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Chapter 4

Democracy, classroom practices and pre-service teachers' conceptions of excellence

Andrea Raiker & Matti Rautiainen

Introduction

All countries in the European Union (EU) are representative democracies. By democracies, we mean the abilities of peoples to choose and change their governments (Hollifield & Jillson, 2013). In the Introduction to this book, we argue that it is the responsibility of governments to establish environments where citizens' abilities to engage effectively with democracy and its processes could be developed. A corollary of this argument is that governments and the education systems they support must create teachers and students who can voice critically appraised judgements to guide their citizenship. We ask: how do education systems develop the abilities of citizens in the EU so that they are prepared to fulfil their democratic role in choosing and changing their governments for the good of themselves and others, within and beyond their national borders? How are these abilities acquired and developed? Choosing and changing a government involves responsibilities of the highest order. So it is paramount that each individual engaging in representative democratic processes knows what s/he is voting for and why, so that the individual can recognise and support through her/his vote the representative of the political party whose policies most closely align with her/his views.

An important aspect of democracy and its processes and outcomes has already become apparent. At the heart of democracy is the relationship between the individual and society, as demonstrated both as the voter registering her choice, and the individual candidate representing a political party. Dewey recognised this symbiotic relationship. For Dewey, belief in democracy involves free and critical thinking, expression and debate in the:

...formation of public opinion, which in the long run is self-corrective, except faith in the capacity of the intelligence of the common man to respond with commonsense to the free play of facts and ideas which are secured by effective guarantees of free inquiry, free assembly and free communication?' (1939:3).

In other words, democracy is not merely political; it is social and moral, social in the sense that individuals are members of societies, and moral in that societies are governed by shared, understood and agreed ways of behaving. These may well reflect the desires and expectations of individuals, but principally in the sense that they reflect the judgements of the majority. These shared and understood ways of behaving or rules are clearly of greater importance than exercising one's right to vote. They determine the boundaries of everyday life; elections happen only once every four or five years. Nevertheless, the formal and informal laws

governing the individuals comprising the social will reflect those devised and mandated by government and, as a consequence Dewey maintained that democracy is a personalisation of individuality, and is exhibited by certain ways of behaving, certain traits of character, certain ways of living a good life as a social being. As Jackson (2014:15) summarises, ‘Dewey’s theory is indeed founded on its notion of a democratic individual way of life, for it is this exhibition of democratic behaviour by individuals that is meant to be our primary standard for evaluating the presence of democracy’.

If this is the case, then education systems should include within their curricula learning spaces for the development of character and behaviours, and of knowledge and understanding to support the development of social, democratic beings; in other words, as fully participating citizens who demonstrate their abilities to choose and change their political representatives by the characters and behaviours they exhibit. As Hopkins and Tarnanen indicate in Chapter 6 of this volume, such a curriculum will be democratic in ‘...that [it] embodies, from a pedagogical point-of-view, the social interaction and collective enterprise necessary for active citizenship in a democratic society’. To deliver such a democratic curriculum will require the involvement of teachers who are themselves democratically and politically knowledgeable and active. So the curricula offered in higher education, especially teacher education, should include content and pedagogical approaches that will continue the development of informed and participatory citizenship established in the compulsory school phases.

Pupil and teacher education, then, is of prime importance in developing citizens who have the knowledge and understanding to make critical judgements on how they and their political representatives should act on the issues confronting communities locally, nationally and globally. Almost every child in the EU passes through approximately ten years of schooling. Every child has parents that have also experienced a similar time in formal education. Hence the questions we asked at the beginning of this chapter: how do education systems develop the abilities of citizens in the EU so that they are prepared to fulfil their democratic role in choosing and changing their governments for the good of themselves and others, within and beyond their national borders? How are these abilities acquired and developed?

