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Democratic Values in Education: A Theoretical Examination of Ukrainian Children and Youth in Polish Schools Post-February 2022

[Wartości demokratyczne w edukacji: analiza sytuacji ukraińskich dzieci i młodzieży w polskich szkołach po lutym 2022 r.]

Streszczenie: Masowy napływ ludności ukraińskiej do Polski po 24 lutym 2022 r. postawił przed instytucjami edukacyjnymi bezprecedensowe wyzwania. W niniejszym artykule autorzy podjęli rozważania, w jaki sposób wartości demokratyczne mogą zostać włączone do polskiego systemu edukacji w celu wspierania wzajemnego zrozumienia kulturowego, zaangażowania obywatelskiego i integracji społecznej. Kluczowe koncepcje, takie jak wartości demokratyczne i antydemokratyczne, obywatelstwo, zaangażowanie, wolność i edukacja na rzecz pokoju i inne są analizowane w celu spojrzenia na te kwestie z perspektywy globalnej. Autorzy podkreślają również potrzebę badań empirycznych w celu dalszej walidacji i udoskonalenia przedstawionych tu ram teoretycznych, biorąc pod uwagę wyjątkowy i ewoluujący krajobraz społeczno-kulturowy polskich szkół.

Summary: The massive influx of Ukrainian people into Poland after February 24, 2022, has posed unprecedented challenges and opportunities for educational institutions. This article aims to lay the theoretical foundation for understanding how democratic values can be integrated into the Polish educational system to foster mutual cultural understanding, civic engagement, and social inclusion. Key concepts

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such as Democratic vs. Anti-democratic Values, Citizenship, Involvement, Freedom and Education for Peace, and others are analyzed to offer a comprehensive perspective. The article also underscores the need for empirical studies to further validate and refine these theoretical frameworks, given the unique and evolving socio-cultural landscape of Polish schools today.

Introduction

The unprecedented events following February 24, 2022, have led to a massive inflow of Ukrainian people into Poland, a phenomenon that has unexpectedly involved both spontaneous social movement of people organising reception of Ukrainian refugees, and much slower institutional reactions. The school, understood as a social institution, was somewhat in-between. Getting involved in the social movement provoked often by the parents, the school had also to confront many institutional constraints of the educational system. The refugees in vast majority were women, mostly with children. Soon later, it became clear that the children need schooling, while very few schools in Poland had experience in admitting migrating children and youth and working in a multicultural ambiance (Popyk, Pustułka, Trąbka, 2019; Popyk, 2021).

There is a number of empirical analyses devoted to the large presence of Ukrainian migrants in Poland (Sobestjańska, Sopińska, Wojdat, 2022; Hordecki, Trosiak, 2023; Tędziagolska, Walczak, Wielecki, 2023; Popyk, 2023; Jarosz, Klaus, 2023), among them many are focused on children and youth, however, there is still a need for a quiet theoretical rethinking of educating young people in a new social context. In Poland, this new context includes important presence of Ukrainian children and youth in schools, in some of them exceeding 20 percent of all students. In Ukraine, one third of students practice remote schooling, while many of those going to school on 'regular' bases had experienced forced migration provoked by war.

The primary objective of this theoretical exploration is to rigorously engage with the idea of democratic values in the context of education, particularly in the socio-political landscape molded by the influx of Ukrainian children and youth in Polish schools, as well as migrating students, both domestically and internationally, in Ukrainian schools.

While many studies have investigated democratic education, few have delved into how these democratic ideals manifest in situations characterized by sudden and large-scale demographic change in a wartime. This theoretical article will not only dissect the principles of democratic values in a general educational setting but also apply this understanding to the specific scenario that Polish and Ukrainian schools find themselves in today.

We argue that democratic values may manifest in various ways. This paper is predicated on the importance of daily interactions and behaviors rather than formal institutional structures as markers of democratic values in education. By focusing on the granular aspects of democratic values as experienced and practiced by individuals – both Ukrainian and Polish – in everyday schooling life, we aim to contribute a nuanced analysis that goes beyond policy discourse.

