Reflections on how education can be for democracy in the twenty-first century

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Reflections on how education can be for democracy in the twenty-first century

This paper is one of two that bring together a range of education scholars to consider how education might be for democracy in a time of complex challenges facing twenty-first century societies. In this paper, scholars from Australia, Japan and the United Kingdom consider how sites of formal and informal education can respond to multiple unfolding crises, including the COVID-19 global pandemic, catastrophic climate change and ecological collapse, political upheaval, and growing social and economic inequality. What emerges is a wide-ranging set of reflections that engage with these complexities and challenges in a considered and hopeful way.

Keywords: education for democracy; democratic institutions; social inequality; public education

Stewart Riddle, Amanda Heffernan and David Bright | When we invited several leading educational thinkers and scholar–activists to participate in a collaborative paper for our special issue on education, policy and democracy, we were delighted that so many were able to contribute. As such, we found ourselves with not one, but two collaborative papers in the making. This paper brings together key educational thinkers from Australia, Japan and the United Kingdom in a dialogue regarding the role of education in responding to the challenges and crises of the twenty-first century. The second paper presents a series of reflections from leading scholar–activists on provocations for democracy and education (see Apple et al., 2022). These papers are designed to be read in tandem to gain a sense of the scope of the provocations and propositions shared by contributors to this collaborative engagement in critical reflection on the challenges and opportunities for education and democracy.

There are many contemporary challenges facing democracy and education, including catastrophic climate change and ecological collapse, the COVID-19 global pandemic, political upheaval and social unrest, alongside widening inequality, increasing fear and hate. The pillars of liberal–democratic societies that appeared so firm in the latter years of the twentieth century—liberalism, capitalism, democracy—are fraying at the edges or unravelling entirely in many parts of the globe. This dialogue is one response to the increasing urgency for educators, leaders, policymakers and scholars to consider the ways in which education could be *for* democracy in times of great uncertainty and upheaval. We asked contributors to this paper to consider their responses in light of the following prompts:

(1) Given that we are living through a global pandemic, rising inequality and a climate crisis, what is the responsibility of education as a social institution to respond to these challenges?
(2) How can sites of formal and informal education, such as early childhood care settings, schools, universities and further education, be for democracy?
(3) What are the biggest challenges to democracy in the twenty-first century and what opportunities does education provide for democracy?

The responses shared in this paper cover a diverse range of issues and perspectives, and we have deliberately provided them without interruption nor comment because we suggest that the strength of such a paper is in the evocation of thought and the potentially productive set of tensions that arise for the reader.

We suggest that the reader take these responses within the broader context of this special issue, in tandem with the reflections offered in the companion piece, to help rethink and reframe the ways in which formal and informal sites of education could become places that foster a collective commitment to the common good, to a shared

understanding of what it means to live and thrive within communities that are sustainable and engaged in a desire for an inclusive and participatory public. Of course, we do not suggest that these pages hold all the answers to the complex array of problems facing democratic societies, but rather that they act as a starting point for dialogue and reflection, from which we might work together to build more democratic futures.

Bob Lingard | Education *as, for, in* democracy indicates multiple, potential, actual and desirable relationships between education and democracy. The first, education as democracy, is Dewey's notion that schools in democracies should function in democratic ways. There are multiple potential aspects to this construction: including inter alia students' democratic involvement in curriculum in action, pedagogical practices and in decision-making in schools at various levels, the participatory decision-making role of teachers across a broad range of school activities, as well as school-community and community–school relations and responsibilities (see Lingard, Baroutsis and Sellar, 2021). On the latter, democratic accountability would demand interactive two-way school-community conversations about desired outcomes and achievements, as well as new bottom-up relations between schools and systems. The bottom-up relations would complement and enhance current dominant top-down, test-based system-imposed accountability measures and provide opportunities for schools and their communities to demand from the system the resources needed in schools to achieve system-imposed accountability measures, as well as those constituted collaboratively by the school and its community; this is a demand for what have been called 'opportunity to learn standards' (Elmore and Fuhrman, 1995). Regarding students and the idea of schooling as democracy, this might be schooling enabling the prefigurative practices and

anticipations of future adult citizenship. This citizenship might be constructed as national or global. These constructions are about active citizenship now practised both inside and outside schooling; for example, the school student climate strike and protest, student parliaments in schools with real power and so on. Global citizenship in this framing must also be more than a marketing device for a school in a given schooling market, but rather is about developing in students a critical cosmopolitanism (Rizvi, 2009). The kind of citizenship being referenced here is an active, critical citizenship.