To initiate debate focussed on these questions, we consider student teachers’ perceptions and classroom practices in England and Finland. We focus on Aristotle’s notion of the ‘best good’, being ‘...a habit disposed towards action by deliberate choice...defined by reason as a prudent man would define it’ (Aristotle 1991:4). We propose that the term ‘excellence’ is equivalent to the notion of ‘the best good’ and that obtaining the views of pre-service teachers on conceptions of excellence in teaching will reveal insights not only into their classroom practices but also into their characters and their thoughts on how they should behave towards others and others act towards them, so that the ‘best good’ can be achieved. This in turn will reveal the abilities, in terms of character and behaviour, that pre-service teachers believe to be important. In so doing, student teachers will disclose the democratic frameworks underpinning their pedagogies, based as they are on a personal way of living a good life as a social being as Dewey argues. We will then be able to make judgements on the

extent to which these abilities might promote informed participatory democratic thinking and acting within teachers and pupils.

Teacher education has a key role to play in education. It reflects the solutions made in the past, but it should also look to the future. This is the reason why we focus on teacher education in this chapter. Our research into conceptions of teaching excellence, or the 'best good' in their respective education establishments has been taking place since 2010 and is ongoing (see e.g. Raiker & Rautiainen, 2012). We use empirical data, including quotations as examples, collected from Finland (subject student teachers) in the end of their pedagogical studies, and reflections on excellent teaching collected from English PGCE students at the end of their course. In Finland, conceptions of teaching excellence are based on teacher's own reflections. This is the reason, why a reflective and inquiry-based approach is emphasized in Finnish teacher education. The quotations given in the discussion below represent the authentic voice of students' reflective processes. **This data is gathered from 18 subject teacher students in 2011 in the University of Jyväskylä. In these essays students had to describe and argue their pedagogical thinking and reflect their theoretical and practical understanding concerning teacher's profession.** In contrast in England, conceptions of excellence are more closely defined in documents concerning standards of teaching and professional conduct and are controlled by Ofsted. These differences impact on classroom practices.. Because of broad pedagogical freedoms enjoyed by teachers in Finland, their classroom practices are not only individual but also personal; England's more hierarchical and controlled system attempts to normalize practice. **Therefore conceptions of excellence from 18 English PGCE teachers were collected outside course activities through a mind-mapping exercise**

Student teachers' conceptions of excellence and classroom practices

Max Horkheimer has described man's position in his famous work *Eclipse of Reason* in the following way:

It seems that even as technical knowledge expands the horizon of man's thought and activity, his autonomy as an individual, his ability to resist the growing apparatus of mass manipulation, his power of imagination, his independent judgement appear to reduce (Horkheimer 1947:v-vi).

It appears that the education system in England exhibits the reductivism described by Horkheimer. On the other hand the Finnish system, acclaimed in the introduction to the UK government's White Paper *The Importance of Teaching* (2010:16) as being a factor influencing the significant changes in teacher and pupil education appearing in the subsequent Education Act (2011), seems to oppose it. Whereas in England, the philosophy and theory of education has all but been abolished from the initial teacher education curriculum (see Chapter 10), in Finland the formation of personal pedagogies based on critical evaluation of ontologies and epistemologies is fundamental to the award of teacher status. The situation in the two countries appears to reflect Paolo Freire's (in Leach and

Moon, 1999:53) division of teachers into competent technicians, who can modify previously given instructions so that they become part of one's own classroom activity, and his ideal of critical pedagogy with the 'teacher as cultural worker' (see Chapter 3).

Such an interpretation would be misleading, however. In fact, student teachers' conceptions of excellence in teaching are remarkably similar in both countries. Both emphasize child-centred learning, the promotion of thinking and personal conceptions of teacherhood. Both groups are also enthusiastic, even passionate, about their chosen profession and both in different ways appear to be prescribed by external factors, tradition in Finland and government in England (Raiker & Rautiainen, 2012.) Finnish teachers have substantial autonomy based on shared understanding with their political partners of education's role in developing individual and social wellbeing, and in Finland's emergence as an international player. Unlike in England, the Finnish Ministry of Education sees no need to for change. In other words, the country's confidence in the current abilities and status of teachers is stable. This can be seen also in teacher education, where student teachers are supported and encouraged in developing their pedagogical thinking from their personal perspectives:

"According to me, enthusiasm is the most important part of pedagogy. Motivated learners learn, because they are eager to learn. The teacher's role is to inspire learners. I thought this way already before I started my pedagogical studies, but now I know how to motivate learners!"

