6 *Practitioners' Response to Manifesto 3*

Democratic Education

ELISE KINNEAR AND ALIABBAS DHANJI

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, Elise and Aliabbas respond to the vision for establishing children's democratic rights – allowing children status as full citizens, entitled to vote in elections – and ask how this vision can be situated in a primary school context. Some of the questions that arose from reading Chapter 5 are, How are our schools democratic? Where are they not? and Do we give authentic opportunities for children to have a say about the workings of their school?

The answer to the latter is that in many ways we do not. Central government sets the direction of state education – making decisions about curricula, setting standards and holding the purse strings. In this context, how can we reflect on what matters to children, and in so doing embrace children's diverse voices in school? The hope is that by experiencing a democratic education, children are more likely to be active citizens when they are allowed to vote. As well as reflecting on their experiences at the University of Cambridge Primary School (UCPS), Elise and Aliabbas explore a case study from a unique school in Germany, where, for decades, democracy has been at the heart of its educational design.

6.2 Practitioner Wisdom from Cambridge, UK: Finding Opportunities for Children's Voices

The UCPS has a guiding principle: to nurture children to become compassionate citizens, curious about the world in which they live, and equipped to participate and engage in society.

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We fully support children's right, pursuant to Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989), to participate in politics, have a voice and be heard. In recognition of this, we actively explore ways in which children at our school can have a meaningful voice and a tangible impact on key aspects of their school life. We read Harry Pearse's manifesto at the same time as we were developing two related democratic projects: setting up a school Class Congress as described in Kirstin MacVicar's practitioner's response (Chapter 4) and drafting democracy lesson resources.

After the establishment of the Class Congress, the school hosted a research project, led by Professor David Runciman, Dr Harry Pearse and Ella Bradshaw, on democracy and children's rights. The project – based on a series of workshops with primary school–aged children – sought to understand how children think and feel about their disenfranchisement (Pearse, 2023).

In his thought-provoking chapter, Pearse challenges us to confront the status quo and critically analyse the current age restriction imposed on suffrage in the UK. It is arguable that the voting age of eighteen is only accepted because it is all most of us have ever known (having come into force in 1969); because there is broad parity in voting age thresholds across Western democracies; and because it is assumed that, with the extension of voting rights to women, the great fight for universal suffrage has already been won. Save for recent debates about lowering the voting age to sixteen, as is the case in Scottish and Welsh elections, suffrage is not an issue that receives much media or political attention in this country. There seems little appetite for change. Pearse's chapter is therefore both thought-provoking and confronting.

Box 6.1 Reflections by Elise Kinnear

Harry Pearse's manifesto forced me to challenge my own views on the issue of child enfranchisement, to consider how and when these ideas were formed, how much was down to my own thinking and how much was a passive acceptance of societal norms. Pearse's argument served to highlight the lack of policy cohesion and seeming arbitrariness in the allocation of rights and responsibilities to British children. Why are we held criminally responsible from the age of ten (or twelve in Scotland) yet deemed unable to assume other

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responsibilities until much later? Why can we join the military at sixteen but not drive a car until seventeen? Why can we have sex, and become parents with responsibility for raising a child, at sixteen, while still legally a child ourselves, and yet must wait until eighteen for marriage, cigarettes or alcohol? When forced to stand back and look at the issue, it can be hard to identify a shared rationale that binds these individual pieces of legislation. However, if childhood continues to eighteen as legally recognised by international law, is there not an argument for increasing the threshold for all these activities to eighteen? As Pearse notes, such an approach would fail to acknowledge the different levels of risk posed to either the individual or wider society. So, why the need for a minimum voting age level at all? It can't be to ensuring a competent and informed electorate because, as Pearse points out, no such criterion exists for the adult electorate.

