Education in Democratic Values: The Historicity of Democracy as the Openness of Narratives

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Abstract

This article poses as a theoretical and practical problem a particular aspect of democratic values: its quality as a historical occurrence. Valorizing the non-essential character of democracy, its "foundational void," should be a common part of any democratic culture. The values that inform democracy also share this historical quality; they cannot be established outside of personal and institutional biographies. This article explores the consequences that such principles have for democratic values education in schools. The article describes the general traits of an educational policy and practice that might be understood as a form of democratic narration.

Education in Democratic Values:

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The main purpose of this essay is to answer the following question: From a political-educational (policy) perspective[1], what is the most appropriate method for influencing the interactive processes of schools in order to facilitate school actors' appropriation of democratic values and the manifestation of such values in their relationships with others?[2]

When we say political-educational, we understand these two terms as inseparable. Every educational intervention mobilizes political aspects, and every political intervention in schools should include educational aspects. In this regard, then, our analysis will focus on intervention in schools by public education administrators belonging to the central government.

Political interventions by the State in the schools are important if, in addition to being coherent strategies of political power, they help to make possible learning processes within schools and people. However, if such interventions are inadequate, they inevitably create a contradiction between what political administrators state in words and what they actually do. And it bears mentioning that one of the particular aspects of this type of program in the school environment is precisely its quality of being an "intervention," understood as the deliberate actions that are abruptly introduced, but that attempt to encompass pre-existing personal and institutional processes, and guide them from the point of view of democratic values.
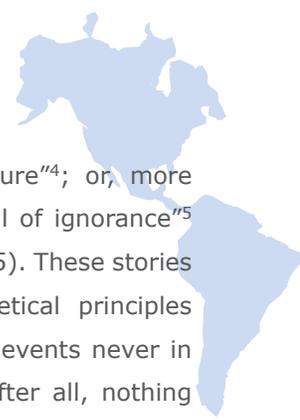
From this perspective, the State's political strategies inherent in programs for Education in Democratic Values (EDV) are clearly subject to a social and educational process already underway. As such, they require a specific angle of inquiry and reflection: the contingent and historical character of EDV. Both in the general public sphere and in the schools, democracy is a de facto social reality; it is characterized by a fundamental factuality. This aspect of democracy is not sufficiently acknowledged in the typical policy statements that aim to implement EDV, yet such acknowledgement is one of the greatest challenges that every school-based intervention seeking to advance democracy must face.

In view of the foregoing, a more refined version of our initial question reads as follows: Which are the means of policy intervention for promoting EDV (Education in Democratic Values) that best recognize the constitutive **historical character** of democracy? To provide an answer to this question, we will consider the founding principles of disciplines such as philosophy and educational theory. First, we will attempt to specify the terms of our question. We will then briefly explore alternative methods to our own. Finally, we will present our own answer, an intervention strategy that we have named reflexive *accompaniment.*

The Historicity of Democracy

In the realm of formal education we seem to have difficulties in fully recognizing the importance of the historicity of democracy. One of these difficulties comes from the tendency to naturalize the idea of democracy as an already established social organization, as a spontaneous attitude in people, or as a ready-made tool available for orchestrating interests in a society.

For their part, foundational theorists of democracy have resorted to narrative and metaphorical expressions to justify it, e.g. T. Hobbes (Hobbes, 1994, pp. 100-105)[3], who presents an origin story

which he named "the state of nature"[4]; or, more recently, J. Rawls, who uses the "veil of ignorance"[5] metaphor (Ricoeur, 1996, pp.283-285). These stories and metaphors provide both theoretical principles and founding narratives, though the events never in fact actually occurred. There was, after all, nothing that likely resembled a deliberative gathering at the inception of our societies. Rather, we would find obscure preambles of violence, internecine wars, and bloody revolutions which de facto resolved the conflict over forms of social organization. Such founding tales thus have a rather post hoc explanatory role; they confirm that the legitimization of democracy is more after-the-fact than the fruit of argumentative deductive reasoning.

