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Regular Article

Attributes of democratic culture as represented in young children's drawings

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A R T I C L E I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Democratic culture refers to a set of values, attitudes, and practices shared by citizens and institutions, without which democracy cannot exist. Preschools and schools have a core role in teaching and transmitting democratic culture as they offer most children their early encounters with the public realm that provides social environments for democratic culture. The aim of this article is to increase knowledge on democratic education of young children and creative means to implement it. The core questions raised are: How do young children understand their classroom social environment and their own role in it? Which of the children's understandings of their classroom social environment reflect attributes of democratic culture? The data include 125 children's drawings and their linguistic explanations of them collected from schools that implemented the Cultural Literacy Learning Programme in Cyprus, Israel, Lithuania, Portugal, and the UK. The method used is data-driven content analysis, including qualitative categorizing of the data, quantification of its core features, and a reflexive interpretation of the contents of the drawings. The study reveals how children aged 5–6 are able to elaborate on the ideas, principles, and practices of democratic culture, including participation, collaboration, negotiation, dialogue, listening, and expressing one's own opinions. The analysis of the data elicited five thematic categories of how children think about social life in their classroom, approach democratic culture, and understand their role in practising it in school. The categories were based on the children's approach to rules; suggestions taking the action either alone or as a member of a group; and views of the purpose and beneficiary of this action. The analysis revealed how drawing with peers is a multimodal and dialogic process of learning democratic culture. Children engage in dialogic chains of thinking not only in verbal, but also in visual interaction. Since the ability to participate in a dialogue is seen as a core skill in democratic education, educators should better recognize visual dialogic chains of thinking as a way for students to familiarize themselves with and practise democratic culture.

1. Introduction: creative means for democratic education

Participative, active, and responsible individuals are key for democratic societies. Democratic education, in which democracy functions simultaneously as a pedagogical method and the educational aim, has a long history. In complex, diversifying, and rapidly transforming societies, such educational attempts are increasingly timely. The Council of Europe suggests in its recent Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (CofE, 2018a, p. 7) that education systems 'should make preparation for democratic citizenship one of its key missions.' In the Framework, democracy is approached from a participatory point of view, emphasizing citizens' engagement in public policies through which they can impact common issues. The Framework concept of democratic culture refers to a set of values, attitudes, and practices

shared by citizens and institutions, without which democracy cannot exist. This set includes 'a commitment to the rule of law and human rights, a commitment to the public sphere, a conviction that conflicts must be resolved peacefully, acknowledgement of and respect for diversity, a willingness to express one's own opinions, a willingness to listen to the opinions of others, a commitment to decisions being made by majorities, a commitment to the protection of minorities and their rights, and a willingness to engage in dialogue across cultural divides' (CofE, 2018a, pp. 71–72). Preschools and schools have a core role in teaching and transmitting democratic culture as they offer most children their early encounters with the public realm that provides social environments for democratic culture (Astuto & Ruck, 2010; Kemple, 2017; Marsh et al., 2020). In this environment, children learn to understand how to interact as part of a social group and community formed by their

peers and teachers (Erickson & Thompson, 2019, 4).

The aim of this article is to increase knowledge on democratic education of young children and creative means to implement it. The study focuses on drawing as a form of communication, a mode of practising imagination, and 'a constructive process of thinking in action' (Cox, 2005, p. 123). The core questions raised are: How do young children understand their classroom social environment and their own role in it? Which of the children's understandings of their classroom social environment reflect attributes of democratic culture? The analysis conducted to answer these questions shows how drawing with peers functions as a dialogic mode of meaning-making and an arena for envisioning, suggesting, and testing the premises and rules of social life and living together.

Democratic education has recently gained much attention among educators and scholars. It has been approached as a cross-curricular practice teaching children cross-curricular topics and competencies within all subjects or areas of study through methods and approaches that conceive education in a holistic way grounded in real-world phenomena, incidents, and challenges (CofE, 2018b, pp. 15–16). These methods and approaches include modelling democratic attitudes and behaviours (such as valuing human rights and dignity, fairness, equality, cultural diversity, empathy, and openness and respect for other people) in the classroom; implementing democratic processes with students; and co-operative and project-based learning (CofE, 2018b, pp. 29–31). Moreover, the methods and approaches cover service-learning practices intended to simultaneously educate students, empower them to make decisions, and act on their own initiative in cooperation with peers, as well as to benefit communities beyond school (Boyle-Baise, 2002; CofE, 2018b; Marsh et al., 2020).

These aims characterize the participatory strand of democratic education. Pedagogic practices in this strand vary from learner-centred approaches, where children are seen as active knowledge producers and creators of their own worlds – and thus participants in social reconstruction – to citizenship educational approaches aiming at children's active participation in existing social life – and thus in the social reproduction of the society (Sant, 2019). These two approaches to participatory democratic education reflect two distinct ontologies of its core functionality. On the one hand, scholars and educators have stressed that children need to be included in processes to make decisions and solve social problems related to their current and future lives (Ben-Arieh, 2014; Hart & Schwab, 1997; Lansdown, 2001). On the other hand, scholars have emphasized the instrumental value of participatory democratic education, showing how various interrelated prosocial skills learned at school increase later civic engagement and democratic participation in adulthood (Astuto & Ruck, 2010, 2017; Callan, 1997; McGuire et al., 2019).