Overall, I found myself more open to a review of current voting laws – indeed a comprehensive review of the current system – and a national conversation about what a modern democracy should look like and who should have a voice. Although I question the merit in granting universal suffrage from birth, as advocated in the manifesto, I am open to the right being afforded earlier than eighteen, not least because of compelling evidence that surfaced during the aforementioned democracy research project, namely that the most pressing issues for the children in our school – including climate change, the plight of refugees, education and artificial intelligence – do not reflect the policy concerns of adults (in the UK in 2024 these are the economy, health and immigration/asylum; YouGov, 2024). If policy is driven by citizen demands, and citizens express those demands by voting – a process illustrated by the disproportionate attention given to the policy concerns of the 'grey vote' – then any group that cannot vote is placed at a disadvantage. Just as the introduction of female suffrage compelled political parties to develop policies that would resonate with women voters, suffrage for younger people would seem likely to drive policy commitments in areas that matter to younger generations. Thankfully, I am not tasked with driving policy change. I am, however, persuaded that we cannot afford to accept the status quo without question, and that children have the right to understand these important issues, form their own opinions on them, and use their voices to ensure their opinions are heard.

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At the conclusion of Pearse and Runciman's democracy research project, the school conducted a review to identify its strengths and limitations and to determine how we could further refine and improve it and embed it within our school curriculum for annual delivery. To ensure maximum effectiveness, we thought carefully about the target age group. The original research project was delivered to children in Year 2 (aged six to seven), Year 4 (aged eight to nine) and Year 6 (aged ten to eleven). Based on feedback from participating children and teaching staff, it was agreed that it would be most productive to work with children aged between eight and ten, namely in Years 4 and 5. Observations from the research project revealed that younger children were less likely to participate in discussions, whilst older children, sadly, had already developed a degree of cynicism about democracy and politics. Overall, children in Year 4 participated well in the research study with a wide number of children contributing ideas and showing a willingness to reflect and alter their opinions.

Box 6.2 Reflections by Aliabbas Dhanji

The initial research project, conducted by Harry Pearse, David Runciman and Ella Bradshaw between 14 October and 2 December 2022, comprised six forty-minute workshops, each conducted with a single class from Years 2, 4 and 6.

As the teacher of the Year 2 class, I had the opportunity to observe as a bystander, having very little active participation or influence in any of the sessions other than managing class behaviour and facilitating logistics. This included arranging groups, and giving children instructions to efficiently move around the classroom when necessary. My lack of active participation, although not an explicit instruction conveyed by the research team, was to ensure the children felt they could freely express their opinions and ideas in relation to the questions being posed to them. Upon reflection, however, I do wonder whether my presence and their awareness of me as their class teacher could in some way have influenced or restricted their responses.

While my presence was required as the adult with the responsibility for those children within the classroom, it did lead me to reflect on the potentially problematic nature of trying to elicit

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children's authentic opinions on issues like independence and autonomy when the environment in which they are expressing their opinions is explicitly structured. Could this in fact impact the authenticity of the children's responses? I found myself wondering whether children were able to fully express their thoughts and opinions and whether – had I not been in the room – their thoughts and opinions would have been expressed differently, or whether more or less children would have felt comfortable conveying their ideas.

The initial session began with an exercise to gauge the children's existing understanding of power structures within Britain. Later, the researchers explored children's views on whether they should be allowed to vote or not. The opposition towards child enfranchisement from just over half of the children in the class (52 per cent) took me by surprise, as did the rationale (cited frequently by the children) that children lack the knowledge and terminology to appropriately convey their ideas, thoughts and beliefs. I was struck that most of the children who made this argument were students who had an existing understanding of the definition of democracy, as well as an awareness of current affairs, such as the war in Ukraine, and matters related to the environment – often speaking about and conveying their thoughts on these issues during class discussions.

Beforehand, I had wondered if the children who usually express their political opinions in class would be more proactive in the research project discussions? The facilitation and structure of the sessions allowed all children to actively take part in the discussions to some extent. However, I felt there was a disparity in the participation levels of children who had previously expressed opinions on current affairs at school or at home, and those who had not. From a teacher's perspective, this led me to ponder how a subject matter such as democracy and child enfranchisement could be made more accessible to those children who are not actively exposed to or partake in such discussion with adults at home. If we discuss such matters without ensuring all children have a base understanding of the concepts, will all children to be able to equally contribute to the discussion? To effectively discuss such matters and form an opinion, a certain amount of subject knowledge and teaching – for example about power structures and their histories – is required. Without it,

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we end up with discussions that assume all children can keep up with each other. Will this allow conversation to be truly equal? Or are the children who are exposed to democracy 'dinner table talk' at an advantage?

