Chapter 10
Time to Tell More Stories: Children, Democracy and Education in Movement

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Abstract The purpose of this chapter is to highlight and challenge a dominant contemporary perspective regarding children in relation to education, learning and democracy. This perspective primarily puts economic- and future-oriented ideas in focus. Scholars are now claiming that this perspective has become so prominent that it many times is assumed as the only true, right and possible alternative. In relation to this, I find it interesting to contest this dominant discourse by proposing an alternative approach where a more inclusive and pluralistic idea highlights individual differences and diverse worldviews.

The chapter provides a review of key literature where the different approaches are highlighted. By introducing two vignettes, drawn from a doctoral study in Sweden, the two approaches are discussed in relation to different consequences. The conclusion opens up for a discussion concerning the role of the child and the teacher but also a discussion with a democracy aspect concerning education based on predetermined goals and consensus or based on inclusion and diversity.

10.1 Introduction

At the intersection of macro and micro perspectives, many different interpretations and meaning-makings concerning children, learning, democracy and education take form. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight and challenge a dominant contemporary perspective regarding children in relation to education, learning and democracy. This perspective primarily puts economic- and future-oriented ideas in focus. Many scholars (e.g. see Moss, 2014; Vandenbroeck, 2017) are now claiming that this perspective has become so prominent that it many times is assumed as the only true, right and possible alternative. In relation to this, I find it interesting to contest

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this dominant discourse by proposing an alternative approach where a more inclusive and pluralistic idea highlights individual differences and diverse worldviews.

After a short introduction concerning global changes, the first part of the chapter presents a research review addressing one contemporary and dominant narrative based on neoliberal ideas in relation to education. Theoretical concepts of consensus and conflict in relation to democracy are explored; this theoretical discussion merges in a construction of an alternative and pluralistic narrative. This perspective is based on conflicting worldviews, which emerge as a democratic alternative regarding children, learning and education. In the final section, two vignettes from a Swedish preschool illustrate how situations create different consequences depending on the adopted perspective. The discussion concludes the chapter by proposing this pluralistic perspective as a way to include all individuals, regardless of age and life experience, as participants in producing knowledge and education.

10.2 A World in Movement

For the last decades, most parts of our world have gone through many extensive changes. Technical and digital development has blurred distances and national borders. National economics connect in global markets, where power has dislocated from the nations themselves to multinational organisations with a more global perspective (Lauder, Brown, Dillabough, & Halsey, 2006). This globalisation development is often argued through positive aspects, for example, that countries are tied together in an increased consensus regarding knowledge, ideals and values. At the same time, many of us are experiencing the world as more turbulent than ever, both regarding the nearby social climate with an increased "we and them" thinking and in a more global perspective regarding terrorist threats, extremism and refugees. An increased consensus in the world seems to represent a predominantly Western view of values and norms, with a decreased possibility of thinking and acting in alternative ways (Institute for Future Studies/Institutet för framtidsstudier, 2015).

Political societies are based on certain ideas concerning, for example, the relation between the individual and the society, which in different ways is materialised through the organisation of governmental control, economics, the market and education' s role in the society (Lauder et al., 2006). How to organise our individual and interconnected lives, where differing visions and values are promoted, affects our ways of thinking and being in the world and our views regarding what creates life value. Diverse perspectives are present in our everyday lives, but often there is one perspective that is more dominant than others are. Therefore, our everyday living can never be assumed as something constant and fixed but rather in continuous movement and change (Ball, 2000).

10.2.1 The Right Turn: Knowledge and Education as an Economic- and Future-Oriented Narrative

One of today's most dominant narratives regarding the relation between society and education is sometimes described as *the right turn*, which focuses on modern ideas regarding a political liberal view, neoliberalism (Apple, 2006). The main focus for neoliberal ideas seems to be economic growth and maximal returns from investment. This can get the effect of a search for control, results and measurability to reach increased welfare for the individual and the society (Lenz Taguchi, 2010; Moss, 2014). In a neoliberal frame, nations and societies are organised and governed as companies, where the citizens are expected to be responsible and autonomous economic actors with an ambition to create a good life through education, and thereby contribute to society through profitable work (Lauder et al., 2006; Moss, 2014). This economic- and future-oriented perspective effects the aim of education and how education is organised.

