

# Alternative narratives of achievement and Democratic Education – a model for a few?

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## A lack of diversity

One of the criticisms Democratic Schools often face is that they are exclusive, and therefore, there is a lack of diversity in their student bodies. At first glance, this assumption seems correct, and the fees parents have to pay to send their child to a Democratic School make for an easy explanation: Democratic Schools are mostly private (fee-paying) schools. The monetary aspect certainly is a hurdle, yet, asking staff of Democratic Schools, it quickly becomes apparent that most, if not all of them, have taken measures to encourage parents who are unable to afford the fees to apply anyway, and have systems in place to make attendance affordable for all children, like bursaries or solidarity structures. Diversity and equality are central values within Democratic Education contexts. Thus, while money remains a significant barrier, I argue that it is not sufficient as the only explanation for a rather homogenous student population at Democratic Schools. Looking into concepts of achievement might yield important results with regard to additional, less obvious reasons.

## Self-validation and external validation

Therefore, I conducted an explorative study to find out more about concepts of achievement in people with a clear affinity to Democratic Education. At the annual EUDEC (European Democratic Education Community) Conference, I asked 20 participants to “tell me about a situation where [they had been] very proud, and explain why.” I analysed the transcripts using a QDA (Qualitative Data Analysis) software. The feeling of pride proved to have different reference points and two main categories could be established: *Self-Validation* and *Validation by Others*. When the individual is the only one to validate their action(s) as being worthy of pride, they themselves, their self-concept and values are the point of reference. When they are proud because somebody else praised or recognised their action(s), the point of reference is externalised (*Validation by Others*).

The biggest main category by far was *Self-Validation*, which, considering how much autonomy is given to children through the principles of Democratic Education, might not be surprising. However, with regard to the sub-categories, both *Community* and

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*Autonomy* featured equally, and they were usually mentioned within the same interviews. It was not a case of people being either community-focussed or striving for autonomy, but individuals successfully incorporating both aspects into their daily lives and identities and evaluating that as an achievement. Given how community and autonomy are often discussed as mutually exclusive opposites, this is remarkable (Mayer 2016, 1460). Democratic schools seem to be communities where the individual's sense of belonging (and achievement) does not depend on conformity, meaning that students can freely express their individuality and still feel part of their community (Au 2010, 1).

Within the main category of *Self-Validation*, the biggest sub-category was *Personal Growth*. There were more mentions of this sub-category than of the other main category. This indicates that a high value is placed on learning itself within Democratic Education contexts. Equally, both the act of making a decision and the act of taking responsibility were seen as achievements within themselves.

The second main category, *External Validation*, was nevertheless well worth looking at. What this category amounts to is feeling proud because of positive feedback. Contrary to what one might expect, there was not a single mention of validation by somebody on a higher hierarchical level, be it at work or in educational settings. On the contrary, what featured most prominently was feedback given by people the interviewee had responsibility for (which usually indicates that they have the same or a lower hierarchical status than the interviewee).

## Diversity, access and educational choices

What is probably most interesting with regard to the question of diversity and equal representation is that in both main categories, there were no mentions of traditional markers of achievement, such as degrees, grades, certificates, (monetary) rewards etc, which usually feature highly as objects of pride (Mueller 2016, 2; Baldrige 2014, 446).

In the following paragraphs, the connection between this and the lack of diversity at Democratic Schools will be explored. Traditional markers of achievement, such as money and material goods, rewards and grades, degrees and certificates as markers of education are easy to recognise and nearly universally accepted (Mueller 2016, 2). They serve to create capital: economic capital and social capital (Bourdieu 1997, 53).

It is easier to ignore those markers or feel less of a need to acquire (more of) them if they are already present or freely available and accessible. This could mean having enough economic capital to be able to compensate for failure, or having enough social capital for the economic capital to be less relevant (when connections have become more important than academic achievement, most often the case for the upper classes) (Bourdieu 1997, 53). If enough cultural capital (education) has been accumulated, the fact that learning takes place at school (illustrated by getting good grades) is taken for granted and thus not worth mentioning. This would apply primarily to the educated upper

middle classes, as illustrated by Deppe's study on milieu-related educational beliefs (2013, 236). The middle classes also report feeling a sense of belonging in educational contexts, making them more likely to be experimental than working class people, who reportedly feel out of place in educational settings (Hill 2016, 1288). Deppe also mentions that for the working classes and the lower middle class, education is the most important opportunity for improving one's position within the social system. Therefore, parents from said socio-economic milieus were found to attach a lot more importance (and display more controlling behaviour with regard) to their children's grades as predictive of their children's future opportunities (Deppe 2013, 236).

Individual concepts of achievement play an important role in life and educational choices: people will make those choices based on what they personally consider achievements, and make life and educational choices for themselves and people they have responsibility for (e.g. their children) depending on which path will allow them to achieve most (according to their own concept of achievement). Thus, if the narrative of achievement put forward by a certain educational model does not match the concepts of achievement of (some) members of their desired target group, it will not attract these people to the model, even if other aspects of their respective concepts of achievement are exceptionally well matched. Unintentionally, part of the target group is excluded through the narrative, even if the aspects of achievement which are omitted in the narrative are taken into account within the reality of the educational model. Because traditional markers of achievement are not seen as central or worth mentioning, they are disregarded, making it seem like they are non-existent or not catered for at Democratic Schools. Changing this and creating a more holistic narrative of achievement within Democratic Education could potentially ensure a higher degree of diversity in Democratic Education settings.

### A problem of communication?

If Democratic Schools give no space to degrees and career opportunities in their narratives of achievement, they inadvertently exclude people who focus on them, for example people striving for a better position within the social system through their education. This will often apply to people from minority backgrounds, as they are disproportionately more likely to belong to those groups, for example because they are often disadvantaged in the hiring process and other interview situations (Sandhu 2018, 1; MAR 2006; Office for National Statistics 2014). For example, according to the 2011 Census, employment rates were a lot lower in people born outside the EU (59%, compared to 69% for those born in the UK) (Office for National Statistics 2014). In other words: if traditional denominators of achievement are ignored in the narratives of achievement put forward in Democratic Education contexts, these narratives can only speak to those who can afford to ignore them. The problem of the apparent exclusivity is further exacerbated by issues of rep-

resentation.<sup>2</sup>

Without noticing or intending to do so, Democratic Education might be excluding part of its target group, purely by how the model is presented. If Democratic Education wants to be truly inclusive, good intentions are not enough. More research will be needed to identify and eliminate those factors that make the model exclusive where it should not be. This does not mean changing educational practices, but the way they are communicated.

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2 A school known for its visible lack of diversity will be less likely to attract students from visible minority or societally less privileged groups, because they might not feel that it is a space for them. And if they do, they run the risk of carrying the burden of exceptionality (cf. Williams). Pursuing this aspect would lead beyond the scope of this essay, but research in this field is clearly needed.