This quotation is taken from a Finnish subject student teacher's report entitled *My pedagogical thinking and its theoretic and philosophic background*; this report is the final task in their pedagogical studies (60 ECTS). It reflects the synthesis of all the teacher education that student has received, internalized, and then articulated. New teachers have high consciousness of their pedagogical freedom in their classroom with their classes. They know the system is not controlling them.

However, new teachers' pedagogic freedoms do have constraints in the form of the traditions of the Finnish school culture. Student teachers with new ideas to improve classroom practice recognize the pressure of tradition. They are aware that, as teachers, they will be expected to introduce innovative ways of learning and teaching into schools, but at the same time they will be expected to uphold traditional pedagogic practices. This contradiction makes them uncertain of their choices during their studies. Rautiainen (2008) compared students' conceptions of community in relation to the idea of democracy and political ideologies such as anarchism, liberalism and conservatism. The majority of the students are conservatives even if they show great willingness to increase interaction between teachers and pupils. Only a small minority is willing to change basic school practices. Nevertheless, some student teachers have thoughts that have are similar to those of John Dewey (1966). The quotations below are from the data collected from subject student teachers concerning the changes needed in school according to student teachers.

“Besides, how can an educator demand of his students the ability to cooperate or to get along with other people if he himself as an adult human being is incapable of functioning as an active member of his own community or in cooperation with other teachers or with the home?”

“In a school community pupils should be given the opportunity of directly influencing school activity. A simple example would, for example, be defining the objectives for courses. Pupils should have the possibility of influencing all kind of activity. Admittedly, participation does presuppose sufficient knowledge about how school works, but this could be gradually taught even during lessons. Pupils should have equal chances of influencing the school community and everybody should have the opportunity and right to affect matters. The issues and the decisions should have a real meaning and appropriate goals. The community must approve the goals democratically, but be open to new suggestions and ideas. Pupils could be given different roles and tasks in the community. Through joint action and planning pupils commit themselves to developing the community”.

In everyday life the task of developing a new culture of democracy will face the problem of lack of time. If a student teacher feels there is not enough time for completing the basics in a school subject, how can time be found for making explicit living democratically? In this context education for democracy is a secondary aim compared to achieving objectives in each subject. This is also a deeply rooted tradition of school: the pupil's unquestioned position as learner and the teacher's as supervisor. In other words the pupil's role is subordinate to that of the teacher. This is interesting, because there does not seem to be a strong connection between learning practices and education for democracy in student teachers pedagogical thinking. The primary nature of learning methods compared to educating for democracy has created classroom practices without a strong ethos of democracy.

A typical Finnish classroom is still laid out with rows of tables and seats. The teacher's table is in the front of the classroom. This arrangement is not conducive for educating for democracy as one pupil is looking at the neck of another pupil, and the only face the learner can see is that of the teacher. The difference compared with classroom design in England is striking. In England, many classrooms are arranged for group work but with the wherewithal for each child to look to the front where the teacher and the interactive whiteboard are generally situated. Teachers' desks are often pushed to the side; some teachers do not have desks at all. Lessons are designed to include not only whole class delivery of subject matter to meet specific learning outcomes but also for group work focused on differentiated tasks so that all pupils can access the learning presented. Group work is learner-centred and can be either cooperative or collaborative, depending on the task. In Finnish classrooms, lesson plans and furniture arrangements are designed for teaching from the front, in other words, teacher-centered in nature. Finnish classroom-design solutions are logical from a traditional perspective. Teaching from the front to pupils sitting in rows emphasizes the teacher's central role in and control of the learning process. However, it appears that the English approach where control moves from teacher to pupil and back again, with the teacher holding the

overarching role of facilitator, has greater resonance with Dewey's conceptions of the democratising power of education or of faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action' (Dewey, 1939:3).

