rethinking the democratic role of education through childism

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abstract
There is a strong tendency in both theory and practice to view education's democratic role as that of *equipping* students with specific attributes presumed necessary for democratic life. Discussions thus center around identifying the required values, skills, and capabilities, as well as the types of educational endeavors that best foster them. What underpins such discussions is the assumption that the child is inherently lacking, which, I argue, leads to a conceptual dead end. In this article, I explore how the concept of childism can expand the epistemological framework for understanding and theorizing education's democratic role. Using theoretical concepts from Biesta and Rancière's sporadic democracy, along with Fricker's theory of epistemic injustice, I discuss a case from a Danish state school where a teacher harasses a student. I argue that the perception of the child as a deficit being causes children to suffer systemic epistemic (and other) injustices, as incidents of adults harassing children can go unnamed and unrecognized. The potential long-term harm is a loss of trust in one's ability to know, interpret, and understand the world. I argue that this is also a loss in potential claims for equality based on the perception of injustice, a loss that damages the democratic quality of society. The article advocates a *childist turn* in research on education's democratic role. Childism enables a hermeneutical breakthrough that can spark new discussions of scholarly, social, and political norms regarding the question of democracy and education.

keywords: childism; democratic education; epistemic injustice; sporadic democracy.

repensando el papel democrático de la educación a través del niñismo

resúmen
Existe una fuerte tendencia, tanto en la teoría como en la práctica, a ver el rol democrático de la educación, como el de equipar a los estudiantes con atributos específicos, que se consideran necesarios para la vida democrática. Las discusiones, por lo tanto, se centran en identificar los valores, las habilidades y capacidades requeridas para participar en la democracia, así como los tipos de esfuerzos educativos que mejor la fomentan. Lo que subyace en tales discusiones es la suposición de que el niño es inherentemente carente, lo que nos lleva a un callejón conceptual sin salida. En este artículo, exploro cómo el concepto de niñismo puede ampliar el marco epistemológico para comprender y teorizar sobre el rol democrático de la educación. Utilizando los conceptos teóricos de la democracia esporádica de Biesta y Rancière, junto con la teoría de la injusticia epistémica de Fricker, discuto un caso de una escuela estatal danesa, donde un maestro acosa a un estudiante. Argumento que la percepción del niño como carente provoca que los niños sufran injusticias epistémicas sistémicas, ya que los incidentes de adultos acosando a niños no son necesariamente nombrados ni reconocidos. El daño potencial a largo plazo es la pérdida de confianza en la capacidad de uno para conocer, interpretar y comprender el mundo. Argumento en este artículo que esto también significa una pérdida de posibles reclamos de igualdad basados en la percepción individual y social de la injusticia, una pérdida que daña la calidad democrática de la sociedad. El artículo propone un giro

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niñista cuando investigando el rol democrático en la educación. El niñismo permite un avance hermenéutico que puede generar nuevas discusiones sobre las normas académicas, sociales y políticas en relación a la cuestión de la democracia y la educación.

palabras clave: niñismo; educación democrática; injusticia epistémica; democracia esporádica.

repensando o papel democrático da educação a partir do infantismo

resumo
Existe uma forte tendência, tanto na teoria quanto na prática, a considerar que o papel democrático da educação é equipar os estudantes com atributos específicos presumidamente necessários para a vida democrática. As discussões, portanto, giram em torno de identificar os valores, as habilidades e as capacidades requeridas para participar da democracia, assim como os tipos de esforços educativos que melhor a fomentam. O que sustenta tais discussões é a suposição de que a criança é inerentemente incompleta, o que, argumento, leva a um beco conceitual sem saída. Neste artigo, exploro como o conceito de infantismo pode ampliar o quadro epistemológico para compreender e teorizar sobre o papel democrático da educação. Usando o conceito de Biesta e Rancière de democracia esporádica, junto com a teoria de injustiça epistêmica de Fricker, discuto o caso de uma escola estadual dinamarquesa onde um professor assedia um estudante. Argumento que a percepção da criança como um ser faltante faz com que as crianças sofram injustiças epistêmicas sistêmicas (e outras injustiças), uma vez que incidentes de adultos assediando crianças podem passar sem ser nomeados nem reconhecidos. O potencial dano a longo prazo é a perda de confiança em suas capacidades de conhecer, interpretar e compreender o mundo. Argumento que isso também significa uma perda de possíveis reivindicações de igualdade baseadas na percepção individual e social de injustiça; uma perda que prejudica a qualidade democrática da sociedade. O artigo propõe um giro infantista na pesquisa sobre o papel democrático da educação. O infantismo permite um avanço hermenêutico que pode gerar novas discussões sobre as normas acadêmicas, sociais e políticas em relação à questão da democracia e da educação.

palavras-chave: infantismo; educação democrática; injustiça epistêmica; democracia esporádica.

rethinking the democratic role of education through childism

introduction

The question of education's societal role has historically been a central theme in educational theory, policy, and practice. At least since the Enlightenment and the spread of modern democratic ideals, there has been a strong tendency in Western democracies to view the societal role of education as one of *producing* certain qualities, capabilities, and values essential for democratic life, most notably the ability to reason (Biesta, 2007). In contemporary times – marked by increasing concerns about the state and stability of global democracy, increasing political division, decreasing levels of global freedom, rising wars and conflicts, dilemmas arising from digitalization and artificial intelligence, and not least the pressing climate crisis – governments worldwide have turned to educational systems as the core instrument to address these challenges. In both policy and research, the prevailing assumption is that to effectively confront these challenges, societies *need* citizens with specific qualities and capabilities. Education's role, therefore, is to *equip* children, starting at a very young age, with these essential traits (see e.g., European Commission, 2016), or more instrumentally put, to *produce* such citizens, who are most often perceived as *democratic* citizens. Roughly put, we could say that the more conservative approaches – "educating for democracy" – place emphasis on inserting children into the existing world, while more progressive approaches – "democratic education" – place the emphasis on encouraging critical thinking and fostering the ability to challenge and reshape the world. However, for either approach the discussion centers on what specific qualities and capabilities are needed, and which types of educational endeavors and configurations can best foster them. The common underlying assumption is that the child is inherently lacking.