As Claude Lefort has pointed out (Lefort, 1990, pp.187-194)[6], far from being detrimental to democracy, this "foundational void" is its greatest source of possibilities. The foundational void translates into an *ever-vacant seat of power* that may be temporarily occupied, but not permanently appropriated per se. This void distinguishes democracy from most fundamentalisms[7], which posit an ultimate source of support for the social order -–an unconditioned essence that conditions everything else, usually embodied in the sovereign, the priest, or the wise man. In democracy, power is no longer embodied, it becomes symbolic. Power does not remain attached to a person or party, and its exercise is always temporary. Fundamentalisms, on the other hand, tend to identify power with someone or something (e.g. the leader, the party), conferring upon it "a body" in order to be able to maintain power and transmit it as society's untouchable repository and legacy. Clearly, the temporary nature of democratic power is not easy for politicians to accept; a look at recent Latin American history should suffice to confirm this. Yet the contingency and impermanence that characterize all democratic experience is an educational challenge as well, because such contingency calls forth an intention to teach, to plan, to project. How can we escape the
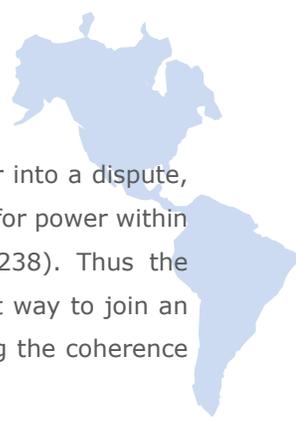
paradox of wanting to guide processes that have their own internal dynamics?

If we accept democracy's constitutive historical character, then we will also recognize that it implicitly affirms the finitude of the human condition (Merieu, 2007, pp. 1-2). The historicity of democracy is its continuous inclusion of beginnings and ends in social processes, its unpredictability and the elusiveness of a permanent social fact. Indeed, we have commented elsewhere (Onetto, 2005, pp.1123- 1132) that learning democratic values and culture involves overcoming omnipotence as a stance vis-à-vis the social order.

Political-educational interventions have a tendency to highlight potential rather than limits, and this can easily lead to an expectation of omnipotence. Unfortunately, this quality of omnipotence is rooted in school culture and in the very constitution of the modern educational paradigm (Hargreaves, 1996, pp.165-182). Thus, taking up our initial questions again, they now appear like this: Do the State's educational policy interventions capture this focus on the historicity and finitude of democratic culture? What would be the most appropriate means for doing so?

Accepting the historicity of democracy also means accepting the inevitable *contextualization* of EDV within a given social group, with its own cultural perspective. EDV is always situated in a social milieu that differs from other contemporary milieus on account of shared language and commonality of meanings (Gadamer, 2003, pp. 535-536). What is the best way to enter into these pre-existing cultural contexts and promote their full acceptance of democratic values?

Finally, we should say that the historicity of democracy presupposes that all EDV involves engagement with an ongoing collective narrative. It is a narrative that not only produces values and meanings, but also a particular distribution of power that is both institutionalized and unstable (Ball. 1989,

pp.19-41). To develop EDV is to enter into a dispute, a struggle both manifest and hidden, for power within a social group (Ball, 1989, pp.211-238). Thus the question also arises: What is the best way to join an ongoing power struggle without losing the coherence of a program in EDV?

It is not possible within the scope of this paper to answer these questions thoroughly, or even sufficiently. We can, however, present a few initial guidelines for what might be considered appropriate answers to these questions.

Three Different Approaches to EDV

In general and rather theoretical terms we will here describe three different approaches to EDV (In the footnotes we have included some examples for each of the categories). In our understanding the first two approaches, although they have valuable aspects that can be incorporated, do not adequately recognize the historical character of democratic culture. With the third approach we propose a practice that seems to us more congruent with this historical conception of democracy.