Character and behaviour

Interestingly, the changes in direction of democratic teacher professionalism, characterized by character and behavior, have the same root in England and Finland, the period of experimental education known as 'progressive education' practised in the 1960s. Progressive education involved a move towards child-centred education, informality with an emphasis on personalisation and learning by discovery. In both Finland and the UK, selective schools were replaced with comprehensive schools (though public schools and some grammar schools in the UK avoided replacement). However, whereas in Finland collaboration at all levels and by all stakeholders ensured the development of a cohesive approach to teacher education with shared understanding of required standards and their method of application, there was no similar uniform approach in the UK. Partly, this was due to the relative size of the two countries. In 1960, the population of Finland was 4.43 million (de Wulf, 2012) whilst that of the UK was 52.4 million (ONS, 2014) and growing rapidly due to the post-war 'baby-boom'. Also, whilst Finland had been able to adopt comprehensive education throughout the nation, diversity was maintained in the UK. The reasons lie in the attitudes to mass education held by the Conservative government of 1951- 1964. The Conservatives were committed to the public and grammar schools where they themselves had been educated. Despite the efforts of Harold Wilson's Labour Government (1964-70) to increase opportunity within British society, by abolishing the 11 plus examination on which selection to grammar schools depended and spending more on education than defence, by 1970 only 30 per cent of secondary aged children were attending secondary comprehensive schools. However, the increase of access to secondary education given by the 1944 Education Act had resulted in a more knowledgeable and politically aware populace that recognised the unfairness of the selective system and believed that education should be more child-centred, particularly in primary schools. The system of streaming in primary teaching, and thus whole class teaching, was gradually discarded.

Newly qualified teachers found their professionalism and status advanced by teaching becoming a graduate profession through the introduction of the Bachelors of Education degree following recommendations of the 1963 Robbins report. Local Education Authorities (LEAs) encouraged innovation in the classroom. This, together with a decline in the inspectorial role of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMIs) and LEA inspectors of schools increased teachers' autonomy and they were stimulated to be creative and innovative in their practice. This was a golden time for democratic teacher professionalism, but as Galton, Simon and Croll (1980) point out, the direction of teacher autonomy and professionalism in future years '...can be found in this period and the apparent subsequent reaction from ideas and practices then regarded as positive' (Galton et al, 1980:39). This was an age of permissiveness teachers could teach what they wanted to teach in a manner and to a timescale that suited

them. This period has been termed the era of ‘uninformed professionalism’ (Earl et al, 2003) and it had significant consequences for teacher and child education.

In the 1980s, an international focus on achievement in language and mathematics raised concerns about teaching and learning methods; emphasis was placed on determining the causes of under-achievement. In response the role of Government in education changed and became explicitly interventionist. The Conservative Government introduced a series of initiatives that attempted to democratise education whilst pressurising schools to demonstrate school improvement and increasing achievement in return for increased funding. Parental choice in schools increased and many aspects of school management were taken from the LEAs and given to schools. *The National Curriculum* was introduced in the late 1980s (revised 1999 and 2014), a legal statement of what schools were required to teach. Pupil achievement was measured by *Standard Assessment Tests* (SATs) at the end of each Key Stage at ages seven, eleven, fourteen and sixteen, success in the latter being awarded by General Certificates in Secondary Education (GCSEs). School performance was inspected in depth during a round of inspections by Ofsted beginning in 1996. The shift from teacher autonomy to Government prescription was completed in 2012 when the General Teaching Council of England was abolished and its *Code of Practice for Registered Teachers in England* were replaced by the *Teachers’ Standards* (TS, 2012). Devised and published by the Secretary of State for Education, the TS prescribe principles or criteria to be followed by student teachers and nearly all practising teachers, regardless of their career stage.

