Democratic Education and Epistemic Justice

Krassimir Stojanov

Abstract A democratic society needs an education for democracy, and this education must be in itself just. This is quite obvious, and many authors write about "democratic education" and "educational justice" as both sides of the same coin. However, both "democracy" and "justice" have been rarely linked to the main business of education, namely production and acquiring of academic knowledge. In this chapter, I address this deficit by elaborating on a epistemic concept of democratic and just education. In the first part I argue, following John Dewey, that democracy is not only a form of government, but also (and in first place) a social lifeform, which is characterized by a non-hierarchical diversity. A democratic lifeform, which is focused on education, is distinguished in first place by its epistemic diversity. This diversity is oppressed by what Paulo Freire calls "banking concept of education", which is on stake in the second section. This conception, which still dominates schools worldwide, excludes beliefs, experiences, perspectives, and worldviews of the students who do not belong to a canonized and homogeneous mainstream culture from the cooperative production and acquisition of knowledge in the classroom. I argue that this exclusion could be described with Miranda Fricker as epistemic injustice. In the final section, I share some ideas on how epistemic injustice can be overcome in the classroom.

1 Introduction

At the very beginning of this article, I shall recall two widely accepted points: first, the proper functioning of a democracy presupposes well-educated citizens. Second, a truly democratic society is a just society. One's participation at the democratic process of public deliberation, cooperative decision-making, and collective control of the institutions of the society obviously requires one's acquiring awareness and knowledge about one's own rights, understanding how the institutions function, as well as skills of reasoning and argumentation. On the other hand, the citizens can

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understand themselves as co-authors of the institutions and the rules of their society—a self-understanding that is a prerequisite of every democracy—only if they view these institutions and rules as just and hence non-oppressive ones.

If we think these two features of a democratic society in their interrelation, we should conclude that this society needs an education for democracy; an education that must be in itself just. After all, schools are institutions with crucial importance for the development and the social life of the citizens, and a society can hardly count as "just" if its schools produce or amplify unfair inequalities, or discriminate against certain students.

This interrelation is indeed obvious, and many authors write about "democratic education" and "educational justice" as both sides of the same coin. But, strangely enough, both "democracy" and "justice" have been rarely linked to the main business of education, namely the production and acquiring of academic knowledge. In most cases, "democratic education" becomes restricted to school policies of students' representation and participation at school's government, and to students' becoming informed and skillful about democratic decision-making. On the other side, "educational justice" is usually focused on issues about fair distribution and re-distribution of educational resources and opportunities, as well as about students' rights, while teaching and learning as the core dimensions of schooling remain largely outside of the scope of that term.

In this chapter, I address this deficit by elaborating on an *epistemic* concept of democratic and just education. In the first part I argue, following John Dewey, that democracy is not only a form of government, but also (and in first place) a social lifeform, which is characterized by a non-hierarchical diversity. A democratic lifeform, which is focused on education, is distinguished in the first place by its *epistemic diversity*. This diversity is oppressed by what Paulo Freire (1996/1970) calls the "banking concept of education", which is discussed in the second section. This conception, which still dominates schools worldwide, excludes beliefs, experiences, perspectives, and worldviews of the students who do not belong to a canonized and homogeneous mainstream culture from the cooperative production and acquirement of knowledge in the classroom. I argue that this exclusion could be described with Miranda Fricker (2007) as epistemic injustice. Epistemic justice that is prerequisite for both democratic and just education can be at best conceptualized *ex negatio*, as the opposite of epistemic justice. In the final section, I will share some ideas on how epistemic justice can be pedagogically achieved in the classroom. These ideas are to a great extent inspired by pedagogical projects that are connected with the Dalai Lama's secular ethics like the "SEE-Learning" project, although I do not discuss these projects explicitly here, for they deserve a systematic reconstruction and evaluation in their own terms; a reconstruction which should be elaborated in a separate paper.