However, an international tendency of democratic 'backsliding' proves to consider democratic ambiance of schooling as important. We live dramatic circumstances of the political confrontation between two contradicting political tendencies: towards authoritarian regimes versus democratization. These two tendencies are present all over the world, including 'old' democracies (The Global State of Democracy, 2019; 2022; Democracy Report, 2023). This confrontation is especially important in the wartime provoked by Russian aggression. The presence of democratic values in daily relations at schools, or their shortage, contributes to this ongoing confrontation. We follow the idea that the eventual examination of the real social processes needs careful empirical studies. However, in this paper we engage in theoretical elaboration of plausible dimensions of democratic values in schools. There is a paucity of research on how democratic values are being influenced, integrated, or compromised. While democratic principles like dignity, freedom, and citizenship are foundational to educational discourse, their operationalization in a newly multicultural setting remains inadequately theorized. Moreover, the sociocultural challenges exacerbated by the war- such as anomia, inequality, and distrust-make the study of democratic values in education all the more pertinent.

Literature Review

The current scholarly landscape on the topic of democratic values in education is replete with nuanced and often contrasting perspectives. The overarching narrative revolves around a set of key concerns: the role of market strategies, the strategies employed by teachers, the influence of right-wing populism, and the evolving nature of citizenship education.

Haydon (1993) asserts that «a democratic society requires a degree of consensus on values». He cautions against a rigid, predetermined approach to values education, stating that "the transmission of predetermined values can itself be undemocratic." This view echoes the more recent perspective of Biesta (2011), who argues against a prescriptive understanding of what constitutes a good citizen. Biesta introduces "the figure of the ignorant citizen", suggesting that citizenship is an evolving concept, not based on static, predetermined values.

Engel (2000) criticizes the modern educational landscape by stating, «Those making decisions about education today argue that market strategies promote democratic educational reform when really they promote market reform of education». Engel's view underscores the tension between economic imperatives and democratic ideals, positing that market-driven reforms can subvert the true essence of democratic education.

Giroux and Bosio (2021) discuss the different pedagogical strategies employed by teachers, noting that «teachers engaged in four learning strategies: contribution learning strategies, enrichment learning strategies, transformation learning strategies, and problem-based learning». These strategies provide a pedagogical framework that could be integral to cultivating democratic values. Interestingly, Giroux & Emiliano urge us to "connect critical ideas, traditions, disciplines, and values to the public realm of everyday life". Thus, a democratic education cannot be confined to the classroom but extended to everyday experiences.

Zembylas (2020) observes, „it is important for educators in democratic education to understand how the rise of right-wing populism in Europe, the United States, and around the world can never be viewed apart from the affective investments of populist leaders and their supporters to essentialist ideological visions of nationalism, racism, sexism, and xenophobia". Zembylas's point directly challenges educational systems to adapt and counter the growing waves of anti-democratic ideologies. He also posits the need for "an affirmative critique […] to endorse and disseminate alternative concepts and affective practices such as equality, love, and solidarity", highlighting the need for active counter-narratives within democratic education.

While Engel questions the market-driven approaches, Giroux and his collaborators focus more on pedagogical imperatives for nurturing democratic values. Zembylas, in contrast, dives into the socio-political factors that could influence the cultivation of such values, advocating for counter-narratives to right-wing ideologies. Haydon and Biesta focus on the philosophical underpinnings of what democratic values and citizenship education should entail. Haydon argues for a generational interpretation

of democratic values, while Biesta questions the very idea of defining what a 'good citizen' is.

In summary, the reviewed literature underscores the multi-faceted and complex nature of integrating democratic values into educational settings, highlighting the need for approaches that are adaptive, critically reflective, and sensitive to both socio-political realities and evolving interpretations of citizenship in embattled Ukraine (Oleksiyenko, Terepyshchyi, 2023).

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this article centers around the juxtaposition of democratic values and anti-democratic values, both critical concepts that serve as the bedrock of our exploration. To effectively operationalize these terms within the educational context, it is essential to first lay down their conceptual scaffolding.

Democratic values can be understood as the foundational principles that guide the operations and social contracts within a democratic society. These encompass concepts like freedom, equality, dignity, and justice. In the realm of education, these values aim to create an environment where students are free to express their opinions, value diverse viewpoints, and contribute to decision-making processes. Specific components of democratic values in education might include freedom of expression, which allows individuals to voice their thoughts openly and without fear; inclusion and equality, which mandate providing equal opportunities to all regardless of their background or beliefs; dignity and respect, fostering an atmosphere where each individual's worth is acknowledged; and active participation and engagement which is crucial to a learning process.

