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# A phenomenological research of democracy education in a Finnish primary-school

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## ABSTRACT

This phenomenological research examines democracy education and the conditions contributing to young students' democratic agency. The dataset includes interview and observation data from a school and educational decision-makers. The findings from the iterative analysis highlight the contradictions between democracy education as an ideal and opportunities for democratic agency. One significant contradiction was the expectation that young pupils should be competent democratic agents before being offered opportunities to act democratically. Young students deemed to possess the greatest competencies were offered opportunities to learn about democracy in action, whereas most students were expected to focus on their individual labour. Within these conditions, teachers remained in charge of sharing important information, deciding the contents of education and the organisation of the public, socio-political life in school. This study highlights the need to go beyond espoused ideals of democracy education and to re-consider the conditions for developing democratic agency in Finnish primary-school education.

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Democracy education;  
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action; phenomenology

## Introduction

The phenomenon of democracy education is of particular importance in Finland, as Finland is recognised as one of the leading free democracies in the world (Freedom House, 2018). The notion of Finland as a leading democracy was also reflected in the results of the International Civic and Citizenship Study [ICCS], 2016, in which the majority of Finnish youth stated that they are committed to the core values of the democratic state (Mehtäläinen et al., 2017, pp. 57–59). However, while this may be true, studies do not support the argument that public school-education in Finland would be explicitly democratic (e.g., Männistö, 2020b; Nikkola et al., 2013; Raiker & Rautiainen, 2017). This argument is supported by the findings of the ICCS, which elucidate that even though most youth support democratic values, only 3–5% of them are interested in participating democratically in the future (Mehtäläinen et al., 2017, p. 42). To put the findings of the ICCS into a wider perspective, it is worth mentioning that the Finnish findings resemble those from other European countries. For example, in Norway, Italy, Sweden, and the Netherlands the percentage of youths interested in democratic participation varied from 5% to 10% (Mehtäläinen et al., 2017, p. 41). These observations are not new, as they reflect the findings of earlier civic-education studies conducted in 1999 (Brunell & Törmäkangas, 2002) and 2009 (Suoninen et al., 2010). Moreover, inequality as well as young people's distrust towards other people have been on the rise in Finland

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and youths' understanding of how social structures work and affect individuals' lives is worse than that of older generations (Myllyniemi, 2014, 2017).

When talking explicitly about education and democracy in Finland, young people themselves have stated and studies elucidate how neither Finnish school-communities nor teachers encourage or prepare youths to participate democratically (e.g., Gretschel & Kiilakoski, 2014; Männistö, 2020a; Myllyniemi, 2014; Raiker & Rautiainen, 2017). One pivotal reason for this is that traditional ways of participation, which do not adequately consider the plurality of the students, continue to dominate Finnish schools (Gretschel & Kiilakoski, 2014; Männistö, 2020a, similar observations have been reported from other countries as well, see e.g., Cook-Sather, 2020; Vaughn, 2020). These remarks are understandable, as 83% of the Finnish primary-school teachers stated in a survey carried out by the National Board of Education [NBE], that they do not possess enough expertise to act as democracy educators (NBE, 2011, p. 51). Consequently, studies have shown that young people, who participate democratically in schools and the Finnish society, have obtained most of the competencies and preparedness to act democratically outside of school-communities (Elo, 2012; Ristikari et al., 2018). This means that public-school educators in Finland have been unable to address the discrepancies in young students' abilities to act democratically (see Gellin et al., 2012; Männistö, 2020b; Raiker & Rautiainen, 2017).

In response to these earlier findings concerning democracy education in Finland, we are interested in phenomenologically examining the everyday experiences in school from the perspectives of different agents. As young people are rarely considered as capable of acting democratically (see Biesta, 2006, 2013; Männistö, 2020a; Wall, 2012), this study seeks to provide an alternative perspective by focusing on how public-school educators and pupils understand the agency of primary-school students in relation to the socio-political conditions of the classroom as the world, material and social, limits our actions (Biesta, 2021, p. 3). By employing a phenomenological lens, we aim to be sensitive to the notion that people's agency is realised in relation with the conditions of the environment (see Howard et al., 2020; van Manen, 2016). After this, we compare our findings with the principles of democratic agency, which are based on the concepts of acting in plurality and first-person participation (e.g., Arendt, 2013; Barber, 2004; Biesta, 2006, 2013; Fromm, 2013; Mälkki & Green, 2014). In addition, we want to give more space to pupils' perspectives, which means that students are included in the meaningful processes of analysing teaching and learning (Cook-Sather, 2020, p. 183). The following section outlines in more detail the theoretical background for this study.