Character and behaviour features strongly in the TS. In the *Personal and Professional Conduct* part of the TS (2012:10), character and behaviour is linked to the term ‘ethics’ and is defined as including and maintaining dignity and mutual respect between teachers and pupils ‘...at all times observing proper boundaries appropriate to a teacher’s professional position’, and safe-guarding pupils well-being ‘...in accordance with statutory provisions’. This strongly suggests that the parameters of teacher character and behaviour are determined by government. What is more, the parameters are defined in deficit terms, suggesting that they are not naturally part of a teachers’ culturally generated self, that is, the totality and embodiment of her thoughts and experiences organised into perceptions of correctness of practices; in other words, teachers do not intrinsically have the character to behave in the ‘best good’. However, our research into student teachers’ conceptions of excellent teaching has revealed a healthy scepticism as well as an appreciation of the framework provided by the Teachers’ Standards. The following is representative of the views of the English students who contributed to our research:

“What is excellence in education? Well, when I found out I was going to be speaking about this today, the first thing I did was to ask the teachers in my school what they thought excellence in education was and I got a lot of different answers. The main answer I was given was that excellence in education was achieving an outstanding at Ofsted. Ofsted are like a governing body that assess teaching in the UK. But I spoke to my mentor about this and she gave me the opinion that getting an outstanding at Ofsted was not a sign of excellence, it could be luck. So this made me question what my

definition of excellence is, and I think it's such a hard question to answer because it is based on your personal views. The UK government have come up with eight teacher standards that Student C sated to talk about. It was to create a uniform goal of teaching across the UK. These standards came into implementation in September of this year and they are the standards by which we as PGCE students and teachers in general are judged. Although these standards are given to be the minimum level of practice, I personally think that of you are implementing all of the standards then you are on your way to achieving excellence.”

There are no such government-directed and prescribed principles for acting in the ‘best good’ in Finland. Finnish teachers have broad pedagogic autonomy in their work compared to English colleagues. This has arisen from philosophic and historic perspectives based on social meta-practices evolving from European, in particular, German, traditions of education and socio-political development in the Nordic countries. According to Heikkinen et al. (2011:2):

...in Finland and the Nordic countries, the European tradition of ‘Bildung’ has been adopted and developed along with the Scandinavian welfare state, based on strong values of democracy, equity and solidarity....The development in Finland can be understood within this social, political, cultural and material-economic context.

‘Bildung’, following the Hegelian tradition, is defined by Heikkinen et al. as being not only an intense pursuit of personal intellectual and practical development, but also of development of one’s society. This involves the consistent and continual questioning of the existing state of affairs, challenging both government and society to realise its own highest thoughts and designs.

The result of this in terms of teacher education was that changes in society in 1990s strengthened what Finnish educators call ‘teacherhood’. Teachers’ duties became more demanding than in earlier decades through the adoption of pedagogical approaches that placed greater focus on the ethical dimensions in teacher education. Established traditions made way for a constructivist orientation which presupposed constant assessment and renewal of one’s pedagogical practices and approaches. The national core curriculum lost its prescription and become guidelines for school-based curricula. Also, the national school inspection system and inspection of school textbooks were abolished. At the same time there was extensive discussion of basic concepts associated with learning and the status of the school. The idea of collaboration in its various forms spread in Finland at the same time as the shift to school-based curricula resulting from the curricular. The resultant rise of responsibility and autonomy required broader reflections on professional character and behaviours and teachers’ responsibility for the ethical dimensions of their practices.

The same requirements for autonomy and professional responsibility in terms of character and behaviour were applied to teacher educators. National legislation provided the framework for academic and pedagogic programmes of study by defining the qualifications required for

teacher status, but this framework is open to interpretation. This allows university faculties of education to have strong autonomy in deciding the aims and curricula content of teacher education. Traditionally in Finland teacher education has been didactically and psychologically oriented; the role of the social sciences has been always been minimal (Rantala & Rautiainen 2013). Therefore the ethos of teacher education has emphasized student teachers' personal growth through reflection and reflexivity focused on personality, choices and the resulting outcomes (for further reading on the historical roots of the Finnish approach to teacher education see Haavio, 1948; Niemi & Jakku-Sihvonen, 2006; Niemi et al, 2012.) Areas of study, for example ethic and values, educational philosophy and theory, and legislation, provide the bases for pedagogic studies, professional development and growth, but the final conception of 'teacherhood' lies with the individual, both pre- and in-service. In other words teacher education in Finland can be likened to a 'supermarket', where student teachers can select the arguments to support his/her conception of teacherhood (character and behaviour) to become and be a teacher. The cornerstone for teacher professional development is clearly liberal in nature.