1. The Category-based Approach[8]

This label denotes a particular way of approaching EDV which seeks to express the social experience of each school and/or person in common, predefined categories. When classification is the primary concern, it is impossible to prevent the occlusion of the historical aspect of each school's democratic experience. The inclusion of actual processes in predetermined categories requires a more or less accomplished task of linguistic evacuation (Gadamer, 2003, pp.487-502). In its extreme form, categorization seeks a "language without languages" (Gadamer, 2003, pp.495-498)[9], i.e., a language made up of universal signs. Mathematics is the universal language that meets this condition; a quantifying approach is typically category-based,

and in one way or another it always clashes with the historical character of democracy. Languages, on the other hand, are localized; they belong to community histories. The attempt to categorize languages has ancient roots in Plato and Aristotle (Gadamer, idem, pp. 487-502) (Aristóteles, 1967, pp.178-241). We are not claiming with this that it is possible to approach EDV without existing concepts; however, there is a difference between preconceptions and categories. While the former are the product of a personal or collective history, the latter are superimposed on histories in an attempt to regulate, arrange, and classify them.

2. The Instrumental Approach[10]

An alternative method of undertaking EDV is defined in terms of means and ends. Such terms remind us of the bureaucratic dilemma faced by modern State organizations such as schools (Hargreaves, 1996, pp.120-141). As mentioned earlier, on account of its processual nature, the historicity of democracy also renders its process not fully available to, or manageable by, its own actors. For this reason, we believe that EDV is not adequately expressed in terms of means or instruments and that, by withdrawing it from the sphere of instrumental rationalities, EDV will also recover its moral quality (Rizvi et al, 1997 pp.41-64).

To approach these value-learning processes by conceiving them as means is to emphasize control as a stance. Education itself – as intergenerational transmission – contains an attempt to control, or at least to make the lessons learned in the past endure over time, and to organize the future from a collective concern. The qualities of imposition and discipline of State-managed education have historically been, and still are, expressed by its compulsory nature (Perreoud, 1990, pp.13-34). However, this impositional quality of State education develops in tension with the historicity of democracy, which entails the creation of a historical subject and the subject's emancipation from

all dogmatism, whether religious or scientific. EDV flourishes to the extent that educational programs move away from indoctrination and the inculcation of values.

3. Reflexive Accompaniment

In our understanding, the contextualized design of educational policy[11], and a policy intervention understood as reflexive accompaniment, is best suited for the radically historical character of democracy and its values. There are at least three reasons in support of the suitability of the intervention we are calling reflexive accompaniment: 1) Reflexive accompaniment, insofar as it implies presence in the actual context, emphasizes the localized character of the historical; 2) As openness to inquiry, it captures the historical as an unfolding event, and 3) It confirms that the narrative aspect of history is a pre-given in terms of memory, and open to possible re-narration.

Accompaniment as Moving Towards

The first feature of this approach that we recommend is to undertake EDV as an accompaniment. In a first phenomenological description (Ricoeur, 1996, pp.352-365), to accompany means to approach or "move towards" the one who is being accompanied. An educational policy or intervention varies substantially if it is conceived of either as "moving towards" or as "waiting for the other to draw near." "Moving towards" is to be present, and for human beings this involves corporeality, being there, making contact. This outward movement also implies leaving some other place. Materially, in terms of State policy, it is to move towards the places where EDV is being deployed, i.e. the schools.

To accompany means something more than sporadically intervening; it involves spending time with others, being – and remaining – present. Politically this entails a face-to-face policy intervention. From a
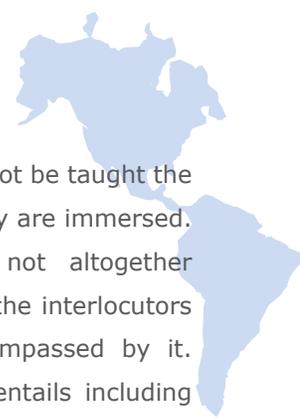
more metaphorical point of view, however, it entails moving towards the other's perspective (Goffman, 1994, pp.13-28). To this end, it is necessary to open up one's own point of view and subject it to examination[12]. This actual and metaphorical deconstruction of the policy intervention is a crucial moment of reflexive accompaniment.

Reflexive Accompaniment Provides for Authentic Conversation

The description of accompaniment leads us to the need for reflexively bearing in mind our own point of departure. To accompany, then, no longer implies a physical image of movement but is better seen as an action that attempts to understand personal and institutional processes. It is also related to listening. No understanding is possible without establishing an authentic conversation with EDV stakeholders (Gadamer, 2003, pp.439-447). By authentic conversation we mean the type of exchange in which the interlocutors are able to take the floor and express themselves.