## Theoretical background

### *Agency, socio-political conditions, and education*

Martin Heidegger, the father of phenomenological hermeneutics, argued that societies' socio-political foundations, constructed throughout history, demarcate and direct what individuals can perceive as possible for their being (e.g., Heidegger, 1996, 1999). To Heidegger's pupil, Hannah Arendt (2013), agency meant the ability and the will to act politically according to one's unique attributes in varying socio-political contexts. Combining these ideas suggests that our personal ways of acting are influenced and directed by the socio-political foundations of society.

Gert Biesta (2013, p. 118) argues that democratic agency can emerge<sup>1</sup> only when people have the possibility to act together in plurality in varying contexts. When acting together in plurality we learn to understand that human relationships comprise of people's distinct personalities, motives, interests, and intentions, which are in constant dialogue with the socio-political conditions of society (see Arendt, 2013; Barber, 2004; Dewey, 2004; Gramsci, 1972; Heidegger, 1996; Taylor, 1999). For Biesta, the possibility to learn to act in plurality is based on freedom:

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<sup>1</sup>Biesta (2013) argues that everything needs to first emerge (come to exist) before it can be developed.

By making the question of democracy existential rather than developmental I suggest a reading that makes the connection between education and democracy a weak one. One where the idea is not that education develops or, even worse, produces democratic persons, but where there is an ongoing interest in promoting those situations – those forms of human togetherness in which, as Arendt puts, freedom<sup>2</sup> can appear. (Biesta, 2013, p. 102)

Arguably, school is one of the central places where this can be achieved within a whole age-group (Biesta, 2006; also Dewey, 2004; Männistö, 2020b; Raiker & Rautiainen, 2017). However, schools need to be sensitive toward the ever-changing and dynamic socio-political contexts in which students live, as they create diverse and oftentimes contradictory expectations towards the agency of students (see e.g., Gretschel & Kiilakoski, 2012, 2014; Vaughn, 2020, p. 110).

### ***Education and democratic agency***

Biesta (2006, 2013) argues that to develop the competencies and preparedness to act democratically we need education that is based on democratic principles (also Männistö, 2020b). In democracy education, people are understood as subjects in, rather than as objects of, education (Biesta, 2013, p. 18; also Freire, 2013; Gellin et al., 2012; Männistö, 2022). When students are understood as subjects, they are treated as unique individuals, who have their own will, needs, and wants as well as the right to act politically (Biesta, 2006, pp. 132–135; also Arendt, 2013, pp. 175–247; UN, 1989; Wall, 2012). Therefore, students should have opportunities to act politically allowing them to examine and evaluate the consequences of their actions toward their own lives and those of others (Biesta, 2013, p. 18; also Chen & Looi, 2011; Giroux, 1997; Pinnow, 2011; Kapellidi, 2015). Having the possibility to act politically in school communities also educates students to take initiative, contest questionable decisions, be responsible, help others (Kiilakoski, 2014), and be open and receptive to others in community (Isin & Nielson, 2008). However, as young students have not yet acquired a complex stratum of experiences and deep understanding of the socio-political world, educators need to guide and support students so they can learn to realistically assess their expertise, experiences, resources, and ways of acting in relation to their desired goals in varying socio-political contexts (Biesta, 2013).

### ***The Finnish context***

Over the past few decades, there has been a clear objective in Finland to provide education that is explicitly more democratic and encourages social as well as political participation (see Hiljanen et al., 2021; Männistö, 2020b, pp. 38–39). For example, many nationwide programmes have aimed to strengthen young people's participation in civil society (see Nivala & Ryyänen, 2013), and in the current national curriculum (NBE, 2014) the goal to educate democratic agents is more promoted than ever. This initiative, however, has not been introduced into a socio-political vacuum but into a context in which education has had a fundamental role in establishing societal homogeneity, promoting conformity, and political representation (e.g., Rantala, 2010; Rautiainen, 2022; Tervonen, 2014). Indeed, to avoid societal divisions that tore Finland apart during the early years of Finnish independence, educational policies have during the history of public Finnish education promoted social cohesion. While in recent years this policy has changed direction, earlier initiatives arguably continue to be present in everyday pedagogical practices even in a context that values teacher autonomy and trusts their professional practice (Heikkinen et al., 2011).