Conversely, anti-democratic values are principles or beliefs that erode the democratic architecture of a society. These might include authoritarianism, exclusion, discrimination, and suppression of individual freedoms. Within an educational setting, these anti-democratic values manifest as authoritarian tendencies, where a top-down transmission of knowledge assumes little contributions of students. There might also be suppression of free expression, where students and faculty are limited in their ability to question, critique, or engage in critical thinking. Exclusion and inequality may show up as restrictions on access to educational resources or opportunities based on socio-economic factors, race, or nationality. Divisiveness may further manifest in the form of ideologies that create rifts based on various social markers like religion or ethnicity, similar story was described in Northern Ireland (Mitchell, 2017).

The relationship between democratic and anti-democratic values takes on additional layers of complexity in a multicultural educational setting, such as that created by the recent influx of Ukrainian children and youth into Polish schools. Such environments can either amplify democratic values by encouraging openness, inclusion, and cultural exchange, or alternatively, they may magnify anti-democratic tendencies, especially if approached through lenses of exclusion or discrimination, as Philips described it for the International Students in South Africa (Philips, 2021).

This theoretical framework involves several constructs for evaluating these values in practice (Robert, Parris, Leiserowitz, 2005). Firstly, it is the idea of moral grounding, wherein both democratic and anti-democratic values need a moral basis to distinguish what enhances versus inhibits democratic ethos. Secondly, the notion of balancing collective well-being with individual autonomy is a crucial axis that guides the democratic nature of any educational policy or practice. Lastly, we consider the difference between instrumental rationality, which focuses on the efficiency and effectiveness of educational practices but often neglects dialogic engagement of students, which builds long lasting results (Terepyshchyi, Kostenko, 2021; Terepyshchyi, Kostenko, 2022).

Thus, by critically examining these conceptual dimensions, we can establish a theoretical foundation that helps us understand how democratic and anti-democratic tendencies manifest, clash, and interact in educational settings that have been specifically altered by migrations (Włoch, 2013). This conceptual framework serves as the lens through which we can navigate the complexities of incorporating democratic values into the evolving educational landscape.

Freedom of Speech in Education: What Could This Theoretically Mean?

The concept of «Freedom of Speech» is enshrined in democratic ethos as a fundamental right that allows for the expression of opinions without fear of retaliation or censorship (Rodriguez, 2021). Yet, its application within educational settings brings with it a set of unique challenges and opportunities. Theoretically, the notion of freedom of speech in education can be a multifaceted issue, encompassing both individual and collective dimensions, each with its ethical, pedagogical, and social implications.

From an ethical standpoint, freedom of speech in education can signify a commitment to fostering an environment that respects individual autonomy, cognitive liberty, and moral agency. In such an atmosphere, students and

educators alike are able to freely express their viewpoints, even if they diverge from mainstream or institutional perspectives. However, this freedom is not absolute and must be balanced with other ethical imperatives such as respect for others, fairness, and the absence of harm.

Pedagogically, freedom of speech is intertwined with the notions of critical thinking, intellectual diversity, and active learning (Ortner, 2021). The right to speak freely should theoretically enable an educational model that moves away from rote memorization and authoritarian teaching styles toward a more dialogic, participatory form of education. It provides the intellectual space for students and teachers to challenge prevailing norms, question assumptions, and introduce alternative ideas, thereby enriching the educational experience for all participants.

From a social perspective, freedom of speech in education has the potential to foster democratic citizenship by encouraging active participation in decision-making. It also allows for the expression of minority viewpoints, thereby promoting social justice and challenging existing power dynamics. But herein also lies its potential drawback: irresponsible use of this freedom could theoretically lead to discord, harassment, or the propagation of harmful content (Banko, MacKeen, Ray, 2020). Theoretically, an unregulated students' expression at school embodies a tension between individual liberty and social ties (Everhart, 2023). While it provides the grounds for dissent, disagreement, and diversity of thought, it also requires the cultivation of listening skills, empathy, and mutual respect. In this sense, freedom of speech can be both a source of conflict and a tool for conflict resolution, making it a dynamic, evolving concept that needs constant negotiation, reevaluation and institutional flexibility.

