WCES-2010

Examining pre-service teachers' beliefs on democracy and democratic education

H. Sezgi Saraç-Süzer[a] *, Nuray Alagözlü[b]

[a]Başkent University, Faculty of Education, Ankara, 06810, Turkey
[b]Başkent University, Faculty of Education, Ankara, 06810, Turkey

Abstract

In this study, the initial aim is to identify prospective teachers' beliefs on 'what democracy is' as a phenomenon they experience in Turkish society. Secondly, it is aimed to define how these pre-service teachers describe the features of democratic education at a school environment. To this end, the participants declared written data on their beliefs concerning the definition of democracy and the description of democratic education at schools. According to the findings, the future teachers identify that there exists 'the problem of democracy' in Turkey, and democratic schooling requires the participation of both students and teachers in the decision-making process, which has not yet to be substantiated in schools.
© 2010 Elsevier Ltd. Open access under CC BY-NC-ND license.

Keywords: Democracy; democratic education; prospective teachers; belief.

1. Introduction

The minimal definition of democracy involves a form of government by consent, and that is corroborated by civic and political policies agreed via open debate and consultation rather than by dogma or force (Carr, 2003; cited in Deuchar, 2009). The government, as a group of political representatives, enables the participation of all citizens who have the right to vote as equals, regardless of gender, ethnicity, language, religion etc. (Biseth, 2008). As cited in Shechtman (2002), Kelly (1994) and Greene (1988) summarize the ethical principles of democracy in three main concepts which are freedom, equality and justice. To Hay (2006), real democracy is the liberal representative government under law, accepting open disagreement, demanding accountability and maintained by a political culture. Besides, in a nutshell, democracy is a society ruled by and for the people (Cummins, 2000).

It might be presupposed that the idea of democratic school should also be based upon the same traits. The idea of 'democratic school' has first brought forward by John Dewey. To Dewey, in a democratic society, regardless of any criteria, divisions between groups are to be minimized while the shared values, meanings and goals are to be maximized (Soltis, 1994). Dewey (1916) also emphasizes that the school is a microcosm of the type of society that

* H. Sezgi Saraç-Süzer. Tel.: +90-312-234-1010
E-mail address: hsarac@baskent.edu.tr

is desired, which leads to the idea that a democratic school is the prerequisite of a democratic society. In order to achieve and maintain democracy at school, the professional and autonomous role of the teachers is supposed to be radically changed from its traditional style (Dworkin, Saha & Hill, 2003). As suggested by Dewey, in a democratic school, students determine not only the learning content but also the learning environment and all instructional processes. Therefore, any democratic school environment requires a foundation of organization through which democratic voice of students and teachers are shared while making decisions that affect them (Carnoy and Levin, 1985; Goodlad, 1996; Tedford 1996, Sarason, 1996, Kurtines, Berman, Ittel and Williamson, 1995).

In order to achieve the organization of democratic participation at schools, Deuchar (2009) suggests three vehicles: the election of student councils, creation of democratic classrooms and the discussion of controversial issues that are of interest to the students. Deuchar also emphasizes that these three vehicles are supposed to be inter-related so as to provide a model of democratic practice at school. On the other hand, Camicia (2009: 137) brings together three concepts upon which deliberate democracy is based: inclusion, legitimacy, and public decision making about the public interest. In order to evaluate the range of choices provided to students in the curriculum and teaching materials, Camicia (2009) also suggests a framework representing the civic and cultural dimensions of choice offered. In another study, Knight and Pearl (2000) present seven attributes of democracy that are: (1) the determination of important knowledge; (2) the nature of educational authority; (3) the ordering and inclusiveness of membership; (4) the definition and availability of rights; (5) the nature of participation in decisions that affect one's life; and (6) equality (7) an optimal learning environment (p.198).