This background is perhaps why, despite the promotion of democracy education, Finnish educators often continue to think that young people should act within clear structures and/or with strong guidance of adults (e.g., Gellin et al., 2012; Gretschel & Kiilakoski, 2014; Männistö, 2020a; Nivala & Ryyänen, 2013; Raiker et al., 2017). This means, in contrast to Biesta's ideas, public

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<sup>2</sup>It is important to note that to Arendt 'freedom' meant the possibility to act according to one's uniqueness.

school-education in Finland is still quite strongly teacher-oriented and young people are more often perceived as objects of education rather than as subjects capable of acting in plurality (Gellin et al., 2012; Raiker et al., 2017). Moreover, this kind of attitude towards the agency of youth seems to be dominant across the Western world (see Biesta, 2006, 2013; Cruikshank, 1999; Hart, 2008; Vaughn, 2020; Wall, 2012). Indeed, young people are rarely asked to express their ideas even when decisions that are being made concern them directly (Gretschel & Kiilakoski, 2014; Nivala & Rynänen, 2013; Vaughn, 2020). To better understand the current situation in Finnish education, the aim of this study is to examine the agency of Finnish primary school students in relation to the ideals of democratic participation and the conditions framing the actions of the people involved. The research questions are:

- (1) How do the participants understand the agency of young students in relation to the conditions of the school- and classroom-environment?
- (2) What conditions inform the emergence and development of democratic agency in the school- and classroom-environment?

## Methodology

This section outlines the data and context for the research, before explaining the approach to data collection as well as the iterative framework which informed the different stages of the research process.

### *The data and the research context*

The primary context of this research is a comprehensive school situated in a suburban area in Central Finland. The school was, at the time of data-collection, an average Finnish school comprising of grades from one to nine (6–16-year-olds). The school's principal and one of the interviewed primary school teachers did, however, think that the school was more democratic than the average Finnish school. The school had a student union, which included every student in the school. The student union had a council, which made decisions on behalf of the union. The council's members included students from the lower and upper grades of the school, chosen by voting from each classroom, although the three leading students of the council were chosen by the teachers. The council had approximately 20 members. The first author (Männistö) collected the data from the school between 21 September to 25 November 2015 through interviews and observing the everyday life in two classrooms.

The main data for the research was collected through interviews in the summer and autumn of 2015. The interview-data includes seventeen pupils and nine adults (four school and five city employees). The first interviews were conducted during the summer and early autumn before starting the data-gathering period in the school. These interviews included two youth workers, a high school teacher, who had worked before as an educational researcher, a Children's Parliament<sup>3</sup> coordinator, and a coordinator of participatory education. The aim of these preliminary interviews was to construct an initial picture of the state of democracy education in Central Finland (Table 1).

The interviews from the two observed classrooms included two primary-school teachers, who had gone through official teacher education, and 15 students. The students for the interviews were chosen based on their own willingness to participate. Furthermore, the president and secretary of the student council as well as the social studies teacher, who supervised the activities of the student council, and the principal of the comprehensive school were interviewed. Research data was

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<sup>3</sup>Children's Parliament is a representational body aimed for children in primary schools to have an influence in Finnish municipalities (see more Eskelinen et al., 2012, pp. 60–61).