2 Democratic Education as an Epistemic Concept?!

"A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (Dewey, 1916, p. 101). This well-known statement from Dewey's "Democracy and Education" marks the birth of a key motif in the contemporary political and educational philosophy, namely the distinction between democracy as a system of political institutions, and democracy as a social lifeform, as a form of everyday interactions between the members of a community. According to this distinction, the political surface of democratic institutions, which formally grant civic rights such as freedom of speech, religious freedom, or fair elections, must remain only an apparently democratic façade, if this surface is not grounded in democratic attitudes and habits of the society members. These attitudes and habits include in first place the motivation and the capability to "[t]he breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity" (ibid., p. 101). A democratic citizenry is the opposite of a closed and homogeneous community; it is characterized by the open-mindedness of its members, by their inclination and ability to interact with persons who differ from themselves in their origin, cultural background, or system of beliefs. Furthermore, democratic citizens treat their mutual differences and their diversity as a major source of impulses for enrichment of their respective experiences and courses of action, in short—for their personal growth.

This concept of democracy as a diverse and inclusive lifeform leads often to an understanding of democratic education basically as character education, as cultivation of democratic habits of mutual respect and cooperation. As a main tool for this appears to be the establishing of bodies of students' self-government such as students' parliaments, and including the students in practices of collective decision-making with regard to resolution of existing conflicts at the school, using its resources, the design of classrooms, dress codes, etc. The teaching of the norms and the institutions of a democracy within the particular school subject of civic education completes, according to this understanding, the scope of democratic education.[1]

However, democratic education, thus understood as character education plus civic education, is barely linked to the main business of schooling, namely the acquirement of academic knowledge, as it is normally taught in the various disciplines of science, humanities, and arts; disciplines which are not *directly* political in their essence. Thus, it is perfectly possible that a school possesses a well-functioning students' parliament,

[1] An example for this understanding of democratic education is the Resolution of The Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the States of the Federal Republic of Germany "Democracy as objective, subject and practice of historical and political education in schools" (see Kulturminister-Konferenz 2018). In this paper that is probably the most important programmatic document for democratic education in Germany there is a lot of talk about a broader inclusion of contents relating to democracy as a form of government and as a "lifestyle" into the school curricula, students' participation at school's government, encouraging students' civic engagement and organizing "democracy days" (ibid., p. 6f.). However, modes of transmission and production of knowledge in school subjects beyond civic education are almost completely out of the scope of the Resolution.

equips the students with plenty of information about the democratic state, initiate them in conflict resolution and collective decision-making, but nevertheless offers a conventional, top-down provision that does not leave much room for the students to express their own pluralistic beliefs and perspectives to the taught content.

To be sure, Dewey himself profoundly addressed the epistemic dimension of education. He emphasized the educational role of scientific knowledge and its social contexts of production and transmission (see ibid., pp. 221–226; 306–329). However, many authors in the field of democratic education, most of whom are more or less explicitly inspired by the educational philosophy of pragmatism tend to overlook its epistemic element—probably because they are blended by its strong focus on everyday experience and social interactions that are not easily linked to academic, trans-contextual knowledge. This is a very significant deficit because widespread practices of transmission of that knowledge sharply contradict the ideal of the breaking down of the barriers between closed groups, and ignore or even suppress the diversity of students' beliefs and perspectives in the classroom. These practices could be subsumed under what Paulo Freire calls "a banking concept of education"—a concept, which is not only undemocratic, but also creates dramatic (epistemic) injustices at schools, as explained below.

3 "Banking Education" as Undemocratic *and* Unjust

Probably nobody described the modes of undemocratic, oppressive teaching better than Paulo Freire did this in his conception of "banking education". According to him, this is a kind of information transfer in the form of "depositing", in which the students are the "depositories" and the teacher is the "depositor" of pieces of fixed and static, ultimately dead knowledge (Freire, 1996/1970), p. 53). This mode of "education" treats the students like empty "containers" which the teacher must fill (ibid., p. 53).

Fill with what? Strictly speaking, not with knowledge, but with mechanic information about facts and norms for adaption to the existing social order, for "[k]knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (ibid., p. 53).

In the banking concept of education, the students are excluded from this collaborative production of knowledge, since their own considerations, beliefs, and experiences do not matter at all within this concept. This is particularly true with regard to students from underprivileged, socially or culturally oppressed groups. According to Freire, the teacher who deposits "knowledge" into the heads of the students is one of the oppressors who seek to preserve the existing social order, in which s/he has a privileged status (see ibid., p. 55). Even if one finds the term "oppressors" as too strong, one could hardly dispute the fact that school knowledge canons usually mirror the systems of beliefs and norms of the upper and middle classes as well of the cultural majorities. While these systems might echo the socialization and the family

upbringing of the students who belong to the upper and middle classes, the experiences and the perspectives of the socially and culturally underprivileged remain completely unrepresented in the classroom.