Education for democracy is about schools preparing young people to be active citizens in their future adult lives. This differs from schools as democracy and the practices of prefigurative citizenship. Education for democracy involves teaching about democracy and what the practices of democracy entail; for instance, teaching about the Constitution, the right to vote, human rights, rights and responsibilities of citizens, types of voting etc. This is about students becoming citizens in the future, while in contrast schooling as democracy is about students being citizens now.

Education in a democracy raises a separate set of questions concerning the actual nature of schooling and the ways it works or ought to work in democratic societies. This links to necessary considerations of the nature of the social structure, for example, level of structural inequality, in a given nation, and related opportunities through schooling. Schooling is about ensuring the society is one based on achievement not ascription; it is about ensuring all have opportunities to achieve. This raises the matter of a meritocracy, that is, every individual student, in a democracy must be afforded the opportunity to advance through education to their maximum benefit irrespective of their ascribed and background factors such as social class, ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality and disabilities.

As Dewey argued a long time ago, what every 'good parent' wants for their child through education is what must be provided to every child, if schooling and the society are actually to function in a democratic way. Connell some time ago now (1993) argued in a complementary fashion that any educational provision in a putative democracy that privileges one child over another is anti-democratic and sullies and degrades the education of all, including those who benefit from educational privileges. Specifically, Connell (1993, p. 15) noted, 'An education that privileges one child over another is giving the privileged child a corrupted education, even as it gives him or her a social or economic advantage'. For Connell, teaching and schooling are moral activities and as such are important for social justice and democracy. This means that policy for democratic schooling must be much more than simply about distributive justice, that is, who gets what; serious consideration must also be given to the what of education, which is the curriculum. She suggested further that socially just schooling and policy in a democracy should focus on the needs of the most disadvantaged through redistributed funding, staffing and the like. This was evident in the compensatory education programmes in the USA linked to President Johnson's 'war on poverty' and through the Whitlam government's Disadvantaged Schools Program in Australia from 1973–1996. These kinds of programmes have been eviscerated in the context of neoliberal policy frames broadly and in schooling, which simply responsibilise individuals for their achievements or otherwise, neglecting inequalities at home and in society. In some systems, Australia for example, funding also seems to function in a way to benefit further the already well-off, rather than functioning in a redistributive way, giving priority to choice over equality. Further, competition between schools in a quasi-market linked to school choice discourse advantages the already advantaged and thus functions in a non-democratic way.

Jill Blackmore | Many have argued that in a post-truth era and rising muscular authoritarianism, nationalism and isolationism that democracy (in all its culturally specific forms) is under threat. Others refer to a crisis in trust in key institutions of society and the failure of leaders—politicians, the press, big business, religious leaders, and the law—to take responsibility and act morally rather than their involvement, inaction or refusal to address systemic gender- and race-based violence and corruption. This loss of trust in democratic institutions is on the one hand evident in Australia with the social movements of Indigenous #Black Deaths in Custody and women's movement #EnoughisEnough against gender-based violence. On the other hand, the loss of trust is evident with the rise of moderate and extreme right-wing groups due to their sense of disenchantment with contemporary democratically elected governments in many Western nation-states. Some social groups feel disenfranchised and impacted by worsening economic conditions and more extreme elements are resistant to the changing social relations of gender, class and race. Democracy, some argue, is therefore under threat due to political polarisation.

At the same time, COVID-19 showed in Australia that the democratic infrastructure of governance and the welfare state does protect most of its citizens (but not refugees or international students). It also exposed gender inequality in the workplace and the detrimental impact of the gig economy made evident in universities where over 20 percent of a largely casualised workforce were considered expendable. Most Australian's willingly gave over some of their daily freedoms for the public good and were supportive of politicians and employers who put our collective health before 'the economy' during 2020-21. Health and wellbeing or social growth leads to economic growth and not vice versa. Academic experts were at the forefront of public

policy. However, COVID has diverted attention away from a creeping and underlying lack of government accountability and good governance. A federal government has increasingly infringed on the legal rights of whistle-blowers, journalists, academics and charity organisations who advocate for social justice. Academics similarly feel disenfranchised from decision-making and with reduced professional autonomy due to the dominance of corporate managerial and market practices in universities.