Do young children have a capacity for participating in democratic culture and acting as citizens? Scholars argue that children as young as 3–5 critically engage with multiple perspectives on civic issues (Erickson & Thompson, 2019; Sharkey, 2018; Vasquez, 2004, 2017; Winograd, 2015); recognize the needs of others in their everyday environments and communities; are concerned with world events (Hall & Rudkin, 2011; Payne, 2018) and 'are aware of and care for their broader their community, take others' needs and desires into consideration, and deliberate about possible solutions to community challenges' (Marsh et al., 2020). What means of communication can young children use to engage in democratic culture? Some view 'genuine civic discourse or lived experiences of democratic decision making' as the guiding principles for democratic education processes (McGuire et al., 2019, p. 2). To achieve this in practice, educators have sought to activate children's participation in classroom tasks and responsibilities, in co-creating classroom rules and agreements, and in discussing issues affecting their lives in their everyday environment (Levinson, 2012; Marsh et al., 2020). The means used include creative and artistic practices and (role) playing simulating the resolving of real problems (Astuto & Ruck, 2010; Hall & Rudkin, 2011; Kemple, 2017; McGuire et al., 2019; Stevahn & McGuire,

2017). Others focus on non-language-based expression for enabling young children to explore and deal with issues that may be difficult to discuss and give meanings with words. Hence, visual methods have been perceived as adequate and valid means to study children's meaning-making processes (Hall, 2010; Hall & Rudkin, 2011; Deguara, 2015, 2019). Drawing, in particular, has been seen as a means with which children typically communicate their inner thoughts, emotions, and imaginings, their relationship to the external world and to real-life episodes (Deguara, 2015; Jolley, 2010; Wright, 2010). Due to this capacity, Hall (2010, 420) has defined drawing as a 'facilitative method for communication' that facilitates and elicits discussion but simultaneously enables children to convey their understanding of the expressed issues in a non-linguistic way.

This article draws on children's drawings and their linguistic communication of them in a lesson on democratic education. This lesson was part of the Cultural Literacy Learning Programme created by an international group of scholars and teachers in the Dialogue and Argumentation for Cultural Literacy Learning in Schools project (see Lähdesmäki et al., 2022; Maine & Vrikki, 2021). The programme was implemented in over 250 classes in Cyprus, Germany, Israel, Lithuania, Spain, Portugal, and the UK in the school year 2019–2020. One of the lessons aimed at children aged 5–6 focused on democracy and democratic culture with two learning outcomes: 'I can listen to others and respect their ideas' and 'I can examine how democracy allows everyone to have a voice and the ability to change things.' The programme followed dialogic pedagogy, emphasizing that students and their teacher(s) co-construct meanings: The teachers modelled how to engage democratically in the dialogue in the classroom (Maine & Čermáková, 2021).

The findings of this study emphasize how students cocreated meanings through dialogic creative practices in the Cultural Literacy Learning Programme. Maine (2015, 2016) has developed the idea of dialogic meaning-making in her research on children's joint interpretation of films and images. She notes how in such joint interpretation children mediate and transmit influences and inspiration to their peers and thus participate in 'dialogic chains of thinking' (Maine, 2015, p. 55). Maine (2015, 88) explains the mechanism of such thinking as follows: 'When faced with visual texts the children create verbal stories and more visual imagery. They move beyond the frame of the text to contextualize what they are experiencing, and this is true for both the purely visual and the multi-modal text types they encounter.' In the Cultural Literacy Learning Programme, the students received influences, inspiration, and stimulus from both learning material and their peers. They also mediated and transmitted influences and inspiration to their peers and thus participated in dialogic chains of thinking. According to Maine (2015, 55): 'Analyzing the dialogue through looking at the chains enables us to see how the children use co-constructive moves to develop their thinking, and how their dialogue ebbs and flows as ideas take form and are either developed or discarded by the respondent.'

Despite the educational setting, this article does not seek to develop pedagogy for democratic culture. Instead, it focuses on children's meaning-making processes of democratic culture and their agency in these processes. The article begins with discussion of the theoretical framework, data, and methods, followed by analysis of five thematic categories of how children think about social life in their classroom, approach democratic culture, and understand their role in practising it in school. The article concludes with the main results, utility of the applied approach, and contribution to research on democratic education.

2. Theoretical framework

Drawing as a children's mode of expression has been broadly explored in scholarship. In the 2000s, scholars (e.g., Anning, 2003; Ivashkevich, 2009; Atkinson, 2009; Coates & Coates, 2011; Deguara, 2015) noted a paradigm shift in research toward children's drawing as a process of communication influenced by various sociocultural contexts.