In summary, the theoretical understanding of freedom of speech in education is a complex, multi-layered construct that involves a range of ethical, pedagogical, social, and legal considerations. It can serve as both a catalyst for intellectual growth and democratic participation, and as a challenge that tests the boundaries of individual liberties, social norms, and institutional settings.

Dignity and Mental Security: Conceptualizing Their Role in Education

The concepts of dignity and mental security may not often be at the forefront of educational discourse, but they play a crucial role in shaping a conducive learning environment (Roth et al., 2022). Understanding these

constructs theoretically can offer nuanced perspectives on their signi-ficance in the educational setting.

Dignity is a multi-dimensional concept often linked to human worth, respect, and ethical treatment. Theoretically, dignity in education entails the recognition of each individual's intrinsic worth, regardless of their socio-economic status, ethnicity, gender, or any other characteristic. It involves creating an environment where all students and educators feel valued, respected, and treated fairly.

Ethically, dignity serves as a normative construct guiding the moral responsibilities of educators and institutional stakeholders. It can be seen as an ethical obligation to ensure that students are not subjected to humiliation, discrimination, or any form of degrading treatment.

Pedagogically, dignity can have a significant impact on learning outcomes (Yuliansih, Arafat, Wahidy, 2021). A sense of dignity often correlates with increased motivation, engagement, and a willingness to participate, thereby fostering a more effective learning environment. It also implies a pedagogy that goes beyond academic instruction to include moral and social lessons about respect, fairness, and empathy.

Mental security refers to a psychological state where individuals feel safe, secure, and free from undue stress or anxiety. Within an educational context, mental security can be viewed as a necessary precondition for effective learning.

Psychologically, mental security is linked to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, falling under the category of safety needs that must be met for an individual to reach higher levels of self-actualization and cognitive development. A state of mental security allows students to focus better, process information more effectively, and engage more fully in the educational experience.

Socially, mental security fosters a sense of belonging and community, crucial for the development of social skills and civic engagement. It forms the basis for trust, another vital component of a well-functioning educational system. In multicultural settings, such as schools with a significant number of Ukrainian children in Poland, mental security plays a pivotal role in facilitating integration and cross-cultural understanding (Shadiev, Sun, Huang, 2019).

Dignity and mental security are often intertwined, especially in educational settings. An environment that upholds the dignity of its members by default contributes to a sense of mental security. Conversely, a setting that ensures the mental well-being of its participants is likely to be one where dignity is respected.

However, the realization of these concepts is not without challenges. They often require proactive policies, ongoing education, and sometimes even

cultural shifts within educational institutions. For example, careful and open measures against bullying, comprehensive mental health support, and curricula that incorporate social-emotional learning are practical steps that can operationalize these theoretical constructs. In this way dignity and mental security serve as foundational pillars for a democratic climate of the school.

Democratic Decision Making: Respect for Common Decisions and Solutions

Democratic decision-making in a school setting is a complex process that, at its core, involves group participation, shared responsibility, and mutual respect among all stakeholders–students, educators, administrators, and sometimes parents and community members (Sinclair, Malen, 2021). The focus of this conceptual exploration is to understand the role of respect for common decisions and solutions. It serves as an ethical imperative and a social contract. Ethically, it necessitates that once a decision is made through democratic means, it is owed a certain level of respect and compliance, even by those who may disagree with it. Socially, this respect for common decisions reinforces trust and social cohesion, critical elements in any educational community. However, it is essential to recognize that respect for common decisions doesn't imply blind conformity or the suppression of dissent. In a healthy democratic setting, there is always room for critique, revision, and even resistance, as long as these are conducted through democratic channels and in a respectful manner.

Theoretically, democratic decision-making in education is based on principles such as openness, inclusion, deliberation, and collective governance (Šerek, Juhová, Lomičová, 2022). In this model, the decision-making process is transparent and inclusive, allowing various perspectives to be heard and considered. The ultimate decisions, arrived at collectively, gain their legitimacy not merely from the outcomes they produce but also from the fairness and inclusiveness of the process that leads to them.