A conjuncture of events therefore challenges liberal democracies—economic and social inequality, climate change, gender-based violence, detrimental effects of social media and AI, lack of trust in government and increased privatisation of services in government and education. Australian governments have paradoxically disinvested in higher education and in the humanities and social science at a time when investment in research across all fields, as the pandemic indicated, is even more critical for the public benefit and for an inclusive, sustainable and equitable society. This suggests a crisis in relations between knowledge, the state and society and requires rethinking how universities are positioned.

The role of higher education is critical as the producer and legitimator of what counts as valued knowledge. Innovation in the public and political discourse in Australia is often equated to the natural sciences and technology, ignoring the importance of studying the humanities and social sciences for understanding 'the social glue' which holds societies together and provides enabling conditions for innovation. Academics continue to assert their role is not just to train graduates to be job ready in a context where workplaces are constantly changing but rather to develop their capacity to be critical professionals knowledgeable in their field and able to use their expertise to change unequal social relations of power. Already evident is advocacy for the public university with the emergence of collective activism among students, academics and the

National Tertiary Education Union with, for example, the recent formation of a loose coalition called Public Universities Australia.

For universities to fulfil their civic and public responsibilities to achieve and maintain a more sustainable, inclusive and equitable democracy there is a need to reform corporate governance of Australian universities, treat higher education as an investment and not a cost, promote and protect academic freedom, reinstitute academic voice through collegial approaches to university decision-making, articulate principles of professionalism in academic practice as well as provide high quality research to government and civil society. Academic's core work of teaching, researching and service and to act as a conscience and critic is integral to what makes universities distinctive and necessary in recognition that public universities have been historically central to democratic societies.

Debra Hayes | Rather than considering the responsibility of education as a social institution to respond to current challenges, I find it more useful to examine how is it responding, because it does, even when its responses go unnoticed and taken for granted. For example, during the global pandemic we have observed that: teachers are less likely to be blamed for students' underperformance or for the quality of their teaching to be targeted and criticised; the impact on student engagement and progress of inequitable distribution and access to resources is more widely recognised; and the importance and necessity of standardised measures of performance has weakened. In addition, the structural forms of educational institutions are, at least temporarily, redundant. For the most part, schools and universities are empty or under-utilised during periods of lockdown and more students are opting for distance learning, which is now more readily available. These responses have shown a tendency to be fleeting, and as

pandemic conditions abate, prior default modes of schooling re-form and re-establish. However, their contingency serves to reassure us they are not solid and are able to be transformed rapidly and completely under the right conditions.

The biggest challenges to democracy in the twenty-first century come from within democratic societies and stem from a weakening of democratic systems, including its electoral, judicial, and governing processes. Resisting democracy's seemingly inexorable slide towards precarity demands that educators engage in enhanced civility, as a pedagogical practice. The enemy is ignorance and its discontents, not the individuals who proselytise movements underpinned by falsehoods and fear. Open contest of ideas is pointless because truth has no substance, never has, and its meaning is now more rapidly determined and circulated via social and other forms of media. Educators must build relationships of trust with people and movements who are unable and perhaps unwilling to engage in examining evidence, and in distinguishing between beliefs and knowledge—a form of critical thinking that requires epistemological sensibilities. To engage in this form of resistance, educators need a metalanguage of reasoning that lays bare the weaknesses and inadequacies of ideas and arguments promoted anti-democratic movements. However, the success of this form of pedagogical practice will, as always, depend upon the quality of the relationships that educators establish. Clearly identifying the problem as ignorance is an important first step.

Anne Aly | Are strong, stable and effective institutions an adequate measure of democracy? There is no doubt that weak institutions are a primary roadblock for countries transitioning to democracy. Underdeveloped and inefficient institutions impede the progress of development programmes and hamper efforts to improve

governance. But are robust institutions enough? The current state of Australian politics has prompted some concerns that our democracy is, at very least, not all it could or should be. Australians, though proud of their liberal democracy, are increasingly frustrated with their political system. A poll by the Lowy Institute on Australian attitudes towards democracy taken in November 2020 revealed a concerning trend: 30 per cent of 18–29-year-olds believed a non-democratic system is preferable to a democratic one in some circumstances and 55 per cent believed democracy is preferable in all circumstances. Across all age groups, 22 per cent believed that a non-democratic system is preferable in some circumstances and 65 per cent believed that democracy is always preferable. These results suggest a worrying trend that younger Australians have a lower regard for democracy than the general population.