This research has shown how children are influenced by the culture(s) and societies surrounding them and how these influences can be perceived from their visual expression. While children – like all people – are impacted by their social and cultural contexts, they are not only passive receivers but also active creators of these contexts (Lähdesmäki et al., 2022). The participatory approach to childhood research has emphasized children's agency, seeing them as 'social beings who are able, competent agents and active constructors of their knowledge and understanding' (Deguara, 2015, p. 12) and agents of their own learning, 'actively defining reality, rather than passively reflecting a "given reality"' (Cox, 2005, p. 12).

This article explores children's drawings from a combined sociocultural and participatory approach emphasizing children's agency in reflecting, processing, and creating cultural meanings. This approach underlines how children can process knowledge through drawing, which allows them to develop their imagination, personality, dialogic relationship to others, and emotional responses in a creative way (Lähdesmäki & Koistinen, 2021). Children's drawing, however, is rarely limited to visual expression alone. In their meaning-making processes, different modes of communication interact and impact each other in a multimodal synthesis (Jewitt, 2008; Walsh, 2009). Particularly in young children's meaning-making processes, visual and oral modes may be difficult to distinguish. As Kinnunen (2015) notes, drawing can be perceived as a kind of dialogue between the marks made on paper and orally narrated thoughts. As children's capacity to express their thoughts in a visual form is limited, their drawing may convey less than or a different connotation from what was planned or aspired (Deguara, 2015). Kress (1997) has suggested that children may try to overcome this limitation by combining talk or other modes of oral or bodily expression with their visual modes of meaning-making. Therefore, scholars (Deguara, 2015; Deguara & Nutbrown, 2018; Kress, 1997; Siim, 2019) have stressed that children's drawings cannot be interpreted outside the narrative context and explanation of the drawing given by the children themselves. Children's oral explanation of their visual expression facilitates adults' (and other children's) understanding of what is being communicated (Deguara, 2015; Kress, 1997).

The main sociocultural context of this study draws on school. Several scholars have explored the impact of the school on children's communication and creative expression. In these studies, they argue that the school context effectively unifies the children's cultural and communicative resources by moving them from being communicative agents of their own worlds alone to become communicative agents of their society and culture (Deguara, 2015; Kress, 1997, 2000). The school context – including teachers, peers, classroom practices, and curricula – either explicitly or implicitly emphasizes certain values, perceptions, and expectations that influence children's visual expression (Einarsdottir et al., 2009). Some scholars (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010) have seen this 'acculturation to school' as the main shortcoming of research utilizing children's drawings as data: Children may create images that they think will please the teacher or researcher. Understanding the social and cultural context is crucial in the research of children's visual expression and meaning-making.

Children's drawings often involve copying ideas, scenes, and events and imitating visual elements and patterns from cultural texts around them. In a school context, children copy ideas and patterns from their peers and study material. Adults have sometimes considered this kind of repetitive image-making as a less valuable and passive practice that does not involve imagination and creativity (Dyson, 2010; Mavers, 2011). However, copying can be perceived as a semiotic process including selective borrowing: The copied visual elements, ideas, and techniques are transformed from the existing source in a process of reinterpretation, recontextualization, and reconfiguration into a new design (Deguara, 2015; Dyson, 2010; Mavers, 2011). In this process, children typically link their own experiences, emotions, and understandings to the borrowed elements and thus extend their existing meanings. For Mavers (2011, 16), 'there is no such thing as a copy because copying is an agentive process of remaking afresh.' Copying can be thus seen as belonging to drawing as an act of thinking in action (Deguara, 2015; Lähdesmäki et al., 2022).

3. Data and methods

The empirical data for this article were collected during the Cultural Literacy Learning Programme. The programme lesson on democracy started by watching the animated wordless short film *Ant* (2017) by German director Julia Ocker. The film depicts the collective life of an ant colony in their everyday work of carrying leaves from a tree to their nest on the ground. A leader ant directs this systematic work, where each ant repeats the same monotonic routine. One of the ants, however, starts to implement the routine in its own manner, making the routine more fun but simultaneously causing disruption to the community's systematized work. The ant's creative way of carrying leaves causes an intervention that makes the ants to change together their way of working. This change eventually makes the routine more enjoyable for the whole colony. Even the leader ant congratulates the creative ant for making the change. After watching the film, the students were encouraged to role-play the ants in the film and discuss in small groups and with the whole class the claim 'you must always follow the rules.' At the end of the lesson, the teacher asked the children to get into groups, to draw together something that they can change about their own behaviour to help make the classroom a better place, and to describe and explain what they had created. The aim of this task was to encourage participation, collaboration, and negotiation between different points of view.

The data include these drawings, their explanations, and background information on the implementation of the lesson. Some of the children wrote the explanatory texts themselves but in most cases their teachers functioned as mediators of the children's voices, writing down what they said about their drawings. Many of the drawings are individually created multicoloured works but the data include joint creations. The teachers photographed the drawings and sent them and their explanatory texts to the researchers of the project. The teachers also completed a brief survey including some background information indicating the country, gender breakdown of the groups, and a description of the progress of the lesson, particularly if some changes had been made to the lesson plan. The data include 125 drawings total from Cyprus (17 from five classes), Israel (28 from five classes), Lithuania (21 from five classes), Portugal (48 from six classes), and the UK (11 from five classes).