In this article, I think with the concept of childism with the aim of expanding the epistemological framework for understanding and theorizing education's democratic role. As I use it, the notion of "education's democratic role" is distinct from both "educating for democracy" and "democratic education." I do not, however, intend it as a third approach that simply replaces either

educating for democracy or democratic education. Rather, my exploration begins with the understanding that any approach starting from the deficit perception of the child, and thus shaped by a *developmental* logic aimed at *producing* certain qualities presumed necessary for democratic life, may have a valid place in education. However, such views represent only part of the broader story of education's democratic role. Through a childist lens, I aim to bring into focus the other part of this story: dimensions of education's democratic role that the developmental logic seems to obscure. In so doing I aspire to present an argument for the needed radical (and democratic) potential of childism in fostering more child-inclusive scholarly imagination, thereby sparking new research trajectories pertaining to education's democratic role. The notion of "education's democratic role" is, then, a working concept employed here to emphasize a more expansive and inclusive understanding than is currently available in prevailing educational paradigms.

The article is structured as follows. I begin by presenting literature – both from what I refer to as childist critiques but also from research on educational policy – with which I highlight the problem with the deficit perception of the child. This also allows me to demonstrate how a childist approach differs from current child-centered approaches to education's democratic role, and to say why the move toward a *childist turn* is worth pursuing. I then elaborate on the concept of childism, defined in this article as "a way of seeing that determines what, how, and why one would theorize" (Biswas et al., 2024, p. 8). I present a concept of democracy, drawing on the ideas of Rancière (1999) and Biesta (2009), that enables an abandonment of the deficit perception of the child. I then introduce Fricker's (2009) theory of epistemic injustice, which I use to discuss a classroom situation at a Danish state school that escalated into what I identify as an incident of harassment. I examine how the deficit conception of the child and the "naturalized" hierarchical binary child/adult opposition create perceptual constraints that prestructure our perceptions and behavior. After establishing the relationship between epistemic injustice and education's democratic role, I conclude by discussing the need for, and radical potential of childism in directing new scholarly trajectories for questions about democracy and education.

the story about the not-yet child leads to ideals of "democratism"

Historically, the child has been depicted as a "lesser, deficient, or otherwise incomplete form of human being" (Rollo, 2018b, p. 62). The child/adult relation is the oldest story about a relationship of "natural" subjugation. Almost every major philosopher and theologian from various historical traditions has uncritically adopted this narrative, and in philosophical theories informing education, the child has been depicted as an "undeveloped adult," a passive recipient of care, "naturally unruly" and in need of being "civilized" and "cultivated," or as occupying a particular state of innocence (Wall, 2010). Wall identifies three conceptual models of the deficit-perception of the child that have proven persistent over time and would appear to be endowed with a strong historical resilience. Each of these models of education has attempted to respond appropriately to childhood and has, in some ways, improved children's lives. However, they have only partially succeeded, as they remain fundamentally grounded in adult-centered assumptions. A first model is the top-down one that views children as irrational beings needing discipline. This model was articulated, for example, by Plato and Immanuel Kant but also by Christian thinkers as well as the proponents of various other religions. In its most pure form, this model "measures morality by an always transcending yardstick whose command is obedience" (Wall, 2010, p. 20). A second model is a bottom-up model that sees children as pure and virtuous, requiring protection. This view can be traced back to the Bible and is perhaps most famously articulated by romantic philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The notion that the child begins life as wise, good, and just has proven appealing to many, as it seeks to reclaim the value of children's distinct voices and has, for instance, led to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The bottom-up model has thus humanized children in profound ways, but it has also resulted in their dehumanization in other respects, as it tends to "sentimentalize children and thereby marginalize their actual moral struggles, complexities, and diversity" (Wall, 2013, p. 72). Finally, a third, developmental model treats childhood as a stage of growth towards adulthood, often depicting children as prerational. This model was articulated, for example,

by Aristotle and by John Locke, who thought of children as "blank slates" or "wax", ready to be written upon and molded. As is well known, Locke – "the father of liberalism" – built an idea of natural rights into his political theory. However, he saw children as possessing a "weakness and imperfection of their non-age" (Locke, 1689/1975, p. 148) which meant these natural rights did not apply to children. Thus, as Cockburn (2020, p. 298) notes, children "were to be locked out of political theories that formed the backbone of political thought until the Twentieth Century."

Ever since the Enlightenment era, the democratic role of education in Western philosophy has particularly centered around fostering rationality. The deficit perception of the child – in either model – is completely intertwined with the Enlightenment architecture of modern democracy itself. In fact, according to Rollo (2018a, p. 312) the new "'Age of Reason' was conceptualized in explicit opposition to the figure of the child." The legacy of this line of thought is that the main criterion for inclusion has become the capacity to demonstrate reason by exercising a "voice" through speech. The tradition in Western philosophy has been to conceptualize the prelinguistic human as closer to animals than the (fully) human adult, and it has been argued that the infant-toddler subject remains positioned in a putative proximity to animals (Duhn, 2015). Thus, historically marginalized groups have fought for recognition and inclusion on the assumption that exclusion and disqualification of non-speakers is legitimate and even "natural." The struggle was to prove that they were not to be understood as the disabled, children, or animals (Rollo, 2020, p. 318). It is therefore not odd that our educational efforts center around teaching children certain knowledge and values as well as communicative and deliberative skills. This will enable them to "escape," so to speak, from the sphere of "natural" exclusion. I have elsewhere labeled this teaching for democratism. The term "democratism" is borrowed from Emily B. Finley (2022), but I use in a slightly different way so as to denote the interpretation of democracy which utilizes a democratic language, but which effectively transforms democracy into the "*rule of those who can demonstrate the behavior to prove that they are not 'child-like'*" (Hedegaard, 2024, p. 231).