The idea of the free market is often described as a way to increase quality through consumer demands. As an aspect of democracy, the individual consumer is often positively argued to have increased freedom to control and affect one's own individual life. Based on an educational context as an example, this freedom may imply choosing the preschool or school that best suits your own personal preferences. However, we know that not all individuals have the same freedoms or opportunities to make choices in the same way. Further, the freedom to choose connects to a responsibility to choose and to make the right choice in having a profitable life for oneself and one's children in the future. Studies in an education context (Ball & Vincent, 1998; Bunar & Ambrose, 2016; Karlsson, Löfdahl, & Perez Prieto, 2013) show how some individuals benefit from this responsibility-based perspective, but others are disadvantaged. For example, Karlsson et al. (2013) show how parents who make an active choice of preschool for their children appear as "good parents", showing a moral accountability (p. 221):

> A good parent chooses between different preschools in order to find one that can meet the individual needs of that parent's child. The non-choosers, on the other hand, end up being displeased and worried. Preschool choice becomes an act of moral accountability. (Karlsson et al., 2013 p. 221)

The ongoing creation of what is a good or bad parent, or in Bunar and Ambrose (2016) a good or bad school, presents that the act of choosing is part of the legitimising of the market system. These constructions of "good" and "bad" increase the distinction between what is assumed as right and other alternatives, which consequently become bad and thereby wrong. By connecting a moral aspect of responsibility in the act of choosing, the performative and competitive individual who adopts this frame is constituted as right (Ball, 2000; Ball & Olmedo, 2013).

An approach where learning and competence are highlighted as something to increase in a never-ending process to dedicate better and new competences has in a neoliberal agenda become the only right and true way to a good life. This approach can sometimes be so common and taken for granted that it is seldom questioned (Storme & Vlieghe, 2011). Vandenbroeck (2017) questions how research results which highlight long-term and beneficial effects of the early education, regarding the cognitive and social competencies for children later in life, are connected to economic benefits from investing in education in early years. By connecting investment of money in early childhood education (ECE) to yields of high return for society in the future, the already dominant neoliberal discourse is reinforced. A political consequence of this homogenised consensus regarding what is right and wrong is that it seems like there is only one universal and rational truth, which blurs other ways of thinking and acting. It becomes a reconstruction of common sense, which in turn makes it harder to see other possible alternatives (Popkewitz, 2013).

10.2.2 Consensus and Conflict: Two Different Movements

To summarise the previous section, a neoliberal approach includes a dominant consensus perspective that primarily advocates a right way, a truth, concerning education and knowledge. As Moss (2014) and Vandenbroeck (2017) emphasise, the neoliberal narrative is about to get so dominant that we perhaps have to remind ourselves that this is just one alternative among others. In other words, there are more stories to tell. By putting a pluralistic grid on democracy and education, other possibilities can emerge.

Rancière (2004) identifies *the consensual democracy era*, which is characterised by the tendency to avoid conflicting opinions. He claims that societies which have a democratic consensus government are the ones that are experiencing an emerging of xenophobic and racist movements. This, he suggests, implies that the idea of consensus can be the cause to increasing disturbance.

According to Mouffe (2008, 2014), an alternative to a consensus perspective as a democratic aspect is a conflict perspective. Within a conflict perspective, several possible alternatives may potentially be right. Mouffe distinguishes antagonist conflicts in the sense that one alternative is considered right and others wrong and agonist conflicts that in turn may be better interpreted as a difference in opinion where there is an understanding of other and different opinions (Mouffe, 2008). An agonistic conflict is what Mouffe assumes to be the foundation of democracy, and she suggests that democracy in our societies should be built up by real alternatives. If there is a lack of alternative voices and opinions in an agonistic debate, it could be a threat to a democratic society (Mouffe, 2014).