The lesson was implemented in the above-mentioned countries in Greek, Hebrew, Lithuanian, Portuguese, and English. The data were translated into English by a team of researchers from each country. These researchers were involved in the implementation of the programme, collaboration with the teachers, and data collection from the schools, and, thus, knew well the contexts in which the data were produced. Validity of the translation occurred through close collaboration between the teams during the research project.

In the analysis of the drawings, the children's own explanations were considered as a key to their meanings. The aim of the analysis was not, however, to trace the children's thoughts – this is impossible. Following visual communication theories, the analysis draws on 'decoding' the signs which the children have 'coded' to their drawings in the context of the lesson (see Rose, 2001, p. 16). The method used is data-driven content analysis, including qualitative categorizing of the data, quantification of its core features (Rose, 2001), and a reflexive interpretation of the contents of the drawings (Rose, 2001, pp. 15–16; Passerini, 2018; Lähdesmäki et al., 2022). The data included in this article were analyzed by the author alone. The categories for coding drew on an intensive exploration of how the children depicted and described their classroom social environment and their own role in it: What was depicted, what happened in the drawings, by whom, and where? Following the phases of data-driven content analysis, the coded features were collated into broader units that were checked against each other and to the data to ensure their coherence, consistency, and distinctiveness. In the analysis,

the collated units were identified as five categories related to the attributes that underpin democratic culture in children's classroom social environment. Each drawing was categorized only once.

4. Findings: five categories of approaching democratic culture in the classroom

The meanings of democratic culture were jointly created by the children and their teachers, who modelled how to engage democratically in dialogue in the classrooms. In the data, it is both impossible and unnecessary to distinguish whether a certain idea of the classroom being a better place or a suggestion for changing one's behaviour came originally from the children, their teacher, or the film as learning material. The drawings and their explanatory texts reveal interaction in which ideas are borrowed from various sources in the context of the lesson and explored through participants' own views and experiences. Following the inductive logic of qualitative content analysis, the data were organized into five categories. The differences between the categories are based on the following qualitative axis: 1) the children express the importance of obeying existing collective rules – the children suggest new practices or rules; 2) the child acts alone – the child acts as a member of a group; 3) the children's act is based on gaining personal benefit – the children's act is based on reciprocity – the children act altruistically for a common good.

4.1. Following existing rules

The first thematic category focuses on classroom rules. In this category, both the drawings and their explanatory texts emphasize existing rules and the importance of following them to make or keep the classroom in order: Rules are not to be questioned. In this category, common rules determine the idea of a shared space that is comfortable for all. Here, most of the explanatory texts are written in the first person. For instance, a group of Israeli children notes: 'I should follow the rules. I should help other children when they need me. I should listen carefully.' Another Israeli group writes: 'I should behave and listen to the lesson. I should sit properly on my chair in the circle. I should put my bag in its place.' Besides the first-person point of view, the category includes

explanatory texts in which the children repeat the classroom rules as such or as they remember or interpret them. For instance, a group of Portuguese children sums up these rules by stating: 'Treat my colleagues well; work in silence; keep the classroom clean; keep silent; sit properly in one's chair.'

The drawings in this category depict scenes and spaces from school. Despite the first-person approach in the texts, the drawings rarely focus only on one person. In the drawings, the practice of following the rules takes place with others, with a pair or in a small group. The rules and following them are commonly illustrated with figures who are in 'order,' such as standing in a row or sitting in a circle, or who are ordering toys, books, bags, or other items. In Fig. 1, for instance, two happy figures stand next to items organized in a straight row. The children explain their drawing by emphasizing the importance of tidying up things when they are not being used anymore. The drawings thus illustrate how rules are a collective phenomenon: Rules are related to the functioning of the group of people as a collective and benefit it as a whole – not only the one who obeys them.

The emphasis on following the rules in the data contradicts the main narrative of *Ant*. This reflects how rules were dealt with in some classes during the lesson. Some of the teachers wrote in the survey forms that they took up the topic of classroom rules in the lesson or the classes even focused on them in the drawing task. This emphasizes the core role of rules in the school context: They are seen as key for collective interaction by the teachers and (or hence also) by the children.

Teachers were also depicted in some of the drawings. In them the roles and spaces of the children and teachers are clear: Teachers stand in front of the children teaching them while children learn and stay in order in the class. Fig. 2 shows this. In the explanatory text to this drawing, a group of Israeli children notes: 'If the children will listen to the teacher, behave according to the rules, learn, and make an effort then it will be more pleasant in the classroom.'