**Table 1.** The interview-participants.

Participant group (inc. no. of participants)	Interview design	Focus of the interview
Coordinator of participatory education (CPE)	Individual	The overview of the current conditions and activities in schools in relation to pupils' agency and democratic participation.
Children's Parliament Coordinator (CPC)	Individual	
Two youth workers	Pair	The life and education in the school in relation to democratic participation. Teacher–student dynamics and interactions, education in the school on a general level, how the students can influence the socio-political reality of the school.
High school teacher	Individual	
Class teachers (2)	Individual	
Principal	Individual	
Social studies teacher	Individual	The actions and organisation of the student union and its council, how the students can influence the socio-political reality of school.
15 primary-school students	Groups of 3–4 people	Everyday life and interactions in the school, few explicit questions about democracy, society, and agency of the students.
Two leaders of the student council	Pair	The organisation and actions of the student council.

additionally collected by observing everyday life in two classrooms. The observations were recorded in a research diary. The writings in the diary consist both of observations and the researcher's initial interpretations and questions in response to them. In addition, supplementary data was collected outside of the two studied classrooms, for example, from the hallways of the school (see more Männistö, 2020a).

The data gathering in the school lasted for a little over two months, including about 60 h of observations in two classrooms, a significant number of photographs, two classes video-recorded, one intervention lasting 3 × 45 min organised by the first author, and 21 participant interviews. The goal of data gathering was to understand the school-community from an insider, emic perspective (Patton, 2002, pp. 267–269). The focus of the data gathering was on the dynamics and interactions of the people in school community – how people acted, how they interacted with each other, who got to speak and when and what they could say, who could exert power, and so on.

The observational data has been used more intensively in a previous study which examined the conditions of the public sphere of the school and the opportunities for action the public sphere offers or denies (Männistö, 2020a). In the study reported here, the observational data was used to focus and refine the interview questions for the participants in the classroom-environment. Whereas the interview questions focus on the lived experience of the participants, the observation data indicates the conditions that have been formed over time, for example, whether students have to raise hands before speaking or who is given the opportunity to speak or move. The interview questions then provide the opportunity to explore how participants experience and understand their possibilities to act under the conditions of the environment. The larger dialogue is then generated between the researcher, the prior literature on the topic, the observational data, and the interviews, enabling the identification of contradictions, tensions, limitations, and potential areas for development.

### **The interviews**

With the adults, most of the theme-oriented interviews were done individually. Only the two youth workers were interviewed at the same time. The participants were asked about young students' chances to influence the socio-political reality in schools, student-participation, student councils, democracy in schools and society in general, and societal phenomena, for example, power and politics. With the primary school students, the interviews were done in groups of three to four (one student was interviewed alone) and they revolved mostly around everyday life in the school. The students were asked, for instance, what they thought was the most important in life and what



would they want to learn in schools. Furthermore, the students were asked to briefly explain what society or democracy means, how the influence of society can be perceived in schools, and how one could act democratically in Finnish society. The interviews with the two student council representatives mainly focused on students' possibilities to influence the socio-political reality of the school-community and activities of the council.

The students were interviewed in small groups, so they would feel less nervous about the interviewing and so that the participants could offer support and stimuli to one another as they verbalised abstract and complex phenomena (e.g., Madriz, 2000, pp. 835–836). The students themselves also preferred to be interviewed in small groups. For the sake of clarity and space, similar responses from the students have been summarised rather than presented as direct quotations in the Findings. Moreover, this approach better protects the anonymity of the participants (see Bradbury-Jones et al., 2012, p. 432).

Permission to use the data was gathered from every participant and the parents of the underage students. Every research-participant gave consent for the use of the data. During the interviews and the observational period, the researcher did not gather any sensitive or personal information, which could be used to recognise the participants. The procedure for gathering and storing data followed the guidelines provided by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK, 2019) and the principles for ethical research at the University of Jyväskylä (JyU, 2022). The interviews took place in Finnish and the extracts have been translated by the first author.

### ***Phenomenology and directed content analysis***

In this study, we have adopted a phenomenological approach to examine the participants' understanding of the agency of primary school students. In phenomenology the objective is to describe the structure of experience or what the experience means to those who have lived it. Thus, phenomenologists are more concerned with understanding and describing a phenomenon than explaining it (e.g., Heidegger, 1996; Merleau-Ponty, 2005; van Manen, 2016). As there is no one clear line of phenomenology, it is important to clarify that in this study we argue that people's actions are realised in dialogue between the self and the surrounding socio-political conditions (e.g., Arendt, 2013; Biesta, 2006, 2013; Gramsci, 1972; Heidegger, 1996, p. 41).