From a pedagogical perspective, teaching respect for common decisions and solutions can be a vital part of civic education. It helps students understand the workings of democracy, the value of multiple perspectives, and the importance of compromise. In addition to imparting these democratic principles, this pedagogical approach can significantly influence students' interpersonal skills, such as active listening, empathy, and constructive debate, which are essential for effective democratic participation.

The primary challenge is to ensure that the democratic decision--making itself is genuinely fair. Inclusivity cannot be merely symbolic but

getting involved substantive contributions from all stakeholders. Moreover, it requires the institutional environment prepared to commit time and resources to facilitate this intricate process. Some practical strategies might include regular town-hall meetings, student-led committees, and transparent voting processes.

In multicultural settings like the influx of Ukrainian children into Polish schools, respect for common decisions takes on additional layers of complexity. Here, the democratic process must account for diverse cultural norms, languages, and expectations. Yet, it also offers a fertile ground for cross-cultural understanding and mutual respect, as well as beneficial environment for learning.

Theoretical Underpinnings of Solidarity, Trust, and Empathy in Schools

The notions of solidarity, trust, and empathy hold profound implications for educational institutions, especially in contexts experiencing significant demographic shifts like the recent inflow of Ukrainian children into Polish schools, there are almost 150,000 young people who fled the war in their home country (Tędziagolska, Walczak, Wielecki, 2023). This situation poses unique challenges and opportunities for educational sociologists and policymakers interested in fostering an inclusive and effective learning environment. The theoretical underpinnings of these concepts offer nuanced frameworks for understanding their roles within educational settings.

The concept of solidarity is often associated with unity, collective action, and mutual support (Torres, 2002). In educational settings, this can manifest as a shared commitment among students, educators, and administrators to an inclusive culture and academic excellence. Theories of social cohesion suggest that solidarity can serve as a form of «cultural capital», creating an environment where students from diverse backgrounds feel they belong and are supported (Friedkin, 2004).

Trust serves as the foundational bedrock upon which educational relationships are built. In sociological terms, trust can be described as a form of social capital that enables productive relationships and facilitates democratic decision-making. The concept of institutional trust, as delineated by sociological theorists, posits that for an institution like a school to function effectively, there must be a generalized belief in its competence, transparency, and fairness. Here, the governance structures, teacher-student relations, and even peer-to-peer interactions in schools would need to actively foster trust.

Empathy is not merely a psychological construct but also a sociological one that implicates group dynamics, interpersonal relationships, and even institutional policies. It entails the ability to understand and share the feelings of another, extending beyond cognitive understanding to include emotional resonance. Theories of emotional intelligence offer a framework for understanding how empathy operates in educational settings (Cabello, Fernández-Berrocal, 2015). Simultaneously, the pedagogy of social justice education extends this concept to collective identities, urging students to empathize not just with individuals but also with groups who are marginalized or facing injustice.

These three concepts are interconnected and often act synergistically. Solidarity can build trust, and both can facilitate empathy. Their inter-sectionality implies that an effective strategy to promote one of these values likely contributes to the strengthening of the others.

In the increasing migration settings of Polish schools, especially with Ukrainian or Belarus students, the significance of these theoretical under-pinnings becomes even more evident. Solidarity in such a context transcends national or ethnic identities to focus on shared human values and educational goals. Trust here encompasses also cultural sensitivity, empathy involves a cross-cultural understanding that acknowledges but looks beyond differences. Similarly, Ukrainian schools with migrating students, with their diversified experience of wartime, are exposed to solidarity, trust and empathy, as drivers to a valuable learning environment in extremely difficult circumstances.

Democratic Leadership: Theoretical Insights into Classroom and Administrative Practices

Democratic leadership in educational settings represents a model that is participative, transparent, and predicated on shared decision-making. Its theoretical roots are embedded in democratic theory, leadership studies, and the sociology of education, and its practice impacts both classroom and administrative dynamics (Woods, 2004). The framework of democratic leadership offers a conceptual guide for the functioning of schools in a manner consistent with the principles of democratic governance, social justice, and educational excellence.