4.2. Reciprocal practices

In the second thematic category, the children move from the elaboration of rules to imagining and suggesting acts and practices that they can do to make their classroom or school more comfortable for both

Fig. 1. Drawing by children from the UK depicting two smiling figures standing next to items organized in a straight row. © The children.
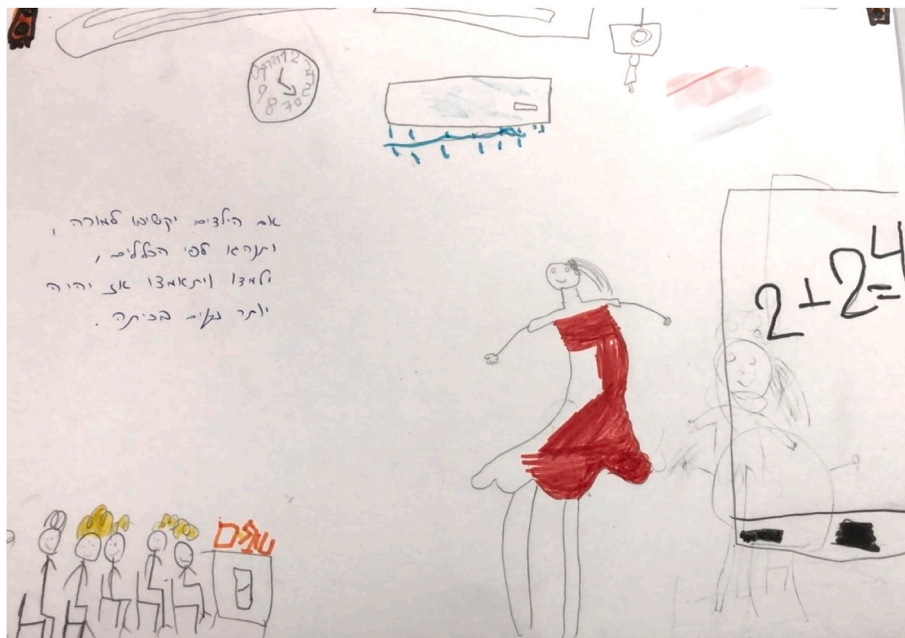
Fig. 2. Drawing by children from Israel depicting a smiling teacher teaching mathematics to smiling students who sit on chairs in a classroom. © The children.

themselves and their peers. These imaginings are commonly depicted and explained as based on reciprocity: The child recognizes what their peer is good at and, thus, can help and support another child who lacks that skill or is less skilled, and suggests how the other child can offer help in return. Compared to the first category, these drawings indicate a more interactive approach to practising democratic culture. The explanatory texts of the drawings in this category commonly draw on the first-person point of view emphasizing the child's own role in the process of inter-action. For instance, a child from the UK explains their drawing by saying: 'I think we need to be more like the ants and do things together more. My friend is really good at maths and she helps me. I don't know what I can help her with. Maybe dancing or running because I'm really good at that!' In the drawing, the child has depicted a group of smiling figures in a framed space, assumably peers in their classroom. The idea of 'being more like the ants' in the film is dealt with in the drawing that includes a sentence: 'I think we can work together.'

Besides the first-person point of view, the children also explore the reciprocal approach to democratic culture in a more abstract and distanced manner. In such cases, the drawings commonly depict two figures giving each other something or interacting in play or a game. In their explanatory texts, the action is described in the third person. For instance, a group of Israeli children describes their drawing by noting: 'The friends share games they brought and help to find things that others lost.' In this drawing, two smiling figures wearing crowns and colourful clothes give each other an item that looks like a present (Fig. 3).

4.3. Acting altruistically alone

Besides reciprocity, the children elaborated on their behaviour and individual action to increase congeniality at their class or school for all. In this third thematic category, the child is acting altruistically alone to transform the school environment and/or its social atmosphere. These drawings commonly depict a smiling figure explained by recognizing how to cherish good social relations in the classroom, for instance by
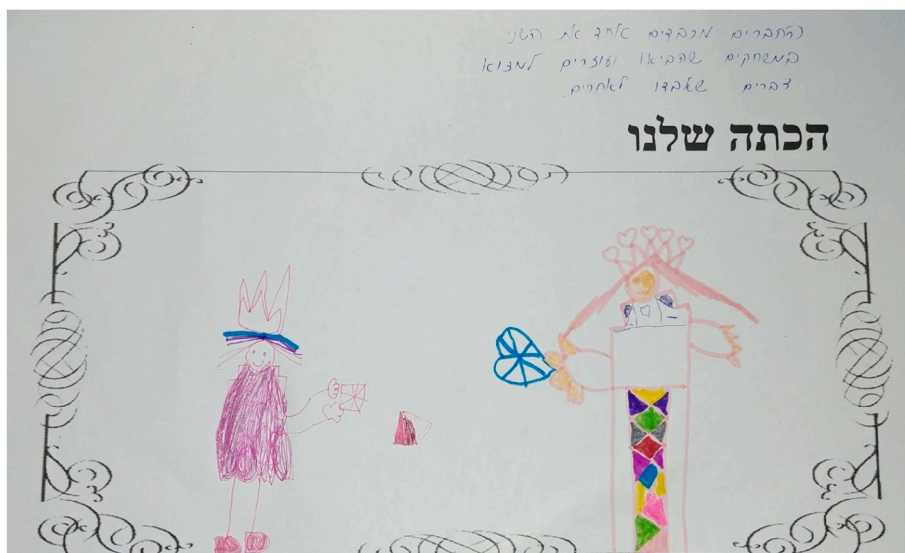

Fig. 3. Drawing by children from Israel depicting two smiling figures who give each other an item that looks like a present. © The children.

being kind, polite, or helpful. A group of Portuguese children note, for instance, 'to say 'I'm sorry'. Don't hit my friends', and a group from the UK explain their drawing by saying: 'I will try my best. I will be polite. I will be helpful. I will be kind. I will share with everyone.'