Bernstein (Bernstein, 1993, pp.100-134) reminds us that this is neither typical nor spontaneous in the school environment. The logic of asymmetrical power cuts across pedagogical discourse (Bernstein, 1993, pp.92-95). This asymmetrical positioning of the interlocutors hinders and may prevent authentic conversation (Habermas, 1991, 123-125). To engage in reflexive accompaniment involves becoming familiar with formally and informally established power relations (Ball, 1989, pp.127-137), and working towards achieving certain symmetry in the interlocution. Otherwise, what we will find is an EDV consisting of double-standards in communication, simulation, and dissimulation (Waztlawick, 1994, pp 73-77), i.e., *inauthentic* conversation.

Authentic conversation is not a technique, nor is it a pedagogical resource for teaching something to the other; it is an **event.** Others cannot be taught the meaning of the situation in which they are immersed. Such a meaning emerges as a not altogether predictable process construed by all the interlocutors in such a way that they are encompassed by it. Openness to this process naturally entails including uncertainty in the design of an EDV program (Jackson, 1991, pp.149-167). Without appreciating uncertainty as a constitutive aspect of the intervention, it will not be possible to realize the spontaneous quality of openness to democratic values.

Reflexive Accompaniment Contributes to Opening a New Narrative

Every educational process "comes from afar" and "goes a long way." Thinking of educational intervention as immediate, unrelated to the before and after, is to condemn it to darkness and to render it useless. We cannot understand the meaning of actions, words, and situations without understanding the history of how their meaning developed.

Reflexive accompaniment implies working with accounts of meaning, and therefore, with identities. We agree with Ricoeur (Ricoeur,1996, pp.138-151) in arguing that identity: a) cannot be well conceptualized using an essentialist category, b) does not supersede personal and collective histories, and c) is not cut off from time and story but rather expresses itself through them (Mc Ewan et al., 2005). Identity is narrative (Ricoeur, 1996, pp.174-198) – not a closed but rather an open narrative. This entails that, by becoming reflexive, the accompaniment process takes up the existing narrative, capturing the collective and personal stories as productive of identity. These narratives will not only tell what has occurred but will also attempt to explain, assign, and predict. Stories establish (Fernández, 1998,13-17) the meaning and explanation of things. They also establish practices, procedures, and rituals for approaching unforeseen scenarios. Identity, meanwhile, has a tendency to

get stuck in sameness. If this tendency becomes too well established in a person or an institution, both the other, and otherness itself, will be construed as a threat because whatever is excluded from the canonical narrative calls it into question and thereby becomes threatening.

For this reason, reflexive accompaniment makes evident the historicity of narratives, preventing them from becoming final. *To accompany reflexively, then, is to open through inquiry the possibility of a re-narration*. A shared re-narration puts in place a new community because it opens the horizon of meaning; it includes new voices and prevents the chronic repetition of destructive patterns. Reflexive accompaniment favors the appropriation of democratic values by participating in a new collective re-ordering of values and facts, thus re-opening moral discussion in the school.

Some Lines of Inquiry Left Open

This paper is likely to leave open some lines of inquiry that were only touched upon here. Those that we consider most significant are listed below:

1. The importance of highlighting – rather than leaving in the shadow – the historicity inherent in learning democratic values, especially from the standpoint of understanding and designing public policies for EDV.

2. We should continue asking whether political guidelines that focus on either a categorical or an instrumental basis can assume the above-mentioned dimension of historicity.

3. We should bear in mind that, if one consequence of accepting the historicity of democracy is to include a commitment to school actors' autonomy and their leading role in the design and conception of policy intervention, then this should be visible in the educational policies already underway.

4. Can we assume that a suitable policy design is a contextualized design that does not limit itself to confirming and reproducing people's and institutions' previous histories, but rather engages with such histories and – together with the actors therein – manages to open new narratives?