Australia is not alone. In Europe and the United States, satisfaction with democracy has been declining. Voter turnout has declined along with a decline in political party membership and a rise in electoral volatility. Fringe political parties and radical political personalities have eroded the traditional left/right cognition of ideological political relationships. Some argue that these indicators point to a state of dysfunction in democracy—variously termed a crisis of democracy or a democratic recession. Others argue that democracy is, by its nature, a state of tension that has, since its inception, been subject to concerns about its fragility and sustainability. In an international and domestic landscape where individual and non-state actors play an increasing role in international and domestic affairs, challenging the autonomy of the state, it is perhaps not surprising that anxieties about the strength of our democracy are expressed. One of the enduring strengths of democracies is their capacity to adapt and renew- particularly during crises like the current global pandemic, rising inequality, climate emergency. Thus, it is worthwhile asking not what challenges today's crises

pose for democracy in Australia, but also what opportunities they present for introducing novel paradigms that encourage and enable democratic participation and increasing trust in our democratic institutions.

For Australian democracy to grow out of the current challenges, it is not enough that our institutions are robust or effective. They also need to be based on democratic values and be enabled to play a significant role in the promotion and maintenance of democratic culture. This means that our institutions play a critical role in sustaining our democracy with the understanding that democracy is an ongoing project that requires constant adaptation and reform.

In 2016–17, the Museum of Australian Democracy and the Institute or Governance and Policy Analysis at the University of Canberra undertook a quantitative and qualitative analysis of democracy in Australia. According to their representative survey, Australians define 10 core democratic values: compulsory voting; social equality ('fair go'); free and fair elections; free press; freedom of speech and assembly; relatively free from corruption; representative government; rule of law; separation of powers and other checks and balances; and stable government. Though not expressly stated in this list, the power to affect change through political participation, underpins democratic values. The form that political participation takes is, or at least should be, beyond just compulsory voting. Citizens should be able to freely and equally contribute to their governance, not just at the ballot box and not just by writing to their local Member of Parliament or choosing to attend a legitimate protest like the Women's March for Justice. They should be able to participate through equal and fair access to our institutions. That is the true measure of democracy.

I am not the first to argue for education institutions as a vehicle for critical democracy. Most commonly this is expressed as the role education as a primary

socialising mechanism and for teaching young people about democratic principles and practices, though arguably learning about participatory democracy does not automatically guarantee one is able to participate. In 2007, The Council of Europe defined the democratic mission for higher education as:

> In keeping with the values of democratic and equitable societies, public authorities should ensure that higher education institutions, while exercising their autonomy, can meet society's multiple expectations and fulfil their various and equally important objectives, which include: preparation for sustainable employment; preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies; personal development; and the development and maintenance, through teaching, learning and research, of a broad, advanced knowledge base.

For the most part, our higher education institutions have fulfilled these roles. However, a worrying trend is emerging with increasing government interference effectively hampering the ability of universities and higher education providers to operate autonomously and meet these expectations. An example is the astonishing decision by the former Minister for Education, Senator Simon Birmingham, to veto 11 recommended Australian Research Council grants in the humanities. Progressive cuts to university funding have disproportionately impacted the humanities and sweeping reforms have increased the cost of humanities degrees exponentially in a bid to incentivise more students to undertake studies in sciences and technology. These measures effectively undermine the capacity of higher education institutions to meet the expectations of democratic society. They also exacerbate already existing inequalities by restricting access to education to those who can afford to pay for it.

Plunged into a pandemic of global proportions, Australia cannot afford to miss the opportunity presented to re-calibrate its democracy to meet the demands of a future that is less certain, less ordered and less secure. The decisions taken by government that

either weaken or strengthen our institutions have far reaching impacts for our entire society and the democratic principles that drive Australians' sense of identity, belonging and wellbeing. Education institutions, both formal and informal, should be at the forefront of democracy because they are critical gateways to political and civic participation.