As a method of handling the data, we have used directed content analysis to validate and extend the existing theoretical framework and research (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281) recognising the importance of iteratively moving between the emic perspective of the participants and what is known from previous research (Tracy, 2019). As previous research has outlined, various contradictions exist regarding how the relationship between democracy and school-education in Finland is understood (see e.g., Männistö, 2020b; Raiker & Rautiainen, 2017; Rautiainen, 2022). We took this as our point of departure concerning the analysis of the data. Hence, the data-analysis has been influenced by the findings of the previous studies, but the goal of this research is to extend and enrich our understanding of the state of democracy education in Finland at the micro level of everyday activities of the school-community, which contextualised our study.

### ***The emergent themes***

Through careful and repeated readings, the reflexive process of synthesising important points of insight across the dataset in relation to what is already known from previous studies and current policies regarding the conditions for student agency in school-communities led to the emergence of three key themes. First, the focus on discrepant possibilities for the students to act stems from observations in the classrooms. Indeed, the observation that students acted in vastly varying manners frequently caught the eye of the researcher. This observation was reiterated in the teacher and student interviews in their comments on who can participate, how, and why in classroom activities. The second theme emerges simply from the acknowledgement that classroom conditions, including the methods and contents of teaching, strongly influence the everyday actions of young students. In



the interview and observation data this theme emerged, for example, as the teachers explained that they do not teach about social phenomena. The third theme, student unions and their councils, emerged because student councils are nowadays an obligatory part of Finnish primary-school institution. In the national curriculum it is said that councils' activities represent "democracy in practice" (NBE, 2014, p. 35). In addition, most of the interviewed adults brought up the student councils without explicitly being asked about them.

### **Ethical considerations**

The ethical considerations in this study include the role of the researcher in the framing and development of this research, the relationship between the researcher and the research participants, and the contributions of participants as representatives of the school community. Indeed, the researchers' unique ways of interpreting the data and describing the activities in the school paint what kind of picture the reader forms about democracy education in the studied contexts. Nevertheless, through careful observations, engagement with existing literature, open questioning, and reflexive processing the researchers have sought to explicate where their understanding has come from and how the findings of this study have been developed.

During the data gathering for this study, the first author (Männistö) sought to be as unobtrusive as possible in the school environment, being sensitive to the established practices of the community. That the students were comfortable with the presence of the researcher in their classroom is suggested by the way in which the children continued with their classroom activities, occasionally wandered around the classroom, and sometimes challenged the teacher. By being present in the community over several weeks also helped establish a positive relationship between the research participants and the researcher, opening the way for the interviews which both drew on the participants everyday experiences and invited them to consider their experiences and democracy from different perspectives. In addition, how the participants were chosen and what was asked from the participants constitute important ethical considerations, such as who, what, and how to ask. These considerations were particularly important when asking children to share their experience while being sensitive to how much young children can understand abstract phenomena.

### **Findings: the emergent themes**

The findings section is organised into three themes. The first theme addresses students' opportunities to act in the school community, the second theme draws attention to the way educational contents and teaching methods connect with the students' agency, and the final theme focuses on the relationship between the student union and democratic agency.

#### ***Students' opportunities to act in the school-environment***

The research participants from different socio-political contexts (students, teachers, city employees) emphasised, in one way or another, that there is a culture of doing schoolwork, that is labouring,<sup>4</sup> alone in silence in Finnish schools.

For example, you might get a prize if you are silent during the class [...] The students can themselves decide (whether) to be silent. (Student 1)

They can choose to do their schoolwork properly. (Fifth-grade teacher)

I think we still have a strong culture of doing alone. (CPE)

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<sup>4</sup>With the term labour we want to, in the footsteps of Hannah Arendt, emphasise laborious activities of the school. Labour was to Arendt an activity, which is realised alone, and is aimed merely at the continuation of the life itself (see more Männistö, 2020b).

In a previous study, Männistö (2020a) reported that the role of the teachers was to focus on handling the organisation of socio-political life as well as deciding the educational contents and methods, while the students' main role was to follow instructions and labour in silence. Indeed, the two groups in the classrooms (students/teachers) had little to no dialogue with each other about the organisation or activities of everyday school life. Moreover, as most classes were strictly structured by the teachers, there was little space for the students to act as subjects in the first place. The fourth-grade teacher stated that this was because students could not be given too many responsibilities when it comes to collective, public affairs, as students' ideas were usually unrealisable.