5. If reflexive accompaniment means a shared self-inquiry amongst those in charge of forming educational policy and the beneficiaries thereof, will those exercising political power be capable of reflexively accessing their own previous meaning-horizons and permanently opening them up to inquiry and to possible challenge?

As a closing statement, we should only add that the ideas presented in this paper attempt to leave open a discussion that, only with the contributions of others, will achieve sufficient clarity so as to attain an increasingly consistent education for democracy, both in its conception and its implementation.
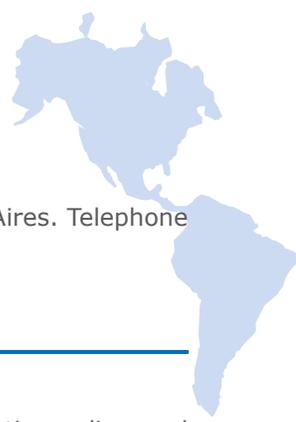
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End notes

1   Editor's note: We have translated the author's term "político-educativo" occasionally as education policy, and occasionally as "political-educational." In Spanish, the term política can refer either to politics or policy.

2   It should be pointed out that, as the question makes clear, this inquiry aims at finding the most appropriate methods of policy intervention. We are not proposing a research method. Nor do we seek a didactic method planned with a pedagogical intention and for certification purposes. We do not, moreover, aim to propose intervention strategies for what could be considered critical or emergency situations, as we suspect that such situations deserve very specific considerations. The exclusion of these approaches does not entail a value judgment thereof.

3   As Hobbes tells us: "During the time when men live without a common power that instills fear in them all, they find themselves in a condition or state called war; it is everyone's war against everyone else." He continues: "It might be thought that there never was a time or condition in which such a war could exist, and, in fact, I believe that it generally never actually occurred in that way, in the whole world" Hobbes, Thomas (1994). Leviatán o la materia, forma y poder de una república eclesiástica y civil. México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, pp.102-103.

4   "State of nature" was the name given by modern philosophers to man´s primordial situation, before the advent of social and political organization. In the case of Hobbes, this situation is one of universal war, all against all, yet equally well-known is the "noble savage" imagined to exist by Rousseau before the social contract. Such philosophers were not describing a real historical society but rather a kind of prehistory with an etiological character, that is, a construct that would justify the present social order and give it rational meaning.

5   J. Rawls also tries to legitimize democracy by resorting to the description of an origin metaphor. We might call this a counterfactual metaphor because it describes not what happened in reality but the necessary a priori conditions for justice and a just society. For Rawls, the concept of equity is the central concept of a democratic society, and he gives this concept a procedural emphasis: justice is defined as how decisions are made in a social order. The metaphor mentioned here presupposes that we bracket out, behind a "veil of ignorance," actually differentiated social conditions of power, prestige, and fortune that might affect the attainment of equity and justice in social relations (Rawls, pp.29-30). See also Ricoeur's comments (pp. 244-251).

6   Lefort, Claude (1990), La invención democrática, Buenos Aires, Ediciones Nueva Visión. Lefort says: "What arises is the new notion of the seat of power as an empty space... those exerting authority cannot appropriate incorporated power." (pp.190)(Underlining added.) Later in the text he expands his ideas: "an empty place because it cannot be inherent to any individual or group, an indescribable place which is neither inside nor outside... a purely symbolic place, in the sense that it is no longer localized in the actual, the reference to an unconditioned hub becomes blurred, society faces a loss of foundation." (Lefort, 1990, underlining added.)

7   The idea of fundamentalism is nowadays linked to international conflicts and religion, but there are fundamentalisms in all religions and all doctrinal positions. Fundamentalism is linked in this sense to totalitarianism. We concur with Lefort (pp. 37-52) in thinking that both totalitarianism and fundamentalism have this in common: they each transfer to the political arena other social domains that should be kept separate, such as the domains of scientific knowledge, the economy, or religion. When this happens, the political becomes indisputable because it is firmly grounded in a theory, in demonstrated knowledge, or in a religious belief that shields it from all questioning. Thus, what is in reality the product of historical circumstance, of interests and random struggles for power, gets situated beyond time, in a fundamental essence.