Vandenbroeck and Peeters (2014) also argue that this *tyranny of consensus* can get the consequence that there are no clear options or alternatives, for example, in education. Instead of focusing on education as a reproduction of earlier knowledge, which often results in a one-way communication between the one who teaches and the one who shall be taught, there should be a focus on alternatives and different opinions as a way of becoming more democratic.

10.2.3 The Pluralistic Turn: Knowledge and Education as a Democratic and Explorative Narrative

So, what could an agonistic conflict perspective regarding democracy and education implicate for learning and teaching? Biesta (2004) chooses to describe that neither teaching nor education is performed by the one who teaches or the one who receives it. Rather, it takes place in the relation between them since the meaning sent out doesn't always get adopted in the same way. As an effect, this transmission between the sender and the receiver cannot be predetermined and controlled. It is in this *in-between* in the communication that the learning takes place through an active participation from both parties. Often, we only focus the teaching and learning situation in education to the transmission of knowledge from one individual to another and with the purpose to end up with the same understandings – in other words reproductions of earlier knowledge – yet we simply cannot guarantee that the receiving individual will create exactly the same meaning (Biesta, 2004).

In this perspective, learning and education are about meeting in communication where meaning is constructed in-between the participants there and then. If we connect this idea with Mouffe's need for alternatives and agonistic conflict to create democracy, education can be highlighted as a meeting place, where we meet others who are different from ourselves. Knowledge is produced in the meeting between people who think differently, where real democracy becomes a prerequisite for education and knowledge. A conflict perspective emerges in different and plural interpretations regarding things you agree on, where it is important to be open for development and to have an ambition to reach a common aim. But this is what Mouffe (2008) believes to be an aim we neither can nor should reach. Instead, we should create an understanding of our differences in meaning-making and plural ideas as the only way to reach democracy.

Such democracy aspects of education require pedagogical work that starts where we are at the time, to develop towards something that isn't predetermined. This calls for a conflicting approach where knowledge and education is understood as something potential and explorative (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2013; Moss, 2014; Olsson, 2008; Vandenbroeck & Peeters, 2014).

10.3 To Create Alternatives: Two Swedish Preschool Vignettes

To illustrate democratic alternatives for education and learning situations, two vignettes are introduced. The vignettes are glimpses from a preschool department in Sweden for children at the age of 1–3 years old. The data material, which consists of video observations, is part of a bigger data set that have been collected for an ongoing PhD study concerning children's participation and influence in preschool. The specific data material in the first vignette in this chapter was used in an article in a Swedish journal (Ungerberg, 2017) but has not been published in English.

Ethical considerations have been made, including gathering written consent from the children's parents for the recordings of the children and for the findings to be published (Swedish Research Council, 2017). Obtaining verbal assent from children themselves is more problematic, but the children's responses were carefully observed, and self-reflection occurred regarding myself as a newcomer in their department. Ongoing reflections regarding when and where to record with the camera, for example, taking an ethical radar (Skånfors, 2009) into account, were also been taken into consideration.

10.3.1 A Dough Activity

Participants in this vignette are Nenne and Ellis, both aged between 1 and 2 years old, together with an early childhood teacher.