The children's suggestions for improving the school environment include taking care of nature in the schoolyard or making the school more aesthetic through beautiful items. In a drawing by a Cypriot child, a smiling figure is holding colourful objects – interpreted as flowers. The child explains the drawing by stating: 'I bring flowers to school and our school becomes better.' Another Cypriot child describes their drawing: 'I take care of the trees in our school and make our school better.' In this drawing, a smiling figure is standing outside surrounded by objects interpreted as trees, flying birds, and a butterfly (Fig. 4). Such drawings extend the idea of democratic culture from social relations in a community to the relationship with the environment that is important for that community.

4.4. Proposing change to the current rules

In the drawings and their explanations, children also propose ways of extending the current rules, routines, practices or establishing new ones to make the school or class more comfortable for them. These drawings form the fourth thematic category. In the explanations of these drawings, the children state what they want in both the first person singular and plural, emphasizing 'we,' the children, as a collective group arguing for changes. Proposals made in the first person may focus only on the child's own benefit. For instance, a Lithuanian child explains the drawing by stating: 'I want to have a lot of sweets in class and be able to eat them as much as I want. They could be eaten for a hundred days.' Most of the claims, however, whether proposed as 'I' or 'we,' aimed at a common good and making the school more fun for all. For instance, a child from Portugal says: 'I wish our pets could come to school too!' A group of Israeli children makes a detailed list of suggestions on how to improve school satisfaction: 'Add more facilities to the schoolyard to have more fun. For example: grass with little balls, water springboard, children's tent, children's fitness facilities.' The drawings in this category commonly include several figures doing activities or playing together, as four children do in Fig. 5. In its explanation, a group of Israeli children call for 'more ball game time.' The drawings in this category present visions of what the school or class would look like when proposals have been put into practice.

The children's demands, claims, wishes, and suggestions for changing the rules, routines, or practices in school or class indicate an understanding of their own capacity to make a change by recognizing and pinpointing what could be done differently. They also show the children's ability to recognize themselves and their peers as a community and to identify means to improve its conditions and environment.

4.5. Collaboration and negotiation

In the fifth thematic category, the drawings and their explanations deal with manifold collaboration between children. In them, the children explain how, together, they can improve their shared environment or the atmosphere in class. Here, the children do not only propose that adults accept and implement changes but seek to find ways to make these changes together. For instance, a group of children from the UK drew a house being decorated in different colours by figures, presumably the children. The group explains the drawing by stating: 'If we decorated the school together, we would all have part of us in the school. Then we would feel more responsibility and look after the place better.' Such efforts for joint action, collaboration, and negotiation of common means of conduct reflect the core ideas of democratic culture.

Some of the drawings in this category deal with abstract emotions, social relations, and actions related to them that came up in the classroom discussions stimulated by the film. These drawings indicate the children's ability to envisage real-life situations where such emotion and actions occur. For instance, in Fig. 6 a group of children from Cyprus has illustrated events that depict 'cooperation,' 'sharing,' 'help,' 'comfort,' 'communication,' and 'recognition.'

In this thematic category, children's explanations of their drawings illustrate the negotiation between peers that was needed to find a solution that satisfies everyone. A good example of such negotiation comes from a Lithuanian group, who deals with the rules for playing with Lego together in the class. The teacher has written down the negotiation process in which the boys wanted to build Gediminas Castle, the medieval national monument in Lithuania, while the girls wanted to build a kitchen. In the negotiation, two children come up with the idea of sharing the time playing with Lego. One of them says: 'One day you can build the Gediminas Castle from Lego pieces and the next day the kitchen.' This suggestion was agreed upon by all. The teacher notes that the negotiation in the group continued and finally the children came up with the idea of making a restaurant in the Gediminas Castle. The drawing created in the group depicts Gediminas hill and the castle tower with two figures that seem to wear crowns, one on foot and the other presumably on a horse (Fig. 7).

Such examples in the data indicate children's ability to apply and

Fig. 4. Drawing by a child from Cyprus depicting a smiling figure standing outside surrounded by objects interpreted as trees, flying birds, and a butterfly. © The child.

Fig. 5. Drawing by children from Israel depicting four figures playing ball in the rain. © The children.

implement the practices and principles of democratic culture to jointly solve problems and disagreements in their everyday environment and to collaborate for common interests. These drawings and their explanations show how the children participated in the interaction with their peers and how the drawing task in the lesson offered diverse opportunities for it.