Keita Takayama | As many scholars argue, modern education has been a central means through which humans learn to hyper-separate themselves from the surrounding biosphere upon which their survival relies (Bowers, 1993; Plumwood, 2002; Yano, 2000). Modern education has long endowed children with attitudes, skills and knowledge that objectify non-human creatures and environment, and in so doing severed their deep emotional and spiritual ties with the more-than-human worlds. Modern schools actively delegitimised localised animistic knowledges that would have invited children to transgress the human–nature dualism, while championing scientific knowledge as the only means for human 'progress.' As the sole possessors of reason, humans claimed themselves to be exceptional beings entitled to subordinate the whole biosphere to their needs. The same hierarchical logic, hyper-separating humans from nature, was applied to children, women and 'racial' minorities, who were constituted as close to nature, hence irrational, emotional and savages, respectively (Plumwood, 2002). Educational institutions relied upon this anthropocentric logic of differences to determine the educability of these 'others.'

In addition to disconnecting humans from the broader ecology, part of the goals of modern education has been to mould children into the self-governing, autonomous, and rational self. This was the ultimate goal of the Western Enlightenment cultural project. Emerging out of this tradition, modern, liberal–democratic societies necessitate

such strong individuals, and education has been the primary means of social reproduction where children are equipped with dispositions and skills required for democratic deliberation (Gutmann 1987). According to Bowers (1993), liberal education inherits 'the anti-tradition thinking of Enlightenment' (Bowers 1993, p. 86); it demands that individuals be removed from the 'dogma' of local traditions and myths, which, as Bowers (1993) argue, offer us wisdoms as to how to restore our embeddedness and emotional connections with non-human nature. By locating the locus of authority in individual self and her/his ability to reason, modern, liberal education effectively nullifies the regulatory functions of traditional knowledges on individuals. Recent studies have shown that liberal education, or child-centred pedagogy, is likely to promote atomised, bloated sense of self, or ontological individualism, which accounts for a range of social problems detrimental towards sustainable future (see Komatsu, Rappleye and Silova, 2021).

Jill Blackmore | Currently we have an issue as to who provides education—the state has been pulling back an outsourcing the role and education has been viewed as a positional good. Therefore, as teacher educators and also universities, we have to be aware of the importance of our role in educating professionals. There will be greater reliance on professional organisations and as individuals to hold the line about the role of education in producing the good society. This requires educating a high level of criticality in teachers and also critical professionalism in graduates—they not only have to meet professional standards often set outside the profession, but also contribute to the professional knowledge base (e.g., being involved in organisational structures outside their workplace) and be advocates for the profession.

Keita Takayama | Both the global pandemic and the climate crisis seem to offer a moment of deep reflection on our existence as humans on the planet Earth. History has shown that periodic emergences of deadly infectious diseases are part of human evolution. The last global outbreak was the Spanish flu about a century ago, infecting at least one third of the world population and killing more than 50 million people worldwide (Isoda, 2020). COVID-19 has turned out to be just as consequential, if not more. I see the pandemic as part of the biosphere dynamics whereby the dominating species, humans, are forced to confront their hubris in order for the whole ecological system to regain its balance. Likewise, the ongoing climate change is forcing us to question the very same human exceptionalism. The threats of overpowering hurricanes, bushfires, flooding and droughts leave us with no other option but to acknowledge our precariousness, our embeddedness with nature and change our ecologically destructive way of life.

What roles have education played in bringing humans to the brink of existential crisis? How has education helped us develop the sense of hubris that is only recently problematised? And how should education change so that humans learn to live in an ecologically balanced manner? These are the pressing questions that confront those of us who are involved in educating the future generations. The task is to turn the present crisis into a catalytic moment of change in education, while recognising that education is one of many—albeit arguably one of the most important—domains whereby changes must take place.

Deborah Youdell | Education has a fundamental responsibility to respond to the challenges of the pandemic, inequalities and climate crisis. Although, of course, the constraints on the extent to which education institutions can do this are key—and we are

returned to the long-standing question of whether education can change society (especially ones committed to free market liberalism and bound by the global flows that perpetuate these).

In the context of the pandemic, it is not yet evident whether/where/under what circumstances lockdown learning has led/is leading to a tightening of centralised control of education or (and?) spaces for creativity and autonomy, and whether either of these might have equalising potential. We are still seeing this unfold, but in schools in the UK, after the initial improvised responses from individual schools or school groups, we moved rapidly to centrally stated expectations being placed on provision *at the same time* as the government's now infamous examinations algorithm widened awarding gaps and penalised whole communities for past disadvantage—awards that were rapidly replaced with grades determined at *school level*. This is a profound shift in a system that has been dominated by centralised examinations and measurement for several decades. Terminal exams at age 16 and 18 have now been replaced by school (or 'centre-based') assessments for the second year running and it seems inevitable that the sector and government will return in a more profound way to the question of how best to measure and communicate learning and, importantly, manage entry to finite post-school and higher education opportunities.

