Democracy as Othering Within Finnish Education

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ABSTRACT

The word democracy is frequently uttered by academics, politicians, and, generally within society. Phrases such as ‘democratic education’, ‘democracy education’ and ‘(student) participation’ are often referred to within national curricula, policy briefings, and, teacher education/training and resources. Little critical attention has been given to the word within the context of Finnish education. In recent years the educational system of Finland has been described as a ‘miracle’ and commentators have noted its ‘successes.’ This article offers a deeper gaze within Finnish education by looking at the ways democracy discourses are uttered by practitioners. For the purposes of this article the author analyses two in-depth conversation extracts, one was from a youth participation conference in Helsinki in 2015, the other is a conversation from a conference held in February 2016. This article focuses on the uses and functions of discourse to uncover cultural stereotyping and othering in terms of how democracy is discussed and expressed within the context of Finland.

KEYWORDS

Democracy, Discourse, Education, Finland, Heteroglossia, Othering

INTRODUCTION: DEMOCRACY IN FINNISH EDUCATION

The aim of this paper is to focus on the ways discourses about democracy and human rights within Finnish education are framed through nationalistic and/or ethnocentric ideologies. Finland has been ‘described’ as a country ‘that shows what equal opportunities look like’ (Sahlberg, 2012), and a country with ‘high levels of equality’ (Aylott, 2016). In a further example, Niemi, Toom, & Kallioniemi. (2012) note the importance of teachers as actors of democracy in Finland and stress strong social cohesion as a factor in Finland’s educational successes. The Ministry of Education and Culture in Finland has published on the need for Finland to do better in terms of inclusion and participation in its schools (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2008). Moreover, the Ministry has gone on to stress that Finland recognises the importance of curriculum development, literacy, and, teacher training for human rights education (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2011). In compulsory education, section 2 of the Basic Education Act in Finland states: ‘(2) Education shall promote civilisation and equality in society and pupils’ prerequisites for participating in education and otherwise developing themselves during their lives’ (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2016, p. 1). The translation and interpretation of what these words mean in practice is yet to be seen. Lappalainen & Lahelma (2015) argue that discourses on equality in Finland have generated a number of assumptions about what society should be like.
in contrast to what Finnish society is like. Simola (2014) argues that within Finland a number of discursive formations over time have produced ‘myths’ around ‘educational clientelism’ and notions of ‘social democracy’. Indeed, some studies on Finnish education have indicated that Finnish schools do not encourage students to develop their own ‘political voice’ (Sandström, Einarson, Davies, & Asunta, 2010) in comparison to other countries. Finally, some commentators have indicated a potential ‘democratic crisis’ in sections of Finnish society (Andersson & Sjöblom, 2013). Seemingly, a number of questions remain surrounding the meanings and practices of democratic values within Finland.

The paper offers a deeper gaze within Finnish education by looking at the ways the word ‘democracy’ is uttered by practitioners within the field of education. As I have previously noted, within Finnish education democracy discourses are present in policy documents, teacher training resources, and, national curricular documents. It is therefore important to deconstruct the ways practitioners utter and use the word democracy as the speakers themselves carry symbolic significance in how other interlocutors (teachers, students, etc.) are influenced by their utterances. Inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981) work on dialogism, this paper focuses on heteroglossic discourse functions to uncover cultural stereotyping and othering in terms of how democracy discourses are discussed and expressed within the context of Finland. Excerpt 1 is shown before excerpt 2 in order to situate the meta-discourses about democracy within Finnish education, thus, one can then go on to demonstrate the relationships between the meta-discourses about democracy and individual utterances. Excerpt 1 shows a discussion at a conference on democracy and human rights and shows the discursive interactions of interlocutors within a dialogue. Excerpt 1 is taken from a conference I co-organised on democracy and human rights. This dialogue offers a rare insight into the dialogues between human rights practitioners within Finland, international scholars, and experts in the field. The conference in excerpt 1 shows the contestation of ideas between academics and human rights practitioners on the issues surrounding democracy and human rights, generally, and specifically, within the Finnish context. Excerpt 2, like excerpt 1, focuses on the utterances of NGO [Non-Governmental Organisation] practitioners being confronted by an other – in this instance, me (a non-Finnish citizen living in Finland). Excerpt 2, like excerpt 1, offers an insight into the discourses of human rights practitioners when confronted by an other. Here, I play the role of a ‘devil’s advocate’ in the conversation whereby I contest the narratives and ideologies presented by the speakers. In excerpt 2 the youth participation conference was mainly attended by Finnish school students and Finnish teachers, thus, the excerpt shows how practitioners utter discourses about democracy and human rights amongst other practitioners within the field of education. Only two excerpts are used as the focus is to show how two sets of practitioners from two different events utter discourses about democracy. In using the two excerpts in my analysis I am not attempting to generalise the whole of the Finnish context from these examples, rather, the excerpts used indicate sentiments that can be hidden within conversations about democracy and human rights (such as, cultural stereotypes, essentialisms, ethnocentrisms etc.) whereby speaker utterances and discourse strategies can be traced.

DEMOCRACY, EDUCATION, AND DISCOURSE: THE PROBLEMATIQUE

The role of education and democracy has been much debated. John Dewey (1916) explored the role that education plays in a democratic society and focused on education as part of a broader project that encompassed an exploration of the nature of experience, knowledge, society and ethics. Dewey argued that the link between community and pedagogy was paramount and that educators needed to consider the connection between community life and the life within the classroom (Dewey, 1916). Dewey’s work is often cited and/or quoted on issues of democracy within education without much critical inquisition (For example, Mintz, 2000; Hecht, 2010). It is important to note however that Dewey’s work has been critically examined by a number of commentators. Some scholars have noted the contradictions of progressive education (Howlett, 2013) and Dewey’s failure to address the role of democratic communities and how democracies emerge and come in-to-being (Joas, 2000). This has
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