Despite the rather critical tone, I do not intend to argue against educational

endeavors that focus on developing certain qualities or skills, as there are arguably valid and desirable reasons for such efforts. My aim is to advocate thinking more broadly about education's democratic role, and to suggest that one way to do this is to think through a childist lens.

the deficit perception of the child diverts attention away from disciplining agendas

The challenge to the default deficit perception of the child in relation to education's democratic role has been raised by other scholars. A relatively new community in the field of childhood studies has, for example, explored the growing protectionist politics linked to the rising interest in promoting children's participation and active citizenship in policy, practice, and research. This political interest has been partly inspired by the UNCRC, which has encouraged a commitment to securing children's right to participate, thereby empowering them. However, it has also largely diverted attention from the more disciplinary agendas regarding children's participation (Cockburn, 2020; Hart, 2009; Sundhall, 2017; Warming, 2011). In recent decades, we have observed the emergence of renewed governance strategies that view children as "raw material" for society's future (Warming, 2011, p. 119). These strategies aim for securing competent, well-adjusted democratic citizens who can effectively navigate the challenges of globalization (Hart, 2009) (see e.g., CoE, 2010; Fadel et al., 2018; OECD, 2019). Hart (2009) and Warming (2011) indicate that this renewed interest is reflected in a significant body of research. However, many of these studies primarily focus on developing practical methodologies to foster children's participation and evaluate various educational interventions from participatory projects. A criticism of such studies is that they tend to begin with a predefined adult-centered normative and exclusive understanding of citizenship, aiming to shape children and young people assumed to be in a "natural" state of "not-yet" able to fit this framework (Hart, 2009; Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Sundhall, 2017). Therefore, such studies, along with the practices and policies they inform, are at risk of producing discriminating effects. Reasons for this risk include the following shortcomings of these studies, the complaint being that they:

(1) overlook children and young people's responsibilities, rendering their actions and voices less visible or undervalued merely because they are performed by children (Cockburn, 2020; Thomas, 2012);

(2) do not recognize and acknowledge the contextual and interactional dynamics surrounding "children's voices," including the power relations that affect them (I'Anson, 2013; Lundy, 2007; Spyrou, 2011). For example, children under the age of seven, or those who have not yet developed sufficient linguistic skills are often excluded from citizenship discussions (Cockburn, 2020);

(3) overlook important insights from children and young people regarding their experiences of their actual "lived citizenship" (Warming, 2019; Warming & Fahnøe, 2017);

(4) largely ignore children's current status as citizens (Lister, 2003); and

(5) work with a misconception that children's human rights, unlike those of adults, are conditional and must be earned through what adults perceive as "proper" (democratic) behavior (Lundy, 2007; Lundy & Martínez Sainz, 2018; Wall, 2012).

The overall critique emerging from this literature is that the effects of research, policy, and practice that do not incorporate a childist lens risk contributing to the increasing decline in political trust and engagement, and ultimately a situation where children and young people turn their backs on so-called democracy.

It should be emphasized that the above-mentioned critiques are predominantly directed at what I have labeled as more conservative approaches to education's democratic task, teaching for democracy – those that view the task as teaching about democracy and encouraging (or disciplining) children to adapt to already established democratic values. This critique is largely shared by more progressive approaches, democratic education, such as the Philosophy for Children movement (P4C) (Lipman et al., 1980), which aims to engage children in philosophical inquiry as a means of promoting democratic values, including respect for diverse perspectives, dialogue, and collaborative learning (Bleazby, 2013; Burgh, 2014; Burgh & Thornton, 2021; Cam, 2000). The idea here is to "foster the development and improvement of thinking" (Bleazby, 2013, p. 4) through the

discipline of philosophy with the aim of leading to "more reflective and intelligent action" (Bleazby, 2013, p. 4). However, these more alternative child-centered and pragmatist epistemological approaches to education's democratic role are increasingly superseded by conservative approaches in influential transnational education policies (Hedegaard, 2024). In Denmark, where the Danish state school is explicitly grounded in – and still praises – the idea of the school as a context for experience, particularly inspired by the ideas of Dewey (2007) and the Danish theologian Hal Koch (1991), Danish education policy is increasingly influenced by transnational scientific and educational political agencies[2] (Brogger, 2019; Krejsler, 2017; Krejsler, 2021; Krejsler et al., 2014; Moos, 2013, 2019), as is the case in many other countries (see e.g., Grek, 2009; Lawn & Grek, 2012; Martens, 2010; Mausethagen, 2013; Meyer & Benavot, 2013; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Steiner-Khamsi, 2012). A phenomenon which has been coined in the term "GERM" (Global Education Reform Movement) (Sahlberg, 2012).

In terms of the concept of the child, there appears to be a decidedly top-down (Wall 2010) force driving educational policy trends (a force that views the child as unruly and in need of discipline from above) (Hedegaard, 2024). These trends are not primarily driven by educational theory and research (though they exist here as well). Instead, they are predominantly shaped by an increasing global political orientation towards children's so-called "social and emotional learning" (Williamson, 2021) (something also framed as *necessary* for democratic life) and by the economic interests of edu-businesses, which provide the supposed solutions (Williamson, 2021). This means that not only do a range of transnational agencies, think tanks, advisory bodies, and private corporations play a powerful role in shaping what counts as educational knowledge (Whitty & Furlong, 2017), but they also significantly influence knowledge about the "nature of the child." There is an extensive economic interest in keeping the child locked in a "not yet" position. More starkly put, there is an enormous economic interest in upholding and

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[2] Such as (1) OECD (Organization for Economic Corporation and Development), (2) EU (the European Union), (3) IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement), (4) the Bologna Process, (5) UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), (6) the World bank, and (7) the WTO (World Trade Organization) (Krejsler, 2021).

reinforcing the colonial logic (Hedegaard, 2024). As critical childhood scholars emphasize, the logic of childhood *is* the logic of colonialism (Murris, 2021; Rollo, 2018b).

In the light of transnational policy trends, I thus argue that literature and studies on progressive approaches to education's democratic role, such as PC4, are increasingly relegated to a marginalized position when it comes to providing answers to questions about education's democratic role. Furthermore, progressive approaches also draw on the developmental logic, thereby affirming the deficit perception of the child, even if they are perhaps closer to the developmental model (Wall, 2010). Regardless of the model, the deficit perception underpinning the progressive approaches to education's democratic role represents a conceptual dead end. Finding ways to rethink education's democratic role thus has to start with identifying and destabilizing dead ends that structure what it is currently possible to think. In this article, I do so by abandoning the deficit perception of the child with the aim of providing an argument for broadening the epistemological framework through which we can understand and theorize education's democratic role. This includes an aspiration to create new positions from which current policy trends can be further scrutinized and challenged.

childism – reconstructing more age-inclusive scholarship and social imagination.