> At the children's request, the teacher brings three[1] children into a small room with a table and some chairs. The teacher tells the children where to sit, then takes a plastic bag from a shelf on the wall and brings forth a green, round lump of play-dough.[2] She also puts a basket of things on the table. The teacher starts telling the children what all the things in the basket are and how they should be used. She also explains what order the baking procedure should have. Firstly, the dough should be kneaded soft and then rolled out onto the sheet that is placed in front of the children. After that, different cake tins should be used on the dough to create cookie figures. The rest of the dough must then be gathered and the procedure starts over again. The children are sitting very quietly with their hands still and looking at the teacher. The teacher shares a piece of dough with each child and they all start to dough in different ways. Nenne starts by reaching some tins and uses them here and there on the big round lump of dough in front of her. Another tin is then picked up from the table and Nenne is using it to push up and down on the dough. Many patterns emerge in the dough and Nenne looks excited, points at it and says: "look!" The teacher looks at Nenne and tells her that she hasn't rolled out the dough on the sheet first. Ellis then gets help to roll out her dough onto the sheet. When the dough is flat, Ellis reaches out for one of the table knifes which lies in front of each child. Ellis takes the knife and sticks it into the flat dough. A hole emerges in the dough and Ellis stops suddenly and looks my way with a serious face. I smile back at her and say: "have you made a hole?" She starts to smile, looks down at the dough and continues to make many holes. She seems fascinated by the holes and points with a finger at them and says: "look" at me several times with a very happy face. The teacher notes this and tells Ellis to be careful with the knife. (Extracts from data material)

In the vignette, we can see how the teacher largely arranges the activity for the children. She coordinates where they should sit, cuts the dough to almost the same sizes, places a baking sheet in front of them where the dough is supposed to be rolled and puts many implements such as rolling pins, table knives and cake tins in different shapes and colours a on the table. The teacher appears meticulous when she tells the children what all the things are and what the tins should be used for. The children are sitting quietly and looking at her. It seems like the teacher is putting a

[1] A third child is also joining the activity but he does not participate in this vignette.

[2] Playdough is a mix of water, flour, salt, oil and alum where the alum is used to conserve the dough so it can be saved and used many times.

lot of focus on verbally teaching the children what the things *are*, and her purpose with this activity seems to be to teach the children how to bake cookies.

When the activity is over and I have turned off the camera, the teacher tells me that the children are still too young to bake, but after a while, they learn how to bake cookies in the right way. She assumes the role of a teacher who is consistent with a learning process where the teacher mediates the knowledge she has gained, to the children who haven't yet acquired this knowledge. She also assumes the children as not yet capable of knowing certain things regarding to their age and life experience. The knowledge and outcome here are predetermined and give no space for other ways of thinking or acting, which is *one* common way to organise education. What is *not* becoming possible here, on the other hand, are other suggestions of how to dough, where the children's relations with the dough here and now can be taken into consideration. Another alternative in this short glimpse of a dough activity could be to explore what becomes possible and potential in the relations between the children, the teacher, the dough and the materials, where Nenne and Ellis detect and show different alternatives and seem to be fascinated by the occurrence of both patterns and holes in the dough.

10.3.2 A Fairy Tale Activity

In this next vignette, it is time for a fairy tale activity in the preschool department, and in this activity there is one early childhood teacher and four children who are participating. The children are Alicia (3 years old), Astrid (1 year old), Eric (2 years old) and Sarah (3 years old). The children are sitting in a row along one side of the room, and the teacher sits opposite them. On the wall above the children, there are different fabric bags with props for one fairy tale in each bag. There are about eight to ten different bags, which are all often used in this kind of activity. Usually the children choose which fairy to tell, and this time Alicia has chosen the story of *Bockarna Bruse (The Three Billy Goats Gruff)*. The teacher begins by putting out a blanket in front of her, which then acts as a framed scene where things which represent the fairy tale are presented. This time the props consist of three wooden goats, a troll, a bridge, a river and a little piece of grass. Alicia is lying down with her body stretched and her stomach against the floor. She has her feet towards the wall and her gaze pointed at the scene. Astrid lies next to her, in the same position but with her gaze pointed towards Alicia. Sara and Eric are sitting still on their knees or on their buttocks on the floor, and they look at the scene the entire sequence.