Nevertheless, the commitment of teachers to democratic education is a prerequisite for achieving democracy in school and society (Goodlad, 1996). So, the core of concern ought to be how the teachers, especially the prospective teachers define and conceptualize the idea of democracy and democratic education. Teachers' values, beliefs and emotions play a crucial role whenever teachers need to make decisions, act and reflect on different purposes (Zembylas; 2005). Beliefs have the power of effecting practitioners' perceptions, judgements and pedagogical knowledge and theories (Lombaerts, De Backer, Engels, 2009; Errington, 2004; Ertmer, 2005; Stuart and Thurlow, 2000). Hence, how practitioners perceive, define and believe concerning 'democracy' and 'democratic school' have an impact on how democracy is and will be put into action in real settings.

1.1. Aim

In this study, the initial aim is to identify prospective teachers' beliefs on 'what democracy is' as a phenomenon they experience in the society they live. Secondly, it is also aimed to define how pre-service teachers describe the features of democratic education at a school environment. To this end, the participants declared written data on their beliefs concerning the definition of democracy and the description of democratic education at schools.

2. Method

In order to elicit introspective data on the participants' beliefs, an ethnographic data collection procedure was designed with two main complementary themes that were 'defining democracy' and 'describing an ideal school in terms of democracy'. The subjects for the study were fifty-two (N=52) pre-service teachers of English having education at a university in Turkey. The participants' names were kept anonymous in the study. The research data was collected in written form with the presupposition that first person narrative describes each individual's 'actions', 'experiences' and 'beliefs' (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). During the data collection procedure, it was preferred that the participants declare beliefs in their native tongue which was Turkish. Later, the collected data was analyzed via theme coding system. In order to check the reconstruction of participants' emic perspective reflected in the findings, member-checking was preferred by the researchers. Hence, both the deductions from the data and the translations of the texts were reviewed with the involvement of participants.

3. Findings

The first set of findings from the data is on how the pre-service teachers define the term democracy. The participants highlighted three main features of democracy in their definitions; freedom, equality and justice. On the

other hand, within the definitions provided, there exists another set of data which is on the problems of democracy in Turkey.

3.1. On Definition of Democracy

3.1. 1. Freedom: Of Thought, Choice and Expression

The findings from the collected data indicate that the participants highlight three main features of democracy which are freedom, equality and justice. The identification of these three themes out of the qualitative data seems to be so relevant that it might ostensibly be regarded ordinary. Nevertheless, when the qualitative data turned into numerical input, it is seen that among these three features only one outnumbers the others, which is freedom. The feature 'freedom' is mentioned by the majority of participants (N=42). Similarly, the participants detail this feature by identifying three main subcategories; 'freedom of thought', 'freedom of choice' and 'freedom of expression'. Some of the elaborations on 'freedom of thought' are as follows:

> "It is each and every human being's right to speak up her thoughts."
> "No one can be judged because of her or his thoughts, preferences or life styles."
> "Democracy requires providing everyone equal rights to speak up their thoughts."
> "Democracy is to provide opportunity for everyone to speak up their minds."

Furthermore, the freedom of thought is mentioned by the participants (N=22) with the stipulation that people cannot be discriminated unfairly against or on the grounds of gender, cultural background, ethnic background or socio-economic class. The state is indicated to be responsible for the assurance that the thoughts of indigenous citizens are not blatantly ignored but properly appreciated, valued and taken into consideration (N=9). Moreover, for the maintenance of democracy in society, the state is considered to be highly responsible for including educational goals in the national curricula to foster democratic world view among youngsters (N=5).

The participants elaborated further on freedom as pertaining into democracy with the feature: 'freedom of choice' (N=21). "Democracy is to choose among. Unless we are provided with a variety in the representation of different views and aspects, our choice will not be what we want" states a pre-service teacher. Therefore, 'freedom of choice' indicated by 21 participants is to be provided with a substantial range of differing viewpoints. "Everyone's thoughts are different. No one is supposed to accept one another's views or perspectives. I do not have to fit in others' shoes. I should see and select my choice among others" states a participant.