The "banking education" approach might also take place in courses which aim to prepare the students for democratic citizenship. This is the case when the teachers of such courses attempt just to deposit knowledge about democratic institutions, about human and civic rights, about constitutional norms, etc., into the heads of the students. Nevertheless "banking education" is always deeply undemocratic. For it always neglects and even negates the diversity of the students by reducing them to uniform empty containers to be filled with unified "knowledge", and it does not contribute to the breaking down of the barriers of class, or cultural group, but rather cements these barriers.

The model of "banking education" that still dominates the schools worldwide is not only *undemocratic*, but it is also *unjust*. By ignoring the beliefs, the perspectives, and the experiences especially of the students from underprivileged families, this model generates what Miranda Fricker (2007) calls "epistemic injustice".[2]

According to Fricker, epistemic injustice takes two central forms: "testimonial injustice" and "hermeneutical injustice" (ibid., p. 1). While testimonial injustice is characterized by a lack of sensitivity for the specific beliefs and experiences of certain persons, hermeneutical injustice is basically about a structural neglect of the needs and efforts of those individuals to articulate their beliefs and experiences in terms of propositional knowledge.

Testimonial injustice occurs in cases in which credibility is assigned based on who individuals are and not what they (may) know. In an educational context, these are cases in which less credibility is given to students of a lower social and cultural status, although their ability to gain and produce knowledge may be equal to, or even greater than that of middle-class students. So, several empirical surveys from Germany show that teachers regularly evaluate children from immigrant families as being eligible only for low-performance, non-academic secondary schools without a college-preparatory track (see Bernewaser, 2018).The main reason seems to be a pattern of thought that is widespread among school teachers in Germany. According to this pattern, the family socialization and "acculturation" of every child determine his or her learning ability and knowledge-related credibility (see Mannitz & Schiffauer, 2002, pp. 97–100). Thus, not only the level of a child's knowledge but also the "quality" of her culture and socialization are subject to discriminatory evaluation when decisions are made concerning the kind of secondary school the child should attend. In this way, the barriers of class, origin, and cultural background become unbreakable….

This case is a clear example of the lack of what Fricker calls testimonial sensitivity. This is a lack of both empathy to students' beliefs and experiences, and of a respectful readiness to include those beliefs and experiences in the space of shared information and argumentative discussion. As Fricker (2007) emphasizes, not including someone

[2] I developed the following considerations on epistemic injustice first in Stojanov (2018, p. 42f).

in that space means not recognizing him or her as a "knower" and therefore hindering his or her cognitive development (145).

The second form of epistemic injustice, hermeneutical injustice, occurs when disrespect toward the experiences, aspirations, and achievements of certain people is embodied in publicly and educationally validated language. This is the case particularly when there are no publicly recognized and developed concepts capable of adequately articulating the experiences, aspirations, and achievements of members of marginalized groups (Fricker, 2007, pp. 5–7 and 147–152; Kotzee, 2013, pp. 344–345). So, it seems to be the case that in the language that is dominant at the educational institutions in Germany, no concept exists to express the multi-cultural and multi-lingual socialization of students from immigrant families as an educational potential, although translating between different languages and cultural contexts is obviously a valuable achievement that can serve as a basis for producing new and important knowledge. Instead, educational authorities place these students in cultural boxes, thus reducing their distinctive subjectivity to manifestation of a single "foreign culture" which is seen as "deficient" in comparison to Germany's "leading culture" (*Leitkultur*). As some studies suggest, it is very difficult for those students to find verbal means (in the form of publicly recognized concepts) to argue against their own cultural stereotyping and against the neglect of their specific knowledge and abilities in schools (see Mannitz, 2002, pp. 319–320; Mannitz & Schiffauer, 2002, pp. 87–100).