This is not to naively imagine a return to coursework and creativity—the reach of data science, grade prediction and so in is deeply entrenched in the methodologies that schools have used to arrive at outcomes for their students. And still, it seems like a moment of possibility in which we may be able to build in more possibilities for pupils from less advantaged backgrounds to do well, as well as to return, again, to the enduring matter of what young people might do post-16 and post-18, what chances are available to whom, and what might be possible. In higher education in the UK the return to

school-level terminal assessment has seen substantial overall grade improvements that have been skewed towards the most advantaged students—so the access gaps in HE appears to be worsened, not improved, at a time when HEIs are under pressure (real or rhetorical?) to address the 'awarding gaps' that persist, especially in the most elite institutions. Coupled with mounting evidence of learning gaps resulting from lockdown learning that are marked by the usual demographic divides, it is clear there is a net negative impact of the pandemic on equity in education.

This seems to be stating the obvious—surely it was quite predictable that prolonged disruption to education in an already heavily stratified and unequal education (and social) landscape would exacerbate inequalities. But despite that predictability, it remains the case that education as a public good should be obliged to contribute to addressing, not exacerbating, these inequities.

Education has a fundamental responsibility to respond to climate crisis. This is both in terms of offering children and young people robust climate and sustainability education throughout their education careers, including education, which is accredited, and which will equip children and young people to live in and respond to conditions of climate crisis. This curricular responsibility should be allied by an operational responsibility on the part of education institutions to act now to cease and remove their climate damaging activities—from the fabric of buildings to provenance of the food consumed and the plates on which it is served, to every pencil and laptop on the premises. There is a pedagogical opportunity here to engage education institutions and their various stakeholders in thick democratic processes to map pathways to and achieve zero carbon. In my own university, sustainability, and the pathway to zero carbon has been made a key pillar of our strategic framework. While this could be dismissed as policy without punch, we are moving to ensure all students receive a meaningful, credit

bearing and specialist education on sustainability and climate crisis, while operationally we are looking across our activities and estate to intervene rapidly in our most emitting buildings, single use items, air travel and so on. Our students are demanding this action, and in a marketised higher education landscape, this might be the most powerful driver for change.

Bob Lingard | Regarding the desirable and necessary characteristics of schooling in a democracy, we need to understand (and effective policy needs to acknowledge) that the meritocratic functioning of schools and related social mobility purposes only work when there is a limit to the extent of inequality in the society generally (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). In that respect, as Thomas Piketty's (2014) work has unequivocally demonstrated, since the end of the post-war Keynesian policy era (1980s to the present), inequality has grown rapidly in all advanced economies. The sociologist, Mike Savage (2021), has written about the return of inequality to depict the broad character and effects of the neoliberal policy settlement that replaced Keynesianism. This growing inequality has been reflected as well in the strengthening of the achievement gap in schooling along social class lines globally (Chmielewski, 2019), and within nations; on the latter, in Australia the strengthening relationship between socioeconomic status and performance on the OECD's PISA since 2000, and the worryingly intransigent relationship between socioeconomic status and performance on standardised tests. Thus, any schooling policy that seeks to ensure that schooling works in a meritocratic, and thus democratic, fashion, must redistribute to schools and teachers serving disadvantaged communities, while also being complemented by broad policy frames that address and ameliorate deep, abiding and growing inequalities. Education policy alone cannot ensure that schools function in democratic and socially just ways.

While as suggested here growing inequalities limit the functioning of schools in a democracy, they also damage the broader functioning of democracy. Muller (2021) in a recent book on democracy has argued persuasively that growing inequality has created a two-fold 'secession' from democratic and civic life; the rich at the top who with draw from democratic life and privately meet all of their own needs, as social services have been weakened under the neoliberal, and the poor at the bottom, who are so affected by the ravages of poverty that they do not participate in democratic politics. As Muller also demonstrates, it is that situation in many contemporary democracies (particularly the USA and Europe which are his focus), that has also seen the rise of anti-democratic populism, the rise of post-truth and reasonably widespread scepticism about democracy. Thus, the level of inequality in a society is a central consideration in respect of its democratic or otherwise functioning.