These two features of freedom is not found to be adequate by the pre-service teachers; provided that, 'freedom of expression' (N=32) is not extended. A participant indicates that "people should not be suffering oppression in the society they live because of other individuals or in the state they live because of politics. We should all be free to express our thoughts both in private and in public". On the other hand, "unilateral media" is designated by the participants (N=14) to be restricting freedom of expression in Turkish society.

3.1.2. Equality

Democracy was identified firstly with freedom and secondly with equality by the participants (N=40) taken part in the data collection procedure. Within the data, equality is expatiated with the right to benefit from facilities provided by the state without any discrimination or favoritism of race, social class, political views or economic status. "It is either -not to have any privileges- or -to be privileged altogether-" says a participant. Another participant states, "It is to be equal in all terms and conditions all the time".

3.1.3. Justice

The last issue that was identified with democracy was 'justice' by 28 participants. Within the data, justice is put forward with three main codes which are 'economic', 'social' and 'judicial' justice. Besides, the terms 'rights' and 'justice' are observed to be used interchangeably by the participants. "In order for the administration to be just, it is a must to be respectful for human rights of citizens" indicates a participant. Another participant states that "democracy is to provide justice and peace in the society which is the right of being a citizen". In addition, it is highlighted that democracy is a human right that we all gain from birth.

3.2. On Problems of Democracy

While defining what democracy is, the participants also mentioned the problems they witnessed in relation to democracy as experienced in Turkey. This finding was identified with the theme that "the winner of elections holds the ultimate power". AKP (Justice and Development Party), the one in power as of now, is criticized to be the absolute power following the general elections. "AKP administration does whatever it likes. We have got no will over the decisions taken" states a participant. Another participant indicates that "AKP administration emphasizes all the time that they are in power thanks to the elections and democracy but unfortunately I see that people are being punished by the power they elected democratically". As stated by another participant, "democracy should not be the governance once in power it overlooks and ignores all the other people that are opposing and criticizing the administration's views and deeds".

3.3. On Democratic Education

The participants' beliefs on democratic education were categorized in two main themes. The first one is that 'students and teachers should not be excluded from the administration of schooling' (N=39). The theme was constructed with a negative statement as the majority of participants suggesting this theme (N=28) indicated that students and teachers were excluded from the decision-taking mechanisms at schools in Turkey. As indicated by a participant, "students and teachers are expected to obey the system of schooling, instead of criticizing, developing or contributing to it".

The second most frequent statement is on the 'equality' of students (N=24) in a classroom and school setting. "A democratic school is a bias-free school that is not prejudiced about students' thoughts, attitudes or choices" states a participant. Half of the participants mentioning the importance of 'equality at school' (N=12) indicated that democratic education can be identified with secular schooling. Another participant emphasizes that "democratic school should be free from all the political or religious biases, which is only possible via achieving secularism at schools".

4. Conclusion

The prospective teachers participated in this study highlighted two main and prominent identifications. The former is that the government holds the ultimate power over people, which is a problem of democracy in Turkey. Stanovcic (2006) emphasizes that Ancient Greek philosophers already recognized this issue as a wrong form of government since the majority disregards the others by following only their own interests. Besides, Locke (1960, 11: 96), one of the theoreticians of modern democracy, emphasized the same problem with 'the principle of the rule of majority' which was elaborated as "when any number of Men have so consented to make one Community or Government, they are thereby presently incorporated, and make one Body Politick, wherein the Majority have a Right to act and conclude the rest." Additionally, Kuçuradi (1998) identifies the phenomenon with the term 'the problem of democracy' and indicates that especially in developing countries, democratization is limited to multi-party elections only and the political parties regard democracy as the power to exercise anything they want.