8   I believe that one of the most robust, satisfying and valuable experiences of this paradigm are the Colombian experience in developing citizenship competencies standards. Cristian Cox, Rosario Jaramillo y Fernando Reimers (2005) Educar para la la ciudadanía y la democracia en las Américas: una agenda para la acción Washington BID, p.12. These competencies include knowledge, cognitive competencies, emotional competencies, communicative competencies, all-encompassing competencies, with each of them being quantifiable under standards. Inevitably a "second moment" of intervention is observed to differentiate and separate itself from categorization to the contexts. See for example: Enrique Chaux et al. (2004) Competencias Ciudadanas De los Estándares al Aula. Una propuesta de integración a las áreas académicas, Bogotá Ediciones Uniandes

9   Gadamer interprets the predominance of quantitativeness as the predominance of a language that appears to provide more guarantees of truth as universality and stability, and claims that: "Only mathematical symbolism would be in a position to facilitate overcoming the juncture of historical languages and the imprecision of their concepts." (Gadamer,2003, p.499)

10 One example of this instrumental approximation to EDV is the formulation of a school-coexistence policy aimed at achieving greater educational quality. This fertile connection between a school coexistence inspired in democratic values and its repercussion on the results of learning was discussed at an International Seminar held in Santiago, Chile in 2003; the papers and debates are published in Juan Ruz et al. (compilers) (2003) Convivencia Escolar y Calidad de la Educación, Santiago de Chile, ed. Ministerio de Educación and OEI. This volume includes the address by the then Minister of Education of Chile, Mrs. Mariana Aylwin, on this approach to educational policy. The creation of Civic Education areas as scenarios for indoctrination by military governments in Latin America might also be included in this instrumental line – in its crudest sense of control. For the difference between Civic Education and Citizenship Formation delimited by the greater or lesser degree of closeness to "indoctrination," refer to Uruguay's Ministry of Education paper: Daniel J.Corbo y otros (2003), Documento de referencia para una experiencia de Educación en Valores, Montevideo, ed. Anep Codicen .

11 This political approach – centered on the development of capacities and competencies in local actors, and including context as a place of reflection and reformulation – has already been adopted by international agencies. See IIPPE , Carta Informativa, Vol. XXIV, October-December 2006, Desarrollo de capacidades en educación. As a nationwide test, Argentina's Programa Nacional de Convivencia Escolar (National School Coexistence Program, PNCE) created in 2004 (Ministerial Resolution No. 1619), is worth mentioning here.
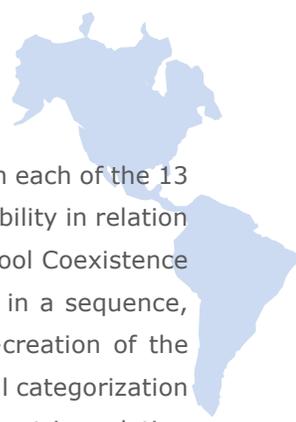
The PNCE has features in common, but it is characterized by developing a particular design in each of the 13 jurisdictions in which it has been applied. The PNCE offers local actors this constructive possibility in relation to three sub-programs: 1) Training for School Supervisors and Principals, 2) Regulatory School Coexistence Agreements, 3) Family and School. The local authority selects and arranges these options in a sequence, without restricting itself to combining pre-established options but rather doing a true re-creation of the original proposal. It is not a question of developing a rigid pre-design according to a universal categorization that is later applied in each context. On the other hand, in its intervention the PNCE prioritizes triangulation devices for the sake of inquiring into previous narratives and of producing collective re-narrations, thus making the consolidation of local actors its privileged impact. For further information, visit Argentina's Ministry of Education Website at www.me.gov.ar.

12 Gadamer, G (2003) strongly emphasizes the value of questions in the attempt to open up the interpretation of a historically set situation. He refers to questions as an essential, though limited, revision of one's own assumptions. In his words: "We say that a question is poorly expressed when it fails to reach openness but rather displaces it by maintaining false assumptions."(p. 441) Later on he adds, "Asking a question is equivalent to suffering rather than doing – the question imposes itself; there comes a time when it is no longer possible to continue evading it or remain in the habitual opinion" (p. 444).

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