Testimonial and hermeneutical injustices in the classroom cause huge psychological harm to the concerned students: Testimonial injustice makes them objects of moral disrespect, which expresses itself in non-recognition of the students as knowers, in excluding them from the social process of collaborative production of knowledge. In addition, hermeneutical injustice entails a disregard to the particular experiences, perspectives, forms of expression, and potentials of the students. In other words, hermeneutical injustice is characterized by a structural lack of empathy for the students, and by a lack of social esteem for them. As Axel Honneth persuadably shows, it is exactly emotional neglect, moral disrespect, and social disregard, which hinder the development of one's personal autonomy and agency (see Honneth, 1995, p. 129). Since education is basically about that development, treating students with emotional neglect, moral disrespect, and/or social disregard is the deeper and most crucial form of educational injustice (see Stojanov, 2018, p. 42). Accordingly, emotional concern or empathy, moral respect, and social esteem should be seen as the main features of the just treatment of students in the classroom.

The critical question therefore is, how, by which pedagogical measures could a democratic, cooperative production of knowledge in the classroom be designed in accord with the recognized forms of empathy, respect, and social esteem?

4 Main Features of Democratic and just Teaching

For Freire the opposite of the "banking education" is the dialogic problem-posing education. Here the students are no longer "docile listeners", but "critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher" (Freire, 1996/1970, p. 62). The role of the teacher is to create "[t]he conditions under which knowledge at the level of the *doxa* is superseded by true knowledge, at the level of the *logos*" (ibid., p. 62).

One can understand this claim in the sense that educative teaching should depart from the "doxas" of the students, that is, from their rather intuitive, unexamined beliefs, and then proceed with the rational, conceptual articulation, modification, and revision of these beliefs through their inclusion in the dialogic practice of reasoning. This should enable the students to critically evaluate existing views and norms, and to resist oppression and indoctrination by developing their own theories about the world, as well as their own ethical commitments.

The first step of addressing the subjective beliefs and experiences of the students in their individuality and diversity requires the recognized form of *empathy*. The subsequent inclusion of these subjective beliefs and experiences in discourses of reasoning and argumentation is a form of *respect* for the students with regard to both their individual points of view, and to their capacity to articulate these points of view in a rational or conceptual way. Finally, encouraging the students to develop their own theories and ethical commitments is a form of *social esteem* for their potential to contribute to the enlargement of the knowledge and of the value horizon of the society.

In short, democratic and epistemically just teaching takes the form of a discourse, within which the intuitive beliefs and everyday experiences of the students are being articulated with academic concepts, and within which all participants experience empathy, respect, and social esteem.

Of course, this is only a very general picture of a democratic and just pedagogy. Much more elaboration (including empirical research) is needed on the question, how could this pedagogy be practically arranged in the classroom, and how educative discourses can be structured. I believe that educational initiatives that are linked to the Dalai Lama's approach of secular ethics, as for example the "SEE-Learning" project, could be very instructive for such an elaboration. Particularly relevant for the further development and the implementation of the conception that I sketched in this paper are the relatively detailed modeling of the interrelations between acquisition of knowledge and personal experience, as well as between self-awareness, interpersonal awareness, and appreciation of interdependence in the "SEE-Learning" concept (see SEE Learning, 2019, pp. 19 and 21f.). However, this concept deserves a systematic exploration and evaluation on its own; an exploration and evaluation, which are beyond the scope of this paper.

5 Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that both "democratic education" and "educational justice" should be related to the core task and domain of schooling, namely the production and the acquisition of academic, conceptually structured knowledge in various disciplines. This demand contradicts a widespread understanding of democratic education and educational justice, according to which "democratic education" is focused on students' participation in schools' self-government and on equipping students with information about democratic institutions and norms, while "educational justice" is limited to questions of distribution and re-distribution of educational resources.

The epistemic kernel of "democratic education" and "educational justice" could be elaborated at best *ex negatio* by first reconstructing the epistemic counterparts of both terms. My claim is that the opposite of "democratic education" is "banking education", and the opposite of "educational justice" is "epistemic injustice" in its major forms of testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. The overcoming of both banking education and epistemic injustice requires the inclusion of the students as partners in the discursive and collaborative production of knowledge in the classroom. This inclusion presupposes the recognition of the diversity and the individuality of students' beliefs, views, and experiences as well as their potential to articulate and transform these beliefs, views, and experiences in a conceptual way. At the end of the day, a democratic and just education means recognizing all students as co-producers of knowledge with their unique perspectives and biographies. This recognition implies treating all students with empathy, respect, and social esteem. I do not think that there is yet a satisfactory answer to the question, by which concrete pedagogical tools and models this treatment could be sustainably implemented and institutionalized in the classroom. Further analytical and empirical research is required to search for genuine answers to this question.

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