The second striking identification is that the foremost feature required for democratic schooling is the participation of both students and teachers in the decision-making process, and this has not yet to be substantiated in schools. As it is stated by Turan (2000) on democratic education, the Turkish state unfortunately failed to understand the importance of participatory democracy in decision making process. As a complementary finding on democratic education at the university level, Arıkan, Yalvaç and Easley (2008) found that there is unfortunately a negative correlation between the ranks of the academics and their views and applications of the principles of democracy and human rights issues into their teaching processes and learning environments. Nevertheless, it is the 'democratic' teachers' responsibility to teach rights via both analyzing and practicing them in the educational setting (Knight & Pearl, 2000). Hence, it can be concluded that governments, instructors, administration and faculty members with democratic and human rights ideals can achieve democracy as an 'attainable goal' via applications of participatory decision making procedures.

References

Arıkan, A., Yalvaç, B., & Easley, J. (2008). *Curriculum for cultuvating democracy: Perspectives of Turkish faculty on democracy and human rights*, Paper presentation at AERA meeting, New York City: April, 2008.

Biseth, H. (2009). Multilingualism and education for democracy. *International Review of Education.* 55: 5-20.

Bogdan, R. C. and Biklen, S. K. (1992). *Qualitative Research forEducation: An Introduction to Theory and Methods.* (2nd ed.). Needham Heights, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon.

Camicia, S.P. (2009). Identifying soft democratic education: Uncovering the range of civic and cultural choices in instructional materials. *The Social Studies*. May/June, 136-142.

Carr, D. (2003). Democracy and citizenship, in J. Crowther, I. Martin & M. Shaw (Eds.) Renewing   Democracy in Scotland: An Educational Sourcebook. Leicester, NIACE, 28-31.

Carnoy, M. and Levin, H.M. (1985). *Schooling and Work in the Democratic State.* Stanford: Stanford University Press. Cohen, J. (1989). Deliberation and democratic legitimacy. In *The Good Polity: Normative Analysis of the state.* (ed.). A. Hamlin and P. Pettit, 17/47. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, Power and Pedagogy. Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Goodlad, J. I. (1996). Democracy, education, and community, in: R. SODER (ed.) *Democracy, Education, and the School*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, CA.

Deuchar, R. (2009). Seen and heard, and then not heard: Scottish pupils' experience of democratic educational practice during the transition from primary to secondary school. *Oxford Review of Education,* 35:1, 23-40.

Dewey, J (1916). *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York, Macmillan.

Dworkin, A.G., Saha, L.J. And Hill, A.N. (2003). Teacher burnout and perceptions of a democratic school environment. *International Education Journal*. 4: 2, 108-120.

Hay, W.A. (2006). What is democracy?: Liberal institutions and stability in changing societies. *Orbis*. 50:1, 133-151.

Knight, T. & Pearl, A. (2000). Democratic education and critical pedagogy. *The Urban Review*. 33:3, 197-226.

Kuçuradi, İ. (1998). Yirmibirinci yüzyıl eşiginde demokrasi kavramı ve sorunları. *Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi, Cumhuriyetimizin 75. Yılı Özel Sayısı*, Ankara, 21/27.

Kurtines, W.M., Berman, S.L., Ittel, A., & Williamson, S. (1995). Moral development: A co-constructivist perspective. In W.M. Kurtiness & J.L. Gerwitz (eds.) *Moral Development: An Introduction* (pp.337-376). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Sarason, S.B. (1996). Revisiting the Culture of the School and the Problem of Change. NY: Teachers College Press.

Soltis, J. (1994). Dewey, pragmatism, and education. In Husen, T. and Postlethwaite, T.N. (eds.) *International Encyclopedia of Education* (Second Edition), Oxford, Pergamon Press, 1520-1524.

Stanovcic, V. (2006). Democracy an the rule of law. *Annals of the Faculty of Law in Belgrade, International Edition*. 1: 49-67.

Tedford, H. (1996). *Transforming Schools through Collaborative Leadership*. London: The Falmer Press.

Turan, S. (2000). John Dewey's report of 1924 and his recommendations on the Turkish educational system revisited. *History of Education*, 29:6, 543-555.