Childism is a perspective (Biswas et al., 2024). Childism is analogous to other more well-known philosophical perspectives, such as feminism, anti-racism and decolonialism. Similar to feminism, childism can be conceptualized as a central notion with various potentialities, subject to multiple interpretations that are often debated, which is why it might be more accurate to refer to childism in the plural form, as childisms, acknowledging its multifaceted nature (Biswas et al., 2024). According to Wall, (2019) the social category of the child rarely functions as its own critical lens in the social scientific and humanistic disciplines, though it is generally accepted that scholars need to understand their research phenomena from diverse points of view – such as race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, etc. The child as a critical lens, an approach Wall calls childism – is a response to the broader and systemic problem that childist researchers increasingly emphasize in

various ways and domains. A central thesis here is that "social practices and understandings have historically been dominated by adults and adult points of view, leaving the entire edifice of human societies, cultures, languages, rights, laws, relationships, narratives, and norms built on a powerful bedrock of adultism" (Wall, 2019, p. 4). Wall proposes childism as a lens for critiquing adultism—a term akin to racism and sexism, but denoting prejudice against children and childhood – and calls for "reconstructing more age-inclusive research and social imaginations" (Wall, 2019, p. 1).

The childist lens places children's perspectives and experiences at the center of inquiry with the aim of dismantling the historical marginalization of children. It examines, questions, and transforms broader social structures and norms in more age-inclusive ways (Biswas & Wall, 2023). It thus moves beyond child-centered approaches by targeting underlying structural premises and assumptions, and the naturalized taken-for-granted hierarchical binary opposition child/adult in terms of which – in this case – education's democratic role is already constructed and pre-imagined. With childism I attempt to broaden the perception of what this role can be. This article will not provide final and conclusive answers regarding education's democratic role. As mentioned earlier, I do not propose an approach to replacing existing ones. Rather, the way I employ childism in this exploration aligns with Biswas's description of childism as "a way of seeing that determines what, how, and why one would theorize" (Biswas et al., 2024, p. 8). In this sense, the childist lens has been present, so to speak, from the beginning of the article, influencing my observations, my thinking, and my aspiration to investigate lines of flight (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988) that produce offshoots from established frameworks rather than being something I "apply" later.

In the following sections, I first present a concept of democracy, as suggested by Biesta (2009) and Rancière (1999), and then Fricker's (2009) theory of epistemic injustice, with which I think in my attempt to move on from what is known regarding education's democratic role.

democracy as a sporadic event

To formulate a concept of democracy and of education's democratic role

that allows for an abandonment of the deficit perception of the child, I draw on Jacques Rancière's (1999) concepts of the *police order* and *politics*, which inform Biesta's (2009) notion of *sporadic democracy*. Biesta has found prevailing discourses of democracy problematic because they embody a colonial perception. The focus of Biesta's critique is that the question of inclusion is central to this discourse. In this line of thinking, the question of democratization becomes the question about how to include more and more people in the sphere of democracy, and although this comes from a well-meaning position, it also relies on certain problematic assumptions about democracy. Firstly, it relies on the assumption that democracy can and should be a normal political reality. There are different views about what this reality might look like and hence when and how it is reached, but the assumption remains that the best democracy is the most inclusive one. The idea that an "all-inclusive" democracy is in fact a reachable situation relates to the second assumption, which is the idea that democratization can be understood as the process of inclusion. This is a process in which those "outside" the sphere of democracy are brought "inside." It is therefore a process that happens "from the inside out" (Biesta, 2009 p. 107), that is, a process that "emanates from the position of those who are already considered to be democratic" (p. 107) which implies "that someone is setting the terms for inclusion and that it is for those who wish to be included to meet those terms" (p. 107).

Drawing on Rancière, Biesta suggests a fundamentally different way of understanding democracy. For Rancière there cannot be any sphere that can be perceived as "the democratic," in which some are included, and some are not. There is an order, which he calls the police order. Everyone is included in the order; everyone has a role and a position in the order although not everyone is included in running the order, and everybody is made a subject, which implies particular assumptions regarding ways of acting and being. Rancière defines the police order as: "an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and that sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task" (Rancière, 1999, p. 29). The police order is made up by "the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible, and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another

as noise" (p. 29).

Politics is to be understood as a disruption of the police order – however, not just any kind of disruption, but a disruption in the name of equality, and for that reason politics is for Rancière always democratic. Politics can be understood as any action that reconfigures the police order and hence "shifts a body from the place assigned to it" (Rancière, 1999, p. 30), and "makes visible what had no business being seen and makes heard [and understood] as discourse where once there was only place for noise" (Rancière in Biesta, 2009, p. 107 with Biesta's addition). Politics is a claim for equality, a claim made from the "outside," "based on the perception of injustice" (Biesta, 2009, p. 108). Those who make the claim do not simply want "a seat at the table" (p. 108). They wish to reconfigure the police order. They "want to redefine the order in such a way that new identities, new ways of doing and being become possible and can be 'counted'" (p. 108). Democracy then is not a state, it "is not a regime or a social way of life" (Rancière, 1999, p. 101), but an event that occurs in situations where "two "heterogeneous processes" meet: the police process and the process of equality" (Biesta, 2009, p. 107). (Democratic) politics is something that someone performs:

> [P]olitical actors or subjects – do not exist *before* the "act" of democracy, or to be more precise: their political identity, their identity as democratic subjects only comes into being in and through the act of disruption of the police order. This is why Rancière argues that politics is itself a process of *subjectification*. It is a process in and through which political subjects are constituted (Biesta, 2009, p. 109).

Importantly, however, even though the claim is made in the name of equality and upon a perception of injustice, this does not mean that the police order is necessarily bad. A police order "can produce all sorts of good, and one kind of police may be preferable to another" (Rancière, 1999, p. 31), but "whether the police order is "sweet and kind" does not make it any less the opposite of politics" (Biesta, 2009, p. 109).