Their ideas ... they just start thinking about things that cannot be realised. (Fourth-grade teacher)

In addition, the same teacher thought that young students were incapable of abstract decision-making, which, the teacher argued, was needed to act as a subject.

Children's thinking works through different means and on a concrete level ... Adults again think on an abstract level. (Fourth-grade teacher)

The coordinator of the Children's Parliament argued that young students' possibilities to influence the socio-political reality of school-communities is dependent on the teacher, while the coordinator of participatory democracy articulated that students' voices are not heard well-enough in schools.

If I think about young students in schools, their chances to participate and act democratically are strongly dependent on the position given by the leader (the teacher). (CPC)

I think the potential and the resources of the students are completely, well not completely, but almost completely ignored in schools. (CPE)

The high-school teacher thought that young students are not given chances to act, because they do not yet have an established position in the school-community.

We tend to think (in Finland) that you have to be in an established position before you can say anything relevant concerning the topic at hand. (High school teacher)

The students' responses concerning their possibilities to influence the school's socio-political reality reflected the answers of the teachers. For example, some students explained that education, including its contents and methods, should be left to teachers, as they are educated professionals who know best:

Sometimes I have some ideas, but [then I decide] the teacher's ideas are better. (Student 2)

Children cannot teach, as they can offer wrong information. (Student 3)

The findings also suggest that the students were in an unequal position in the studied school-community concerning opportunities to learn about acting democratically. Only a handful of students gained opportunities to handle responsibilities, participate in decision-making, and act in public. It was the same students who, for example, were chosen for the student council, who had excellent grades, acted as prefects, and were given other responsibilities as well. This inequality was clearly underlined when the leaders of the student council stated that they were nominated by the teachers to lead the council.

We were chosen by the teachers (to lead the student council) [...] so things would be taken care of properly. (Student council's president)

During everyday school-life, the students, who received responsibilities in the school-community, acted more independently than the students, who were not doing so well in terms of their academic performance or classroom behaviour. In contrast, the teachers helped some of the not-so-well-doing students with the most menial tasks, often without even asking if they needed any help.

The teacher has left the classroom, and the students are labouring by themselves. I notice that one student is contemplating about moving to the window-ledge. After a moment has passed, three well-behaving students move on to the ledge and, following their lead, the other student, who struggles in school, gets the courage to move on to the window-ledge as well. Another student, who is the student council's representative, circles around the class, helping others with their tasks. (Research diary)

The inequality concerning the students' responsibilities and opportunities to act politically was reflected in the teachers' answers when they elucidated students should themselves actively bring ideas and opinions out into the open, while not actively educating the students to do so.

During everyday activities, you are not afraid yourself to come and ask or tell if there is something on your mind. (Fifth-grade teacher)

You have to yourself be active (if you are not in the student council) and contact the student representatives. (Social studies teacher)

I have had groups that have been active themselves and then it has been easy to allot room [for open-ended discussion] [...] However, they (students) often are silent, they do not use the space given. I do not understand why. (Fourth-grade teacher)

Few "moments of freedom", as Biesta (2013) articulates, were observed during the schooldays or shared in the responses of participants.

### ***The educational contents and teaching methods connected to the students' agency***

Both primary school teachers explained that they mostly dismiss talking about social and political issues as they did not perceive societal phenomena important educational content, or they simply were not competent enough to teach them. Furthermore, the teachers articulated that they are quite uninterested about societal issues and passive towards them on a personal level, what they thought affected their teaching. In addition, the teachers said that democratic ways of teaching, for instance, supporting the students' active participation or skills in argumentation were unfamiliar to the teachers and, thus, too difficult to be used.

I usually just skip societal questions and rather talk about my relationship toward the universal world. (Fourth-grade teacher)

Creating such a situation [where the students could argue and/or discuss important socio-political matters] during the schooldays is challenging for me at this point. (Fifth-grade teacher)

It seems plausible to argue that the primary school teachers' attitudes and ways of teaching had an influence on the competencies and knowledge of the students concerning societal phenomena, as none of the interviewed primary school students could give any kind of answers, when asked what "society" or "democracy" mean.