> The teacher begins by showing all the props while telling what the things represent. Alicia is actively involved in the teacher's presentation of the fairy tale and repeats what the teacher says. When the teacher introduces the troll, Alicia says: "It's scary troll!" The teacher confirms by saying: "You think it's scary?" Alicia pushes her body against the scene by pushing her feet against the wall. She then comes closer to the scene and draws back against the wall by pushing her hands toward the floor. The teacher begins to tell the story. When the teacher tells that the big ugly troll lives under the bridge, Alicia pushes her body quickly towards the scene and expresses with a kind of anger: "Look out troll!"

> The teacher answers directly with a question directed to Alicia: "Can you sit on your buttocks?" Alicia is backing in the same way as before, while shaking her head from side to side, still lying on her stomach. Astrid, who follows Alicia's actions, mimics her. Astrid says: "Little, little" and the teacher giggles and answers her: "Yes, that little, little goat." She immediately turns towards Alicia with a more annoyed tone and says: "No Alicia, now you sit up."
>
> "No", Alicia says, watching the teacher.
>
> "Then there will be no fairy [tale], and then I'll end it now", the teacher says. Alicia rises her body a little bit from the floor and looks at the teacher with a sigh.
>
> Eric, who is sitting next to Alicia screams: "No!" The teacher says, directed at Alicia: "But then you have to sit up properly." Alicia looks at Eric and changes position to sit on her knees on the floor. The teacher continues to tell the fairy tale. Astrid looks at Alicia and also rises and sits on her knees. When the teacher says that the little goat managed to escape from the troll as it crossed the bridge, Alicia excitedly adds in: "And the grass."
>
> "Yes, and the grass", the teacher confirms and continues to tell the story. Alicia is now sitting with her back towards the wall and looks dedicated to the scene. When the teacher says "Bridge", Alicia wrinkles her forehead and repeats "Bridge"! with a rough voice. The teacher continues. "Mm", Alicia says and moves closer to the scene, points her finger and says: "There is my …"
>
> "But, little, little Alicia", the teacher interrupts; "Do you have something crawling in your pants?" Alicia moves sideways in front of Astrid while she laughs a little and responds: "Noo", looking at the teacher. She is now placing herself a bit away from the teacher and the scene. The teacher continues: "But it will be disturbing for the other children when you do like this."
>
> "No", Alicia says, and is now sitting properly with her back against the short side of the wall facing the scene. The teacher continues with the fairy tale. Alicia follows the story and mimics "No no no" while shaking her head from side to side. (Extracts from data material)

In this vignette, this teacher also arranges the activity a lot. Just like the dough activity, the teacher appears meticulous when she tells the children what all the properties are. The children may be involved in choosing the fairy and verbally mimic the words that the teacher pronounces. However, what is not allowed is to get too close to the scene, maybe so they will not touch the props or disrupt the storytelling. It seems like it is important for the teacher that the fairy tale must be told and thereby reproduced in the same way as it has been told before.The vignette shows how the children should be quiet and passive just watching as well as listening to the fairy tale. When Alicia refuses to sit up, the teacher threatens to end the telling. Alicia does not seem to want to sit up anyway. But the threat gets a strong reaction from Eric who shouts out no! This reaction makes Alicia look at him and move her body to a sitting position.

This vignette can also be highlighted based on aspects of the age of the children. Astrid, the youngest of the children, is allowed to lay on the floor and move in different ways, something Alicia is not allowed to do. Astrid's attention seems to be more towards Alicia than the fairy tale, but the teacher does not mention anything about that. Instead, the teacher sounds happy when Astrid mimics something from the fairy tale. Alicia, however, should preferably sit up and lean against the wall, as the other two older children do. If Alicia talks about the story but without getting too close, it seems okay.

The vignette shows one idea of a fairy tale activity which is focused on training to be able sit still and listen to a content. Maybe it also contains an idea of telling a story

the right way and for the children to learn this explicit story. That is a common learning situation in many education situations. However, as in the previous vignette concerning the dough activity, this aim of the chapter is to introduce plural ways as alternatives where the children get more included in the process. This seems to require a shift from a goal- and result-oriented focus of the activity to a process focus instead.