The goal of the Teacher education programme is to support students' professional development to become autonomous and ethically responsible experts who are able to critically analyse and reform the culture of school and education as well as their own activities. The goal is to create a strong academic identity and the basis thus formed for teachers to contribute to scientific and professional development in their own field. The work of a teacher requires both mastery of practical procedures and the ability to justify the choice of a particular way of working. At the core of a teacher's work lies the understanding and supporting of a pupil's and a group's development. The dialogue between theory and practice takes place particularly during teaching practice periods, which offer a holistic view of a teacher's work. (Curriculum plans 2014-2017, Department of Teacher Education, University of Jyväskylä:1-2.)

This situation is possible only where the community has confidence and trust in the teaching profession. In Finland teachers have the community's confidence and trust. Their strong ethical basis for the work they do in school is recognized, resulting in teaching being a highly regarded and high status profession, in the same orbit as medicine or law. Because of the emphasis on autonomy, ethical responsibility and expertise, it could be expected that school and classroom practices should be wide-ranging, because the interpretation inherent in the constitution of teacher status mentioned above makes possible pedagogic experimentation and creativity. It is therefore surprising that the differences between schools and classroom practices are small. In other words, despite the potential for diversity of practices, there is strong agreement on the purpose of education, its content and how it should be taught amongst teachers and other stakeholders such as parents and the wider school community. This is interesting because teachers have pedagogic freedom of choice without external hindrances or constraints and their teacher education programmes include intellectual engagement with philosophy, ethics, educational theory and legislation. Finnish teachers might therefore be inclined, even expected, to be strong promoters of democracy in their classrooms, but they seem to be more like 'princes of their domains'. This contradiction can

be explained by the strong role of traditional teaching and learning in Finland which is embedded in the schooling culture. Newly graduating teachers have come from this tradition schooling culture and they will be socialized back into it when they take up their first teaching post, whatever innovative pedagogic ideas on school and classroom development they have engaged with at university (Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2011).

Conclusions

It would appear that, although conceptions of excellent teaching should include explicitly education for democracy, it is not among the primary objectives of schoolwork in either country. In both countries, the teacher's task is to attain the learning outcomes of her subject as prescribed in England's *National Curriculum*, or as guided by the equivalent in Finland. However, despite being presented as admonishment to teachers not to undermine them teachers, democracy and its related virtues of the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect and tolerance are present in England's Teachers' Standards and in the everyday processes of classroom practice. In Finland, teachers' activities are reflecting the values of Nordic society like equality, caring and welfare for all. Visiting a Finnish school is a confusing experience for foreigners, because they can see the two faces of Finnish education at the same time. In Finnish schools, learners attain high standards as evidenced by PISA, and the interaction between teacher and pupils and the various groups in school is informal. However visitors are also aware of the passive learner waiting and following her teacher's instructions, a pupil who does not have a role in the decision-making process. It is clear that the teacher is in the position of 'expert', who rules the classroom and its state of democracy. The diversity of students in English classrooms means that the pedagogic strategies used within them have to be directed primarily at inclusion and equal opportunities in terms of accessing the curriculum. In spite of the class system still present in Westminster and the policies emanating from government, in schools and classrooms educating for democracy exists in practice.

England and Finland are not alone with their teaching cultures and the challenges they are facing in their schools and classrooms. Teachers are using more and more active teaching practices as well as pupils-centered methods all around Europe (see e.g. OECD, 2014). In addition European Union is emphasizing citizenship education's significance in education. The vision is clear: more participatory, active and democratic citizens (Citizenship education in Europe, 2012). However, as we have demonstrated, the change is complex because education is carrying the weight of history, not only in practices, but also intellectually. In spite of differences, intellectuality including values of democracy and critical thinking is also connecting us though the same aim but a different framework.

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