But at the same time, the Finnish students' questionable success concerning opinions, attitudes, and preparedness to act has been ignored. Democracy also means the ability to act together and accept democratic principles, not only knowing them mechanically. (High school teacher/researcher)

Many students also said that it was unwise to argue with the teacher or else you would be punished. Indeed, most of the students viewed arguing in general to be unwise, although a few students stated that arguing with friends can be fun or even informative. However, every student thought that you should never end up in a conflict with anyone.

### ***The student union and agency***

In the current National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (NBE, 2014) and the Report on the State of Democracy Education in Finland (NBE, 2011) it is argued that in a democratic society everyone should be educated so they are able to live as actively participating citizens. However,

the developmental pressure points in Finland concerning democracy education have leaned towards representative democracy. In representative democracy, representatives are the ones, who act publicly on behalf of the people. In consequence, since 2014 it has been obligatory for every school in Finland to have a student union (Finlex 2014). In the studied school, one representative and a backup representative from each class were chosen through voting to the student council. The students voted for the representatives themselves.

Regarding democracy education, the fifth-grade teacher thought that student unions represent clear progress:

I think it [student union] is very important [...] You learn how to have an influence in our society. (Fifth-grade teacher)

However, the fourth-grade teacher was not as positive towards it.

The student council consists of a very limited number of children [...] If the goal is to educate everyone ... well, that is a challenge. I guess a change in the ways of thinking has to happen. (Fourth-grade teacher)

The coordinator of participatory democracy agreed with the fourth-grade teacher.

I think that you do not educate for participatory democracy in schools by establishing student unions -- well, they can be a part of it, but not all of it. (CPE)

The primary school teachers said during the interviews that they encourage the students to discuss with the union's representatives if the students have some matters that they would like to change in the school rather than teaching the students to influence things directly. Consequently, the only way to influence the socio-political reality of the school that the students could come up with was to contact the school council representatives. However, none of the interviewed students had used the opportunity to present their ideas to a student representative.

The interviewed student council president and secretary elaborated that in reality the council decided only about minor matters, such as different school-events (e.g., a party's theme). Sometimes they were able to choose whether the students would, for example, get new footballs or a bike rack.

It is the teachers, who bring forth the ideas for the council to decide upon, because students do not have enough time or space during schooldays to come up with their own ideas [...] You could say that if the decisions made in student council were a house, teachers build the foundations, and students get to paint them. (Student council's president)

It seems that the school council representatives would need more time and space to plan new initiatives and make informed decisions. As it stands, according to the students, it was the teachers who were behind most of the ideas the school council decided on (see also Gellin et al., 2012).

## Discussion

There has been a clear aim in Finland to strengthen the relationship between democracy and public school-education from the beginning of twenty-first century (Rautiainen, 2022). The findings of this study corroborate earlier studies (e.g., ICCS, 2016) indicating that little development has taken place, however, in that students are still often expected to labour in silence, while teachers have the right to organise, inform, and oversee public affairs that influence the actions of everyone in the classroom. Indeed, as in previous studies (NBE, 2011; Raiker et al., 2017), the teachers in this study were aware of the need to develop the democratic agency of the students yet appeared unable to navigate the gap between this need and everyday classroom activities. It is perhaps the inability to integrate democratic activities into everyday classroom life which explains why teachers rely on and promote opportunities for students to act democratically in school if and when students have gained this competence at home. Our examination of the participants' understanding of the agency of young students also highlights significant discrepancies between the perceptions and actions of

the participants which arguably undermine democratic development in Finnish education and point to potential areas for change and development.

An important area to address is how to include political and societal issues in education in a way that is appropriate for young students (see e.g., Freire, 2013; Männistö, 2022). This issue highlights the importance of teacher education, particularly preservice teacher education, as a space for exploring and engaging in different ways to examine and evaluate differing opportunities before taking on the responsibility for developing the agency of younger students (Rajala et al., 2016). Following from this, in teacher education it should be ensured that preservice teachers are given chances to participate in community decision-making, to have opportunities to work through conflicts, and to recognise how cultural habits in schools form habits for future participation (Dewey, 2004).

