall, just like the preschoolers are, whereas his/her gender, origins and skin color may vary. The doll's daily habits are allegedly those of a little child; the elements of diversity, inherent in every class, create the particular identity of the doll (Brown, 2001). The doll's identity is created according to the definitive role s/he will play during the sessions in the school setting. For example, s/he may be a member of the dominant social group or belong in a minority group and may have immigrant or refugee background, and so on. The doll's ethnic-cultural identity should thereby reflect the rest of his/her identity characteristics: his/her mother tongue, the family's socio-economic status, possible special needs, etc. (Smith, 2009, 2013).

The employment of the Persona Doll in the classroom follows the following stages: In the initial stage, the doll enters the classroom as a visitor. Children make his/her acquaintance as his/her personal details are disclosed: name, age, country, whether s/he has siblings, etc. In the second stage, a situation, which the doll has experienced, and which is very familiar to the students, is laid out before the children, so that they can connect with and share in it – e.g. s/he changed places of residence, had a conflict with a child in the park, played with his/her cousins, etc. The target is the creation of a relationship between the doll and the children (Smith, 2009). Gradually, the children befriend the doll and grow to love and



trust him/her. In the third stage, a problematic situation is presented to the children, for instance, one concerning racism and inequality. The situation under consideration aims at children's development of empathy, their expressing their thoughts and feelings about the doll's problem, as well as expressing their own problems, if they are relevant to the particular issue. Next, students' critical thinking is encouraged, in order for them to come up with a solution and advise the doll accordingly. In this way, if the issue is about discrimination and racism, children feel the need to adopt an attitude against injustice and inequality (Vitsou, 2013).

A considerable amount of research has been conducted in various countries, concerning the influence of the Persona Doll method on little children's change of behavior, the expression of their feelings and the fight against bias and racism. According to Smith (2009), in the 'Australian Equity and Social Diversity' research project, MacNaughton used Persona Dolls, endeavoring to find the answer to two questions: first, 'what 4-5 year-old children know about tribe, class and gender', and second, 'how children would react towards dolls with a different cultural background'. In the beginning, children were interviewed about what they already knew. Then, four Persona Dolls were used, each with a different cultural background and descent. The children were encouraged to play with the dolls, in order to break the ice and talk to them, while, educators went on to relate different stories, concerning the color of the skin, social class and gender, with the dolls being the protagonists. The results of the survey showed that the children of the dominant ethnic-cultural group had misunderstood and knew very little about the culture of the Australian Aborigines. In addition, almost half of the children found the Persona Dolls' white skin more desirable, whereas they were apprehensive about the Persona Doll with the black skin. They refused to talk to, play with or look at him/her.

A discussion held in the preschool classroom, following the use of and the stories concerning the Persona Doll, may on the one hand, help children to become acquainted with groups and individuals that do not belong in the dominant group; on the other hand, it can enhance elements of empathy. At the same time, by having access to the Persona Doll, children can familiarize themselves with the social inequality and discrimination



ingrained in the world around them, develop their critical thought and raise their awareness about democratic values (Brown, 2001, 2002).

4. Curriculum and educational material

Another significant aspect concerns the manner, in which the practitioner utilizes the curriculum. It is obvious that the curriculum should be 'open', to enable the practitioner to draw on the daily experiences the children have at school and those they bring together into school from other environments. Given that the classroom is a live workshop, a place where there are many different interactions among children as well as between children and staff, a strict, pre-designed, predetermined curriculum would leave no room for capitalizing on all the events that take place during a school day. On the contrary, a flexible curriculum leaves space for the full use of all that is happening in the school room; it challenges and inspires, without imposing motives and actions on children; it is appropriate for teaching values, attitudes, and skills that concern democracy as well as other relevant topics.

The educational material that the kindergarten teacher uses is equally as important as the curriculum. By 'educational material', we mean books, posters, photographs, pictures, puzzles, toys, films, songs and anything that can be used within the framework of the teaching-learning process. The educational material is a particularly significant tool for the support of teaching in all educational levels; yet, maybe a little more important in early childhood education, since, through it, children have their first contact with basic knowledge and information. In order for practitioners to help little children access topics that repudiate discrimination and racism, while standing for democratic values, they will need appropriate educational material: mainly books and pictures that will support their work, thus providing children with stimuli for thought and discussion (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006). Books with stories, where the heroes' actions showcase democratic values, simplified versions of biographies of people who fought for democracy, or posters and pictures that promote democratic messages make up characteristic examples of educational material that can be effectively utilized at kindergarten.



In this text, various aspects relevant to preschool children's education on democracy have been considered. The educator's role, the teaching strategies, the educational materials and the curriculum are dimensions, which, through appropriate planning and usage, can advocate the teaching and learning of democratic values for little children.

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