The findings of the research project provided interesting insight into children's opinions on a subject matter they seldom have the opportunity to discuss within a primary school context. As a result, it led me to reflect on the impact that providing an open forum for young children can have, and how, regardless of their differing opinions on child enfranchisement, simply exposing children to the ideas of democracy, power structures, world affairs, and the prospect of child enfranchisement, and equipping them with the skills and knowledge they need to engage and form opinions, is hugely significant.

Working in partnership with Pearse, we created an eight-lesson work plan based on some of the findings of the democracy research project. This mini curriculum will be used in the UCPS and eventually made available to other educators and educational establishments free of charge. The curriculum combines the academic and research expertise of our colleagues at the University of Cambridge and feedback from the research study with the pedagogical knowledge of our teaching staff.

Our key objectives were to develop a curriculum that

- Is child focused and child led
- Develops and enhances children's oracy skills
- Enables children to form opinions on important issues
- Promotes British values as defined by the British Government, such as democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance
- Provides an education in citizenship ahead of the UK National Curriculum KS3 requirement

The lessons are intentionally flexible rather than prescriptive and can be tailored to meet the needs of different cohorts and environments. Although aimed at children in Years 4 and 5, the curriculum design and delivery could be adapted for an older or younger audience

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as desirable. Similarly, schools can choose whether to deliver the eight lessons weekly over a half term, fortnightly over a full term, or intensively over a single week – combined, perhaps, with a visit to a seat of democracy, like a local council, regional mayor's office, Downing Street, the Houses of Parliament, the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly or the Northern Irish Assembly.

To maximise the benefits and impact of the curriculum, children need to be equipped with oracy skills so that they can articulate their thoughts, listen actively, purposefully engage in discussion – whether by concurring, building on an argument or disagreeing respectfully – and feel confident to change their opinion and explain their reasons for doing so. Oracy is already embedded into the UCPS' curriculum, so the democracy lessons provide another opportunity to embed and practice them. However, other schools may need to formally teach oracy skills in advance or alongside the democracy lessons to support children to fully engage.

The curriculum is easy to deliver with minimal preparation and limited teacher input. The first five lessons are framed around enquiry questions, whilst the final three sessions involve preparations for, and the delivery of, a presentation to an audience of decision-makers – for example the school governors, a local MP or local councillors. Over the course of the first five lessons, children are provided with information to help them understand societal structures (past and present) and the British democratic system and suffrage, as well as explore enquiry questions (such as, What is power? Who rules Britain? Should children have the right to vote? What really matters to children? Are children heard?). The course material is intentionally neutral in tone – its purpose is simply to provide children with the relevant information on which to form their own opinions, just as they will need to do when they become enfranchised and can exercise their right to vote. Teachers are provided with a series of follow-up questions to help deepen the discussion and challenge thinking if required. We found, however, that within a supportive classroom environment, with sufficient thinking time and drawing on their existing oracy skills, children in the target age group often pose these deeper, thought-provoking questions themselves. The final three sessions allow children to wrestle with democratic decision-making first hand. What should be included in the final presentation? Who should deliver it? Who should be invited to listen? What is the fairest way to reach a decision on these issues? Children all too often have to relinquish decision-making

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powers to other people. Not this time. The teacher will not resolve any disagreements or tell them what to do or how to do it. The power is theirs. And, through this series of lessons, they should come to understand what it means to exercise such power.

A similar example of child empowerment is presented below. This case study comes from colleagues in Germany, who likewise work in a school linked with a university, with strong commitments to equality and democratic process.