As the discussions in the lesson elaborating a claim 'you must always follow the rules,' it is not a surprise that the first thematic category was the most common in the data (30%). The fifth category included 20% of the drawings while the second (12%), third (11%), and fourth (10%) were rather equally represented in the data. Moreover, the data included drawings that focused on elaborating the scenes from the film as well as few drawings that were difficult to categorize due to their abstract expression and/or an incomplete or missing linguistic explanation.

5. Discussion: learning democratic culture through dialogic chains of thinking

The analysis of the data shows how teaching and learning democratic culture may lead to different notions and understandings of rules and approaches to them in everyday life. Most of the children emphasized the importance of following the existing rules, while others suggested changing or creating new ones, or even rebelled against the existing rules. For instance, a group of Israeli children drew a picture where two figures are throwing books into the garbage bin. They explain: 'We drew a rule that has to do with the fact that there's no need for homework.' For most of the children, the lesson as a whole and the exercises taught them to recognize how an individual can make a change and collaboration with others may lead to a common good. Some of the teachers reported similar observations from their own class. For instance, a Cypriot teacher writes in the survey form:

The children wanted to draw the process in which the unconventional ant changed the process. They were impressed when the ant changed the process on its own. At first, they thought he was messing around. After the discussion, they realized that by changing the rules, the ants actually discovered an easier and more enjoyable way to make their work more productive. Some later reported that they too

could change the way they took a break or managed conflicts between their friends ….

The film inspired many of the children to draw the ants carrying leaves and imagine the scene in the film from different points of view. For instance, two Portuguese girls were inspired by the role of the leader ant and the film empowered them to imagine what they would do if they were leaders. They explain their drawing (Fig. 8) depicting a scene from the film: 'The ants are sliding and putting the leaves in one place. If I was the boss, I'd have the rainbow taken out of the sky because there are things I don't like' and 'If I was the boss, I would tell people to work out to get strong.'

The repetition of the story and copying the scenes from the film in the drawings was perceived by some teachers as a sign that the lesson was unsuccessful. A Portuguese teacher notes in the survey form: 'The children engaged very well in the artefact production, but they didn't quite understand the point and the instructions. They drew what they saw in the film and they merely described their drawings.' The repetition of imagery from the film in the drawings may not indicate poor understanding of the core theme or aims of the lesson. As noted earlier, 'copying' or 'repeating' imageries or stories from different sources is a semiotic process that includes reinterpretation, recontextualization, and reconfiguration. By exploring the characters, events, and scenes from the film, children could make their meanings resonate in their class or school and link them to their own experiences and emotions. For instance, two students of the above-mentioned Portuguese teacher explained their drawing of the ant colony by stating: 'It's the boss and the ants. I wish our classroom would change every day.'

Besides the stories and scenes from the film, the data included repeating linguistic and visual elements that the children borrowed from their peers. The individual drawings created in a group usually include similar characters, items, and visual patterns. Repeating visual elements in children's drawings, whether borrowed from learning material or similarities in visual expression between peers, can be considered as a form of visual dialogue. Instead of passive copying, these repeating elements and similarities can be perceived as an outcome of active exploration and dialogic negotiation among children (Lähdesmäki et al., 2022). The analysis shows how children's drawing with peers is shaped by mechanisms of dialogic chains of thinking (Maine, 2015, 2016). The

Fig. 6. Drawing by children from Cyprus illustrating events that are entitled 'cooperation,' 'sharing,' 'help,' 'comfort,' 'communication,' and 'recognition.' © The children.

dialogic chain of thinking led some small groups, for instance, to explicitly explore rules, while other groups focused on depicting novel solutions to make their classroom and school more fun and enjoyable places to study. Similarities in the explanations of the drawings reflect the same mechanism. Dialogic meaning-making led the children to describe their drawings with vocabulary and expressions jointly used in their small group or class.

6. Conclusions

The outcomes of the explored lesson in the Cultural Literacy Learning Programme reflect the ethos of the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture. The analysis of children's drawings and written explanations of them reveal how even very young children are able to elaborate on the ideas, principles, and practices of democratic culture, including participation, collaboration, negotiation, dialogue, listening, and expressing one's own opinions. The analysis of the data elicited five thematic categories that reveal how the young children in the programme think about social life in their classroom and their role in it. These categories are related to attributes that underpin democratic culture. The categories were based on the children's approach to rules, suggestions taking the action either alone or as a member of a group, and views of the purpose and beneficiary of this action. In the first thematic category, the children emphasized the importance of following existing rules for order in the classroom. In the second category, the children imagined and suggested reciprocal practices to make their classroom or school more comfortable for them and their peers. In the third category, the children suggested acting altruistically alone to improve the school environment and its social atmosphere. In the fourth category, the children proposed extending the current rules, routines, or practices or establishing new ones for their school or class. The fifth category covered drawings indicating a manifold collaboration and negotiation between children to jointly improve the shared environment or atmosphere in the class. The categories echo a set of values, attitudes, and practices, such as a commitment to the rule of law, a commitment to the public sphere, a conviction that conflicts must be resolved peacefully, a willingness to express one's own opinions, a willingness to listen to the opinions of others, and a willingness to engage in dialogue, defined in the Council of Europe's Framework as key to democratic culture without which democracy cannot exist (CofE, 2018a, pp. 72–72).