Building on this conceptualization of democracy, I propose a line of thinking in which the democratic quality of a society is tied to the *possibility* of democratic events – moments where equality is asserted against the prevailing order. The democratic quality of a society can thus be understood in terms of a

continuum, based on the openness, so to speak, of the current police order to disruptions that challenge and reconfigure it in the name of equality. Put differently, the question is: *what are the possibilities for putting forward claims for equality?*

In this framework, education's democratic role is thus not primarily focused on inclusion within a pre-existing structure, but is instead oriented toward the possibilities produced by the structures and norms that comprise the school environment. I refer to structures and norms in a micro-interactional sense, a meso-institutional sense (e.g., how school organization, configuration, and education policy shape ways of meaning and doing), and a macro-social sense (e.g., how circulating ideologies influence our interpretations of the world). My point here is that it is arguably desirable for people living together in a society to follow existing rules, deal with disagreements peacefully, be polite, listen attentively to others, become aware of the social and political implications of their actions, develop skill at argumentation and reasoning. However, in the conception of democracy following Biesta and Rancière, there is nothing inherently democratic about these skills.

As emphasized earlier, this argument should not be mistaken as suggesting that such qualities and skills should not be pursued in education, as there are many good reasons to do so. It could be argued, for example, that developing strong reflective thinking skills empowers students to discover inequalities, put forward claims for equality and challenge the existing police order. However, the aim of this article is to shift the focus from what students should learn and develop to how their surroundings (broadly defined) can "hear" and respond to what students express, whether "polite," "reasonable" and "intelligent" or not. Such a shift changes or at least helps broaden what can be regarded as education's democratic role. Education's democratic role is no longer primarily centered on specific activities to foster (however desirable) skills and capabilities. Rather, the democratic role of education would involve scrutinizing education itself with the aim of strengthening its capacity to "hear" and respond to students' perspectives and interests, regardless of whether they are perceived as "nice and appropriate" within the existing order, and even if not all perspectives would necessarily lead to

a reconfiguration of the police order.

epistemic injustice – an injustice with identity-constructive power

To complement my working concept of democracy and formulate an understanding of education's democratic role without invoking the deficit perception of the child, I draw on Miranda Fricker's (2009) theory of epistemic injustice. As the name suggests, this theory addresses a distinctively epistemic kind of injustice. Epistemic injustice is an injustice that occurs on the basis of structural prejudices related to one's naturalized ontological identity. It is a kind of injustice inflicted on a person in their capacity as a knower. Fricker distinguishes between *testimonial injustice* and *hermeneutical injustice*. Testimonial injustice occurs "when a prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word" (Fricker, 2009, p. 1). This is something that happens in the many everyday cases of telling somebody something, such as telling someone about an experience, offering an opinion, or airing a reason. Epistemic injustice is when what you communicate is not believed or taken seriously because your credibility is reduced due to prejudice. As I interpret Fricker's work, she primarily discusses epistemic injustice in relation to what is communicated with in spoken words. But in this paper, I interpret the theory in a somewhat expanded form (which I do not see as contradictory to Fricker's intentions), meaning that I do not confine it solely to the act of speaking, which would imply that prelinguistic children, for example, could not suffer from testimonial injustice. Therefore, I interpret the "offered knowledge" as any form of communication, both verbal and non-verbal, including body language, screaming, crying, laughing, and so on.

Hermeneutical injustice arises from a gap in our collective hermeneutical resources, a gap "in our shared tools of social interpretation" (Fricker, 2009, p. 6). It is not perpetrated by any agent but occurs when a hermeneutical lacuna prevents the subject from making adequate sense of an experience, rendering it communicatively intelligible to others. For it to qualify as an injustice, it must be both harmful and wrongful. Fricker uses the case of sexual harassment, which – before the concept of sexual harassment was established – was misunderstood by many victims because it was collectively misunderstood, for example, because it

was conceptualized as "flirting." This left victims "deeply troubled, confused, and isolated, not to mention vulnerable to continued harassment" (p. 151). The lack of proper understanding further prevents victims and society more broadly from protesting and securing measures to put a stop to the harmful actions. Importantly, relations of unequal power can skew the sharing of hermeneutical resources. More powerful groups tend to contribute more to the shared stock of social meanings and concepts that everyone can use, whereas less powerful groups are hermeneutically marginalized and "more likely to find themselves having some social experiences through a glass darkly, with at best ill-fitting meanings to draw on in the effort to render them intelligible" (p. 148).

Epistemic injustice wrongs individuals in various ways regarding their capacity as subjects of knowledge – a capacity essential to human value (p. 5). When experienced persistently and systematically, it can exert severe identity-constructive power that profoundly affects the subject's life, resulting in a lack of epistemic confidence and a diminished trust in their ability to make sense of their experiences and interpretations of the world.

the case of vesterborg elementary school

The case I use to explore the potential in thinking more broadly about education's democratic role originates from a multi-sited ethnographic study on the democratic role of education, conducted within the Danish state school system (Hedegaard, 2024). This particular case comes from a pilot study aimed at refining the methodology and was not included as empirical material in the main study. The case takes place in a Danish 4th-grade class (with children aged 10) at Vesterborg elementary school (VES; pseudonym) in the spring of 2018. The situation described is a rather extreme case where the teacher behaves in a transgressive manner towards some of the children, particularly targeting one child. I will refer to the action in question as harassment. I argue that this situation should not be viewed as an exception to the norm, but rather as part of a continuum enabled by prejudicial assumptions embedded in the concept of the child. My aim is not to single out this specific teacher, although the description inevitably casts the teacher in an unflattering and unprofessional light. Nor do I

claim that this situation reflects the general or acceptable code of practice in Danish state schools. Employing the perspective of childism, I use this case to explore the underlying logics and assumptions about the categories of child and adult, and the naturalized taken-for-granted hierarchical binary relation between the two, which prestructures our perceptions and behavior and thereby enables such a situation to unfold – even with an observer, myself, present in the classroom. I argue that these assumptions produce a gap in our collective hermeneutical resources, which makes it difficult for both the harasser, the harassed, and the witnesses to recognize the situation as harassment. Finally, I discuss this example in relation to the democratic role of education to illustrate how the deficit-perception of the category of the child not only positions children in an inferior and marginalized position but also damages all of us and society more broadly. On that note, let us turn to the 4th grade at VES.