Box 6.3 Practitioner Wisdom from Germany: Solving Conflicts Peacefully – a Basis for Democratic Education at Laborschule Bielefeld

Nicole Freke (Laborschule Bielefeld) and Christian Timo Zenke (Bielefeld University)

The complexity of developing democracy within adult society is not dissimilar to creating educational opportunities that adhere to the principles of democracy. We know that democracy is diversely lived and experienced in countries across the world and so defining what we mean is an ongoing endeavour. In this section, Nicole and Timo explain how democracy is lived out in a school in Germany.

Laborschule Bielefeld, which is German for Laboratory School Bielefeld, had held a unique position within the German educational landscape since its founding in 1974. This is due to its focus on democratic education, but also its conceptualisation as a public experimental school of the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia. As a progressive public school, Laborschule Bielefeld currently teaches 710 students from Year 0 (the final preschool year) to Year 10 (end of lower secondary school), ages five to sixteen.

Living together in a democratic society can only work in the long term if the members of this community are able to solve conflicts in a constructive and peaceful manner. Since this applies to both our society as a whole and the embryonic society at each school, Laborschule Bielefeld has made it its mission to include peaceful and sustainable problem solving as a central part of everyday school life. In doing so, we not only want to make our own school a more peaceful and democratic place, we also want to ensure our society becomes a space for living together peacefully.

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It all started with us looking for an answer to the question, How can children learn to resolve conflicts peacefully and sustainably? While searching for an answer, we eventually came across the notion of nonviolent communication. To us, this form of communication is not just a tool; it is also (and more often) an attitude. The younger children know this form of communication as 'giraffe language', whereas the older children, adolescents and adults know it as 'mindful or respectful communication'. Giraffe language is a metaphor for communicating with heart and with a higher purpose: giraffes have the biggest hearts, as well as the longest necks.

Initially, three colleagues enrolled in training on the topic, leading to the implementation of the principles of nonviolent communication in everyday school life at Laborschule Bielefeld. Many of the ideas felt familiar, as though they were already a part of our school structure. Not all of them were, however – at least not yet. Over the following months, more and more of these ideas made their way into our classrooms. It was a like doing a puzzle in which some parts had been missing until now.

Since then, all the primary school teachers have been introduced to the principles, and every classroom has a poster setting out support measures to solve problems in a mindful way. This poster introduces the four steps of solving conflicts in nonviolent communication:

- Observation ('I have heard . . .', 'I have seen . . .' etc.)
- Feeling (e.g. 'I am now happy/angry/lonely')
- Need (e.g. 'I need trust/justice/openness')
- Request ('I would like to ask you to . . .')

The visualisation of these four steps helps the children (and the adults) to develop an attitude that is about communicating what is going on inside oneself instead of blaming, threatening or accusing others. In addition to this, we created feelings and needs cards for each class, which illustrate the terms presented on the poster. This helps children to develop a shared vocabulary for solving conflicts.

More information on the project and the materials mentioned can be found at www.labschoolseurope.eu/solving-conflicts-peacefully/.

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Over to You

In his manifesto, Pearse articulated the reasons why we should give children the vote. For us, this brought up questions about children's agency. Giving children opportunities to engage meaningfully in their education (or the decisions about what education could be) and asking questions about how we view childhood represent serious lines of enquiry. In a post-COVID-19 world, in which mental health, identity crises and economic and social uncertainties abound, it feels right that we reflect, reconsider and reimagine how we engage children as citizens; people who have a voice and should be listened to and heard! As we end this practitioners' response, we invite the reader to reflect on the following questions drawing from their own wisdom and practices in their own classrooms, schools, social, cultural and educational contexts:

- How could a school become democratic in both philosophical, theoretical and practical terms?
- Where does the power lie in a classroom or school or youth group? Are there opportunities to speak to power? To challenge authority in a way that is respectful and considerate?
- Where do children debate, disagree and argue?
- Where are the spaces of uncertainty – where teachers and school leaders allow confusion, disagreement and a little bit of organised chaos – to show children there are diverse ways of being, feeling, existing and responding to the world and to life's challenges?

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