Democratic leadership is not a one-size-fits-all model but a flexible construct built on core principles like inclusivity, accountability, and collaboration. Democratic leaders act as facilitators rather than authoritative figures, encouraging engagement, debate, and shared responsibility

(Mazurkiewicz, 2012). Theories of distributed leadership provide a lens through which democratic leadership can be viewed. In this approach, leadership responsibilities are spread across various individuals and teams, not centralized in a single figure.

In the classroom, democratic leadership translates to pedagogical strategies that empower students to take an active role in their learning journey. The teacher assumes the role of a guide or a facilitator, encouraging critical thinking, open dialogue, and peer collaboration. The theories of dialogic learning shed light on how democratic leadership can manifest at the classroom level. These theories emphasize the need for open dialogue between students and teachers and among the students themselves. The aim is not just the transmission of knowledge but the co-creation of understanding and skills, thereby promoting student autonomy (Hausner et al., 2020).

Democratic leadership in administration benefits from stakeholder theory, which postulates that all those impacted by an organization have a stake in its performance and decision-making processes (Parmar et al., 2010). This would mean involving not just teachers and administrators but also students, parents, and community members in policy formulation and review, what in practice may by quite challenging. However, democratic leadership in educational settings represents a transformative shift from traditional top-down models to more egalitarian, participative frameworks. Its theoretical underpinnings offer a nuanced understanding of how such a leadership models can be implemented both in classrooms and school community. By embracing the principles of democratic governance, schools not only improve their internal dynamics but also serve as vital training grounds for democratic citizenship.

Challenges and Limitations

The integration of democratic values into educational settings is a worthy but complex endeavor, particularly in the context of migration forced by war (Adams, Kivlighan 2019). While the theoretical underpinnings offer optimistic avenues for inclusion, dialogue, and social cohesion, there are inherent challenges and limitations to be acknowledged.

The first challenge resides in the complexity of multicultural identity. Democratic values, often rooted in Western liberal traditions, may not always be universally accepted or understood across diverse cultural landscapes. The notion of what constitutes «democratic behavior» or «good citizenship» could vary, leading to potential misunderstandings and conflicts.

This situation brings us to the debate between cultural relativism and universalism in democratic theory. While the former argues for understanding values in the context of specific cultures, the latter posits that some values are universally applicable. Striking a balance between these views in a multicultural educational setting is challenging.

Another challenge is the existing social stratification and inequalities that often get reproduced in educational settings. Despite a democratic ethos, schools can inadvertently perpetuate social hierarchies, disadvantaging students from marginalized backgrounds, such as migrants or refugees. The theoretical framework of intersectionality helps us understand that individuals often belong to multiple marginalized categories simultaneously (e.g., race, class, nationality). This makes the task of achieving democratic equality even more complex.

In the face of war and forced migration, many students may experience trauma and psychological distress, which can create significant barriers to their active participation in democratic processes. Theories in educational psychology suggest that such trauma can have long-lasting impacts on learning and social integration. While resilience theory offers some insights into overcoming trauma, its practical application in an emotionally charged setting is far from straightforward.

Conclusion

The war and forced migration often seed distrust and social fragmentation. A possible lack of social cohesion presents a direct challenge to the long lasting of a nation. Even if the cultivation of democratic values like: solidarity, trust, and empathy, or inclusive decision-making, or giving the voice to every student in their learning processes, seems difficult, it offers an important contribution to a larger game between authoritarian versus democratic developments. Social capital theory, which underlines the importance of community bonds, suggests that rebuilding social capital in such contexts requires concerted, long-term efforts at the institutional level. Theories of organizational behavior point to the limitations posed by institutional inertia making them resistant to quick, transformative changes (Luthans, Luthans, Luthans, 2021). However, acknowledging these issues is the first step in crafting responsive strategies. While theoretical frameworks provide valuable guidance, the complexity of real-world applications necessitates ongoing critical reflection, empirical analysis, and adaptive strategies. In order to make them more accurate, this paper proposes a reconsideration of the democratic values in school ambiance suggesting

their five dimensions. These are: a question of free expression in educational processes; the dignity and mental security of all their participants; the inclusive decision-making; building solidarity, trust and empathy; and democratic leadership. All of them, in our understanding, are focusing at the grass root level relationship as a fundamental aspect of learning.

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