The timetable reads "math", but when the teacher, Amanda, enters the classroom, she surprises the children by announcing the school's upcoming 80th birthday celebration. Excited chatter fills the room as Amanda explains that each class will organize an activity stall for the big party. Today's math lesson will be spent brainstorming and selecting a theme for their stall. The children eagerly share ideas, some exclaiming "Yeah!" while others excitedly discuss with their peers. Amanda gathers the children in front of the board and encourages them to make suggestions. "Any idea is welcome," she assures them. She explains that she will compile a list of suggestions on the board. Afterwards they will discuss each suggestion in detail before collectively deciding on one. "Then we'll vote," Amanda announces with a smile, gesturing towards me. "That's democracy," she adds, acknowledging my presence. I return her smile.

The children are brimming with ideas: dragon themes, horse themes, fashion themes, adventure themes, and more. Some of them are eager to delve into their suggestions in detail, but the teacher interrupts gently, reminding them that, for now, they're just collecting suggestions. Once all of the ideas have been presented, they'll have the chance to elaborate further. However, the teacher occasionally deviates from this rule herself, asking supplementary questions. These moments spark small discussions between the proposers and Amanda.

Then, it's the turn of a group of half a dozen or so boys, who appear exceptionally eager, having patiently awaited their chance. Almost shouting in unison, they exclaim: "Football!" The teacher grimaces and pretends to gag, remarking, "I hate football." Instantly, the boys erupt into a chorus of excitement, eager to share their myriad ideas for a football-themed stall. However, the teacher swiftly silences them with a stern reminder that they are not to debate suggestions at this moment. One boy points out that others were allowed to elaborate on their ideas, prompting the teacher to retort, "Well, those weren't such stupid suggestions." Some of the boys object to her characterization, with one calling her "mean". Undeterred, the teacher dismisses the suggestion as "ridiculous" and refuses to write it on the board, claiming that "every normal person is fed up with football." The men's World Champion football tournament is about to kick off in Russia in the summer of 2018, so football is everywhere, which is what Amanda refers to. Despite protests, she initially refuses to acknowledge the suggestion, but relents after persistent demands from the boys, who remind her of her earlier statement: "Any idea is welcome!" Amanda adds "football" to the list on the board. The boys erupt into cheers and celebrations. Amanda sternly instructs them to sit down and be quiet. I notice smiles and silent high fives among the boys.

Following elaborate discussions of each theme, during which Amanda persistently expresses her disapproval and disdain for the football theme, it's time for the class to vote. With four suggestions now listed on the board (some having been merged during the discussion) Amanda glances at the suggestions momentarily before swiftly erasing the football suggestion, declaring it "just idiotic". "I decide that we won't be having a football stall," she announces. The group of proposers erupts in protest, decrying the decision as unfair.

One boy, Peter, accuses Amanda of cheating, asserting that she isn't adhering to the rules she established. Despite Peter's accusation and the protests from the boys, Amanda proceeds with the vote. As the children cast their votes, some of the football enthusiasts reluctantly participate, acknowledging the erasure of their proposal (though not agreeing with it). Meanwhile, other boys refuse to participate in the vote altogether. Peter, visibly frustrated, turns his back to the board and sits with his arms crossed. With the voting concluded, Amanda

admonishes the boys to "stop whining," emphasizing that in a democracy, one must respect the majority vote.

Amanda organizes the children into smaller groups, instructing them to further discuss the details and possibilities related to the selected theme. However, Peter adamantly refuses to participate, maintaining his position with his back turned to Amanda and the rest of the class, arms crossed. While the other children begin their group work, Amanda approaches Peter, urging him to engage actively. She refers to him as "grumpy" and "peeved," accusing him of disrespecting the majority vote. Peter rejects this characterization, asserting that she's the one who is being unfair.

Amanda continues, labeling Peter as "ridiculous" and blaming him for disrupting the atmosphere with his attitude. All of this is delivered with an eloquent and composed demeanor. Despite Peter's attempts to defend himself, Amanda persists. On my reading of what happened, this all became overwhelming for Peter. His body changes. He turns around, uncrosses his arms, and starts apologizing, "okay okay, I'm sorry… are you happy now? I will do the stupid group work." However, Amanda continues to admonish Peter, maintaining her calm demeanor, and the atmosphere in the classroom grows increasingly uncomfortable. The other children cease their discussions, and silence envelops the room. I am silent. Bodies are still. I feel deeply uncomfortable. I feel that I desperately want Amanda to stop. Peter just said that he will participate in the group work. He obeys Amanda's demand. Why isn't she satisfied?

Finally, Peter begins to cry. His body posture no longer seems defensive but is resigned, as if it has given up its last effort to resist. Then Amanda stops. The classroom is silent, disrupted only by Peter's crying. Amanda resumes the lesson as if nothing had occurred, and the children return to their group work. Peter participates, albeit passively, mostly gazing out of the window in silence.

the broader dynamics of power and hierarchy between children and adults

In the situation described above, Amanda takes advantage of her privilege as a teacher to override some of the children's preferences. For all we know, she simply hates football and decides to exploit the unequal power dynamic between

herself (the adult teacher) and the child students. As such, she is not modeling the rules of the process she set herself. But the part of the situation I wish to focus on for the purposes of this paper is the escalation into what I interpret as something rather extreme. The words and phrases Amanda uses are condescending. She calls the boys' suggestion "ridiculous" and "just idiotic," and claims that every "normal person" is fed up with football. She accuses them of "whining," and Peter is furthermore accused of being "grumpy" and "peeved." But even when Peter finally obeys Amanda's demand to participate in the group work, she does not cease. I interpret this as an attack on him. This suggests that at this point, it is no longer about football being a "ridiculous" theme, nor is it about "accepting the majority vote without protesting," nor about Peter obeying Amanda's demand to do group work. Rather, it is about someone who belongs to the social category of "child" succumbing to the superior status of the social category "adult." It is about broader dynamics of power and hierarchy between children and adults. Amanda's actions demonstrate that the children do not have – and are not entitled to assume – the position of "moral authority" or "epistemic authority" (Murris, 2013). This is furthermore emphasised in what happens by the end of the lesson: Amanda approaches me as if we, as adults, align on this matter. She doesn't provide any further justification for her actions, but merely seems to assume and expect validation for what transpired. She creates, however implicitly, an "us" (the adults) and "them" (the children) and thereby tries to make me complicit in what happened. Despite my discomfort and disapproval, I remain silent – a reaction that suggests I have accepted the role of being complicit.