The study underlines the strengths of using visual methods to explore the meaning-making processes of young children. Drawing functions as a mode of exploring ideas as a constructive process of thinking in action (Cox, 2005), as this analysis indicates. Drawing intertwines children's inner thoughts, emotions, and imaginings with their views of the external world and real-life environments, issues, and events. It serves children as a means of perceiving, testing, and communicating abstract ideas that might be difficult to explore and explain in words alone. The analysis showed how drawings and their linguistic explanations form an entangled multimodal means of expression.

As a strength of the study, the analysis revealed how drawing with peers is a multimodal and dialogic process of learning democratic culture. Children engaged in dialogic chains of thinking not only in verbal but also in visual interaction. Since the ability to participate in a dialogue is seen as a core skill in democratic education, educators should better recognize visual dialogic chains of thinking as a way for students to familiarize themselves with and practise democratic culture.

The study also reveals some limitations. The data for this study were collected as part of a broad international research project with local research teams and in collaboration with teachers in partner schools in five countries. This study cannot acknowledge all cultural and social contexts that may have impacted the students' visual expression and meaning-making of their classroom social environment. Since young children's capacity for visual and linguistic expression is limited, there may be some misunderstandings in the author's 'decoding' of the signs

Fig. 7. Drawing by children from Lithuania depicting Gediminas hill and the castle tower with two figures that seem to wear crowns, one on foot and the other presumably on a horse. © The children.
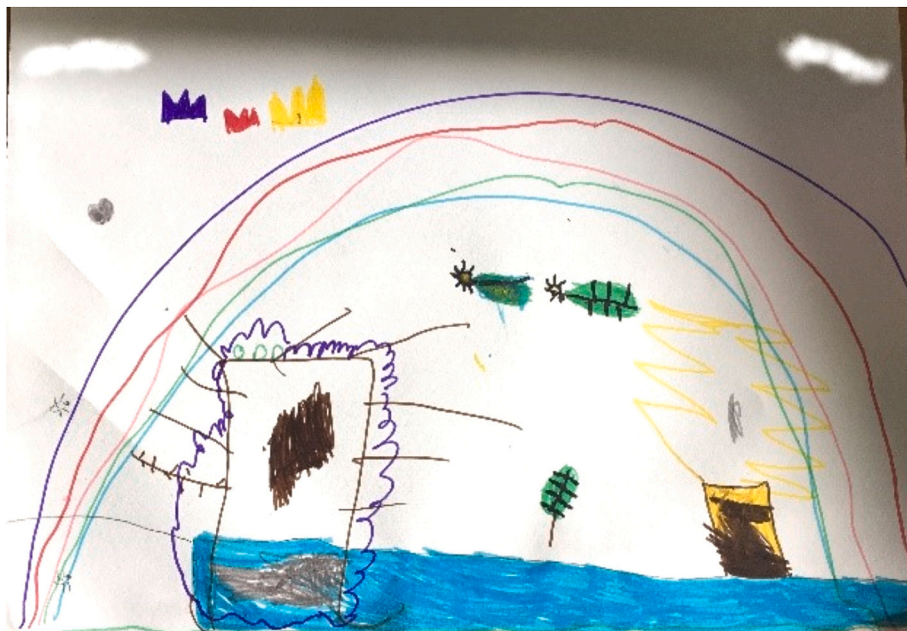

Fig. 8. Drawing by children from Portugal depicting a scene from a film *Ant* in which an ant colony carry leaves from a tree to their nest on the ground. © The children.

which the children had 'coded' to their drawings in the lessons.

Erickson and Thompson (2019) note that it is important to include preschool children in democratic education and civic-minded discussions. This study comes to the same conclusion, indicating the ability of children aged 5–6 to deal with attributes of democratic culture. Moreover, scholars have emphasized how formal education needs 'to be more critically connected and linked to deliberative and participatory democracy in order to create transformative educational opportunities' (Carr & Thésée, 2017, 2; see also Carr et al., 2012) and learning needs to be reinforced by practising democratic processes in real-life situations.

The concept of 'real-life situation' is complex and ambiguous when working with young children. For them, the borders of real life, imagination, and play may be blurred. The analysis of the data revealed the interconnectedness of these dimensions in children's mode of grasping the world. Yet the lesson on democratic culture in the Cultural Literacy Learning Programme achieved its aim of engaging children in a real-life situation in which they could contribute to making their classroom a better place. Some teachers in the programme reported that their students' ideas and suggestions, such as swapping the order of seats, were actually realized in their classroom after the exercise.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Tuuli Lähdesmäki: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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