In the light of our findings, we suggest teacher education for democracy education should include, for example, how to help students and teachers recognise that conflict belongs to community (Palmer, 2014) and the value of learning to argue and settle conflicts in a constructive manner following democratic principles. Moreover, we argue, following the ideas of Biesta (2013), that the emergence and development of democratic agency happens in democratic communities. Indeed, the ideal of learning together as a democratic community could reduce the gap between the all-knowing teachers and the less-than-capable students.

An important insight from this study was that most of the young students were unable to explicate how to act democratically in the school-environment or the surrounding society. It is not their inability to identify or express abstract concepts that is problematic, however, but their assumption that teachers are the only ones with worthy ideas and valid information. This assumption undermines the students' potential to act, a position reinforced by the students' interpretation of their own participation in the school community as the completion of individual tasks. Another discrepancy highlighted in this study is the assumption that most young students are not capable of acting as subjects and cannot therefore be given opportunities to act. This assumption arguably creates a negative cycle in Finnish education that denies students opportunities to be given responsibility until they have proven their competence to be responsible. This assumption is visible in the teachers' perceptions of young students as lacking certain abilities to act democratically and reinforced by the belief that young students' agency is strongly dependent on the position given to them by the teacher. In other words, if teachers do not trust students' capabilities, the students will not get opportunities to act democratically. Educators need to be careful not to construct glass ceilings that limit the democratic potential of young students which seem to be difficult to break through as adults.

If the goal is to move away from thinking that the main goal of democracy education is to prepare a handful of competent students to become future political leaders and focus more on offering every student a chance to practice acting democratically during everyday school activities, we should rethink the role of student unions. While student unions and their councils are a move toward strengthening the democratic decision-making in school-communities, there is a risk that student councils deepen the polarisation between those who are already democratically competent and who are not (Council of Europe, 2011; Elo, 2012; Malama, 2017). To meet this challenge, teachers could include discussions in the formal timetable to give the whole class of students the opportunity to make suggestions to student representatives to take to the student council and report back. At least, the student-representatives should be taught that they are acting on behalf of their classroom-community, so they would learn to comprehend their responsibility towards their communities.

Finally, creating opportunities for students to discuss ideas and understanding in small groups or class discussions is a well-established approach in educational literature and an important partner to democratic education (Alexander, 2019). Moreover, the traces of independent thinking of the students in our data indicate that students have unique ideas, but they set them aside. This kind of thinking suggests that at least some of the students have internalised the belief that only teachers, not students, are ones who can offer right information. Without opportunities to express, witness,

and discuss different ideas, this pacifying, subordinate way of thinking will continue to undermine democratic action. Therefore, we argue, that by giving students more chances to develop and try out their own unique ideas more freely and openly could teach the students that behind every idea there is a real person with their limited pool of knowledge and subjective perception of reality. This way the students could learn that our knowledge of right and wrong are dependent on the context, the perspective we have on the matter at hand, and most of the time debatable.

## Limitations and future directions

As noted in the ethical considerations, we are aware that this study cannot provide the complete picture of democracy education in Finnish basic education, especially as only two classrooms at one point of time were studied through observations and interviews. Nevertheless, the insights gleaned from this phenomenological examination highlight the need and value of paying more attention to the conditions of and opportunities for student agency in Finnish education. Another possible limitation to this study was the timeframe when the data was gathered in 2015. We would suggest, however, that the slow manifestation of change in Finnish education especially in an area that has received little attention (Rautiainen, 2022) highlights the significance of this study.

## Concluding words

In this article, we have presented the key findings from our phenomenological examination of democracy education in Finnish basic education. Our particular interest has been the conditions of the Finnish school system with regard to the emergence and development of democratic agency in young students. The findings from our study suggest that even though in Finland there is an official aim to provide democratic, high-quality public school-education across the country, only students that are perceived as sufficiently capable are given responsibilities and opportunities to participate in democratic activities in school. Even opportunities offered to these students, however, are curtailed by teacher decision-making. Hence, the current situation is problematic to say the least if the goal is to educate autonomous, democratic agents. As many Western countries face the same challenges as Finland, their youth being disinterested towards democratic participation, this text invites the readers to carefully examine their understanding of democracy education and the conditions for democratic participation within different educational communities.

## Disclosure statement

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