harassment is an incident with no name because of the default deficit perception of child

What I want to point out here is that this incident – the condescending words and the domination of Peter – can be conceptualized as harassment. If a similar situation had occurred in a workplace, a supermarket, or at a university (e.g., between a teacher and adult students), we would not have any difficulty recognizing it as harassment. If we imagine the opposite situation, where Peter (the child student) had behaved toward Amanda (the adult teacher) in a similar

way and brought her to tears, we would recognize it as harassment. Peter's conduct would not have gone unchallenged. In Denmark, schools have measures in place to handle transgressive or violent behavior from students. Often, students are sent home, and parents are involved.[3] The Teachers' Union focuses on this issue, offering both legal and psychological support for teachers, while a professional magazine for teachers frequently publishes articles on the topic and provides a platform for teachers to write articles and share testimonies about their personal experiences with transgressive behavior from students. However, what happened in this classroom had no name for those present. Peter's body seemed to express the fact that he experienced transgressive behavior and harassment. The bodies of the children in the room, as well as my own, seemed to express discomfort and insecurity, which may suggest that we were witnessing harassment. But it has only now been named "harassment" in this article – by me.

Drawing on Fricker (2009), I argue that we lacked a proper understanding of the harassment in this situation due to a collective cognitive disadvantage shared by everyone in the room. This cognitive disadvantage stemmed from a gap in our collective hermeneutical resources rooted in a structural prejudice embedded in our conception of the child. The dominant view of the child in educational theory, practice, and society more broadly as "not yet" rational, as immature, and inferior to adults – left both Peter and Amanda, as well as the rest of us, cognitively constrained. As a result, none of us fully grasped how Amanda was treating Peter, at least not to the extent that the harassment was called out and stopped, or that an apology was made and consequences were imposed afterward, as would happen in other contexts such as workplaces or adult educational settings.

Drawing on Fricker, I argue that Peter, in addition to suffering harassment, also experienced both testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. As a

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[3] Approaches vary from school to school, and not all institutions employ punitive measures. However, as mentioned earlier there is a decidedly top-down (Wall, 2010) force behind current educational policy trends. For example, in 2024, the current Danish Minister of Children and Education initiated adjustments to tighten the national school conduct regulations, aiming to strengthen school principals' ability to take action against students' violations of the code of conduct. The adjustments involve the enforcement of measures such as detention, temporary expulsion, and reassignment to other schools.

(subhuman) child, Peter belongs to a hermeneutically marginalized social group that does not have the same position as a (fully human) adult in contributing knowledge and concepts to our shared pool of hermeneutical resources. Although Peter's body offered knowledge about his experience, this knowledge was not "heard" or taken seriously by Amanda. Children's "voices" are not recognized as "rational" but are instead marginalized as "immature." This prejudice led Amanda to overlook the knowledge Peter offers, both in what he said and in how his body communicated about the situation, resulting in testimonial injustice. Furthermore, Peter suffered hermeneutical injustice because he could not fully comprehend his own experience as harassment (an interpretation I make as our interpretations are highly influential of how people around us communicate (Fricker, 2009)) let alone express it in a way that was intelligible to others. In this sense, Peter is what Fricker refers to as "doubly wronged: once by the structural prejudice in the shared hermeneutical resource, and once by the hearer in making an identity-prejudiced credibility judgment" (p. 159).

While this may be considered an extreme case, I argue that it should not be viewed as an exception to the norm. Instead, we should see it as part of a continuum, highlighting the alarming reality that such incidents can occur even in the presence of an observer (myself) and are treated afterward as if nothing significant happened – also by me, despite my intense discomfort. Nor should we consider Amanda an exception to an otherwise more "decent" norm for Danish teachers; rather, her actions can also be viewed on this continuum, illustrating how power dynamics shape both perceptions and behavior across various contexts. The power dynamics are not only present in the room but are also complexly intertwined with meso-institutional and macro-social aspects. In interpreting Amanda's actions, we must consider these factors, including for example, working conditions for teachers, school policies at both local and national levels, and discourses surrounding teacher authority, discipline, and the purpose of education. All of which are already pre-structured and pre-imagined through the lens of the naturalized deficit perception of the child as "less than human." The very concept of the child plays a central role in structuring these power dynamics, thereby creating the possibility of this continuum in the first place. Taking as our

point of departure the idea that Amanda is a "decent" person who does not intend to harass children, the hermeneutical lacuna becomes a source of "epistemic and moral bad luck" (Fricker, 2009, p. 151) for Amanda. Ultimately, all adults risk encountering similar epistemic and moral misfortune where they might not understand that what they are doing is wrong because they lack the interpretive tools to see their actions as transgressive or as harassment or "unfair treatment" or where they simply do not "hear" the knowledge offered by the child. As Murris emphasizes, "hearing" the child's voice is an epistemic challenge (Murris, 2013). This is furthermore a challenge that increases the younger the child is (Duhn, 2015), and when the child category intersects with other categories such as black or indigenous (Baumtrog & Peach, 2019; Murris, 2013).