An alternative in this fairy tale activity is to let the children take an increased part in the process. Alicia is very interested in the fairy tale and she cannot just sit still and watch. This could be seen as an asset where her ideas of the story could be taken into consideration. This could also include Astrid more in the storytelling since she seems very interested in what Alicia is doing. As another alternative, the story could be told in a way that includes the children's bodily actions instead of them sitting completely still, which could then create new ideas regarding the fairy tale activity.

10.3.3 Alternative Meaning-Making

To summarise these vignettes, I argue that a pluralistic approach could be assumed as a way to relate to and learn about different alternatives where the outcome isn't predetermined and the process is in focus rather than the result. This could emerge as alternatives to assume different relations with the dough or the fairy tale as right or wrong but instead highlight diverse actions and explorations as real alternatives. In this way, the children's and the teacher's actions together can assume a collective experimentation concerning what can *become* in the meeting with the dough or the fairy, enabling an open-ended activity and plural ways to assume what children, education and knowledge can be in this specific context. By highlighting the different meaning-making processes in the relations in-between the actors and not assuming these as opposites, more and plural potential alternatives can emerge as an agonistic and democratic learning process. Then, the knowledge isn't predetermined but rather emerges in the relations between children, teachers and activities. Thus, this chapter relates to the model of democracy in ECE by Hägglund, Löfdahl Hultman and Thelander (2017) through challenges to historical perspectives on the role of children in education (Dimension A) and the suggestion of alternative intentional practices in ECE (Dimension C).

10.4 Conclusion: Children and Education in Movement

As a discussion of this chapter, I want to conclude with the idea that not only is the world with its societies in continuous change and movement, so too are education and individuals. With the vignettes from two everyday activities in a Swedish preschool, I want to highlight the possibilities of creating other and new narratives concerning children and education where an agonistic conflict perspective creates possibilities for diverse democratic alternatives. The narratives provided in this chapter highlights

how the children and teachers can be considered as both receivers and creators of knowledge and education with a possibility to create new ideas and perspectives. Or as Dahlberg (2016) puts it, "Then, children and teachers assume the function of connectors, the openers of doors to new actualisations, where they get the chance to live out their productive lives amidst processes of always becoming" (p. 130).

Vandenbroeck (2017) emphasises that we all are both consumers and producers of a hegemonic discourse, which implies that both researchers and practitioners have a responsibility for the "truth" that is produced. It is important that dominant discourses are both challenged and broadened. The teachers' actions in the preschool examples of this chapter are in resonance with the hegemonic discourse regarding ECE, with a focus on specific results and predetermined goals, which are both measurable and evaluable. The teacher's statement after the dough activity highlighted a linear and chronological view regarding the children's development, which occurs after predetermined stages. This is one way of assuming children, learning and education, and it implies certain advantages with a consensus perspective concerning some knowledge and values. Nevertheless, by adding another perspective to this example, the dominant perspective regarding learning and education can be challenged. The children can be a part of the creation of alternatives where an agonistic conflict perspective creates possibilities for other ways of thinking about and acting in education.

In Sweden, ECE is politically controlled, where ideas of a good and valuable life are promoted. This makes preschool an important place, where all the participants should be a part of the construction of these values. Instead of an education only based on predetermined goals, I argue that there is a need for a conflict perspective on education that can enable a more pluralistic worldview, which includes all individual differences and meaning-making, regardless of age and life experience. This could make even young children creators of new knowledge and thereby co-producers of education. This, in turn, implicates that education does not always have to take the starting point in a reproduction of earlier knowledge but can also be assumed as an exploration of new ways of becoming in the world. In our relations with each other, there is a need to assume our differences as a diversity of possibilities and potential for thinking and acting in the world. ECE could hereby be a place where the participants' relations with the world are taken seriously as real alternatives in shaping and rethinking a pluralistic and democratic world.

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