Recently there has been a spate of influential books that offer criticisms of the meritocratic ideal (e.g., Markovitz, 2019; Sandel, 2020), while Wooldridge (2021) traces a history of the concept and seeks to defend it. While defending the concept, Wooldridge (2021, p. 17) agrees that these critics have got one thing right, 'that the meritocratic elite is in danger of hardening into an aristocracy which passes on its privileges to its children by investing heavily in education, and which, because of its sustained success, looks down on the rest of society'. There are a number of important riders here. The first is that in a democracy, irrespective of their educational achievements, there must be respect for all persons. Further, the criticisms of meritocracy must be situated in the context of growing inequality which limits opportunities and the play of talent and effort—merit as suggested by Michael Young who coined the concept of 'meritocracy' in his satire first published in 1958. Thus, for a society to be an actual functioning meritocracy, more equal social arrangements are

necessary. There is a way as well that neoliberal policy frames and a contemporary social Darwinism that responsibilise individuals precipitates an arrogance of the aristocracy of talent, limits the functioning of meritocracy and thus limits democracy.

Changes in the immigration policies of nations focused on high-skilled migrants related to a global war for talent have also challenged the possibilities for meritocratic nationalism and perhaps weakened the commitments of national citizens to limiting inequality and redistributing to the most disadvantaged in government schools (Brown and Tannock, 2009). There is also the related problem of the national middle classes withdrawing their support for comprehensive government schooling systems. We see here the need to rethink what social justice in and through schooling means in this global context (Fraser, 2013). Confronting inequality must be to the fore in this rethinking.

The current pandemic has demonstrated very starkly the growth in social inequalities. This has been particularly apparent in the move to online teaching. Schools in poor communities have become aware of the lack of connection and computer facilities in the homes of the poor. This has brought home quite starkly the necessity of redistributive funding to schools serving such communities and for schools to function in democratic ways. Post the pandemic perhaps will afford opportunities to address these matters, which will be necessary to ensure that schools function in democratic and socially just ways.

The climate crisis in this time of the Anthropocene has also raised very significant questions about the role of schools in addressing this global threat and related, ensuring the future of democracy. Just as Dewey's concept of schools as democracies functioning in prefigurative democratic ways, so too ought schools at this moment function in prefigurative and sustainable ways, with implications as well for

curriculum. This is also a national and global citizenship function for schools. Both the pandemic and the climate crisis demand multilateral global responses; schools have an important role to play here. They carry significant implications for education policy and practices (and education research) in democratic societies and the pressing necessity to acknowledge the finiteness of resources to ensure a sustainable and democratic future (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2020).

Keita Takayama | The educational ‘solutions’ to the current crisis would have to differ depending on the extent to which modern, liberal education has been pursued in different national contexts. In Western liberal societies, the continuing cultural legacy of the Enlightenment runs deeply into the pedagogical approaches found in schools (Komatsu, Rappleye and Silova, 2021). In Australia, for instance, traditional knowledges of the Indigenous people are introduced in schools (e.g., Dreamtime stories), and yet they are mostly included as a symbolic, often tokenistic, gesture towards acknowledging the special location of the first People. What remains unexplored is their potentials as an alternative epistemological and ontological resource that enables children to disrupt the logic of hyper-separation and to ‘recover a radical intimacy’ with the more-than-human worlds (Hickel, 2020, p. 34). Inclusive educational strategies towards cultural diversity, as currently articulated in the scholarship, do not go far enough in embracing the deep epistemological and ontological differences that the Indigenous worldviews can present.

In Japan, by contrast, where modern education played a critical role in mobilising domestic animistic thoughts towards the political ends of the ultra-nationalistic state during World War II, a call for recognising local animism as an educational resource has been quickly associated with a retrogressive desire for the

imperial past. Science, reason and individual constituted the post-war educational foundation for 'new' democratic Japan, with ecological implications of domestic animist beliefs and thoughts never fully acknowledged. What is required then is to shed the cold-war spell, or what Chen (2010) calls 'the de-cold-war politics', so that local animistic thoughts can be adequately placed within school curriculum, while keeping healthy distance from imperialist romanticism.