The way forward, I argue, is to destabilize the deficit thinking that grounds the concept of the child, and this is where the concept of childism has something to offer. However, before I elaborate on that, I want to clarify the relationship between epistemic injustice and the democratic role of education, which will help illuminate how the prejudice embedded in the conception of the child damages society more broadly, which emphasizes the democratic potential of childism.

the relation between epistemic injustice and the democratic role of education

According to Fricker, epistemic injustice – testimonial as well as hermeneutical – is a particularly damaging kind of injustice. In the case of testimonial injustice, the subject is undermined or wronged in their capacity as a "giver of knowledge," which is essential to human value (2009, p. 44). Such harm, when experienced persistently and connected to one's social identity (for example as a child), can deeply affect the subject's psychology, leading to a loss of "epistemic confidence" (p. 49) and thus producing disadvantages that extend broadly and deeply into a person's life. In the case of hermeneutical injustice, the gap in the collective hermeneutical resource prevents the subject from making adequate sense of her experiences and rendering them communicatively intelligible to others. The damage here is that significant areas of one's social experience are obscured from collective understanding. Like testimonial injustice, hermeneutical injustice also has "identity-constructive power" (p. 168). In the case

presented in this paper, Peter is socially constituted as "grumpy," "peeved," "ridiculous," and "disrupting the atmosphere with his (problematic) attitude" – not exactly a valued contribution to a community, thereby jeopardizing his worth in the classroom. The long-term harm of hermeneutical injustice is that the subject loses confidence in their ability to interpret their own experiences.

Drawing on the perceptions of democracy offered by Biesta and Rancière, democracy – or (democratic) politics – is something that someone *performs*. The identity of the democratic subject "only comes into being in and through the act of disruption of the police order" (Biesta, 2009, p. 109). This understanding allows us to see how very damaging epistemic injustice is for the (sporadic) emergence of "democratic subjects" and thus also for the ongoing reconfiguration of the police order in the name of equality. I argue that the deficit perception of the child fundamentally puts "claims for equality" at stake. Although the social category of "child" is one the human being eventually grows out of, thereby shedding the immediate prejudice associated with this category, the damage does not necessarily end in childhood. Prejudice can prevent individuals from contributing knowledge to the public domain. This is not only due to extrinsic factors, such as dysfunctions in the overall epistemic system that block the circulation of critical ideas (such as not being able to "hear" the child's voice). Another, perhaps more alarming source is intrinsic factors such as low epistemic confidence. The loss of trust in one's ability to know, interpret, and understand the world, including personal experiences, can have long-lasting, identity-shaping effects (Fricker, 2009). I argue that this loss also represents a loss of potential claims for a reconfiguration of the police order based on the perception of injustice.

This is why I argue for the necessity of broadening our perception of what the democratic role of education involves. We must see it as *much more* than the specific activities and educational endeavors we enact with the purpose of producing certain qualities and capabilities. Even though certain educational endeavors, such as the Philosophy for Children movement, could be argued to focus specifically on fostering children's epistemic confidence, the deficit-perception concept of the child still poses a challenge in hearing the child's voice. The everyday practices of well-intended teachers, or in Fricker's words;

"hearers," operate in a social-imaginative atmosphere of residual prejudice against children. This atmosphere is not merely a matter of school culture, but materializes, as Wall puts it, in the "entire edifice of human societies, cultures, languages, rights, laws, relationships, narratives, and norms" (2019, p. 4), which includes school policies, organizations, and configurations. From a structural and societal perspective, local cases of "non-prejudiced" teachers and school culture are not nearly enough.

a childist approach to education's democratic role – new trajectories

So, what then is education's democratic role in leaving behind the deficit perception of the child, and what does the concept of childism have to offer in this regard? Following the argument put forward in this article, the democratic role of education is about basic, everyday epistemic practices. It involves conveying knowledge to others – not necessarily or exclusively through well-articulated, so-called "reasoned" or "intelligent" linguistic practices – and making sense of our social experiences, which are shaped by how those around us communicate. Given that the concept of the child as a "not-yet" is historically ingrained and pervades the entire structure of human societies, including scholarship, we arguably face a perpetual constraint both in educational practice and in our scholarly imagination. As a critical lens, childism can help us to better understand this perceptual constraint and the way in which it structures our interpretive habits. Childism is a perspective aimed at examining the underlying structural premises and assumptions that inform theories and practices, as well as the ways in which these assumptions reinforce adult privilege. It is "a way of seeing that determines what, how, and why one would theorize" (Biswas et al., 2024, p. 8). As was suggested above, childism has served as the critical lens influencing the development of this article. It has shaped *what*, *how*, and *why* I chose the particular case discussed and the specific theoretical approach I have taken. As such, I refer to this analysis as a childist analysis, aiming to understand how being a child involves structural marginalization in terms of epistemic injustice, and how this affects not only children but all of us and the democratic quality of society.

I do not claim to have overcome existing social interpretive habits in this

article – nor do I claim to be "bias-free." But I have investigated lines of flight with the aim of generating run-offs from established structures and thus enable potential new directions for how we could think about, theorize, study, and practice education's democratic role. Such new directions, I argue, involve reconsidering the notion that education's democratic role is primarily about *producing* the qualities and capacities that constitute the (imagined) democratic person. From a speculative standpoint, I suggest that education's democratic role may instead be conceptualized as preserving something already present: the ability to convey knowledge.

Again, this should not be mistaken for an argument against focusing on the development of communicative and deliberative skills, reflective thinking, and particular values. Rather, it is an argument for taking a different starting point, suggesting that in order to speak as a political subject, there is *nothing to learn*. This starting point shifts the focus, as also suggested by Wall (2021), from what the individual student must learn and develop for democracy to "work" or to be "realized," to how the school and the broader society, that is, the micro-interactional, meso-institutional and macro-social levels can "hear" and respond to the knowledge already offered by the child, thereby affirming it as a "giver of knowledge" and a sense-making being. This reorients the responsibility for democracy as a collective rather than an individual one, which furthermore implies that the burden does not lie exclusively on education, as is also suggested by Biesta (2007). Therefore, what I until now have referred to as "education's democratic role" is perhaps more precisely described as "the misunderstood perception surrounding education's democratic role."

In my view, the philosophical perspective of childism, as a critical lens to produce a more age-inclusive scholarly imagination (Wall, 2019), enables a rethinking of education's democratic role and has the potential to enable a hermeneutical breakthrough – that is, a moment when a kind of epistemic injustice is overcome (Fricker, 2009). The overcoming of this injustice would not happen once and for all, but perhaps takes place as sporadic events, as claims for equality based on the perception of injustice. Such events and claims could reconfigure the existing police order (Biesta, 2009; Rancière, 1999), shifting the *child* body from the

place (currently) assigned to it. This could make the child visible in a way that it previously had no business being seen and make knowledge offered by the child heard and understood as discourse, where once there was only place for noise.

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