In both cases, the articulation of socially just pedagogy has been premised upon critical reason, autonomous self and social activism, and this runs counter to Bowers' call to restore the authority of intergenerationally-transmitted, local knowledges and traditions, including animistic thoughts. Bowers' call points to the need to reject, or at least suspend, the conventional notion of reason and accept the authority of intergenerational wisdoms that enable us to live in an ecologically sustainable way. To what extent can liberal democracy accommodate such a suspension of critical reasoning? To raise this question does not mean that this is an either-or situation. Rather, I am calling for both. To put it in a concrete question, how do we prepare children to develop modern scientific literacy so that they embrace the scientific accounts of global climate change and act on the basis of rational reasoning, while at the same time embracing the body of knowledge premised upon a different epistemological ground—the animistic account of the more-than-human worlds—that invites them to develop a radical intimacy with non-human nature? The future of education, then, requires us to prepare children to live across multiple—and more than often contradictory—worlds, while embracing the contradictions as part of our collective effort to stay with the trouble we have created (Haraway, 2017).

Reflecting on this challenge in Kyoto, Japan, I remain reasonably optimistic. Looking around, sprits and animism are pervasive, including in social thoughts,

literature, cultural/religious practices, media art and animation, just to name a few (Rambelli, 2019; Yoneyama, 2019). After all, it is a country where rocket scientists visit a local shrine for their successful space endeavours (Nelson, 2000, p. 1). But of course, it is not just limited to Kyoto or Japan. Emerging historical scholarship has shown that many of the foundational scientists were deeply enchanted with the supernatural world (Josephson, 2017). Further, recent educational research suggest that schools offer a multitude of moments where children and teachers engage with multiple worlds, much more frequently than assumed by us researchers (Silova, 2019; Taylor, 2017). Perhaps, we just have to unlearn the human–nature dualism and look closely for those mundane moments so that such pedagogical work can be better articulated and replicated for broader awareness.

Debra Hayes | Being for democracy means being against practices that silence and marginalise. It involves a constant monitoring of the effects of educational discourses: Who succeeds? Who is excluded? Whose lives are represented and made visible in the curriculum? How are resources distributed?

Deborah Youdell | As I engage with the set of provocations offered for this thinking, I am aware that while I have been asked to consider democracy, what I am actually considering is the possibility for greater equity. Living in a nation whose democratic processes have recently delivered Brexit and a Government that plays authoritarian populism, traditional conservatism, and neo-liberalism to the ends of the moment, I find myself wondering whether democracy is a necessary precondition for a sustainable response to climate crisis, or the pandemic, or even equity. As the calls for 'levelling-up' resound, it is easy to wonder whether that levelling-up might just as likely come via

forms of violence as via democracy. Given that, it feels especially important in this moment that we articulate what will qualify as democracy, and what undemocratic and unequitable processes and practices are enacted under cover of claims to democracy. The biggest challenge for democracy is surely the co-option of 'democracy' itself.

Stewart Riddle, Amanda Heffernan and David Bright | The reflections above are intended to problematise and provoke thought about democracy and education, rather than to provide simple answers to complex issues. These contributions, alongside those in the other papers drawn together for this special issue, seek to consider urgent and emergent challenges and opportunities for educational leaders, teachers and other educators, young people and their families within broader communities within a contemporary context of de-democratisation and increasing inequality.

The contributions in this collaborative paper have clearly demonstrated the importance of education as a social institution alongside a collective commitment to addressing the challenges facing democracy in the twenty-first century. While recognising that schools and other sites of formal and informal education are not necessarily democratic by design, that does not suggest that efforts to democratise education are in vain. Indeed, the development of more fully realised forms of democratic engagement in education can demonstrate the power of civic participation and a public discourse in which all are welcome.

Further, there is a need to articulate more critical and creative forms of knowledge-building through education, which work to illuminate the underlying epistemological and ontological foundations of knowledge, and to expose ideological positions that seek to foreclose critical engagement with public discourse. In particular, realising a more fully formed democratic education requires a commitment to truth and

transparency, which are bedrocks of functioning democratic institutions, must run through all levels of education, from policymaking and leadership through to classroom pedagogy and curriculum. The reflections provided in this paper provide some lines of thought regarding how education might be for democracy in the twenty-first century, although these are just the beginning of a long, and difficult, dialogue that we must have if we are to prevail.

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