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Children's identities and experiences of democracy

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Which types of education and learning processes favour the development of 'democratic personalities' in early years institutions? Although this is early in life for citizenship education, are there already experiences which prepare young children for citizenship in a democratic society?

Speaking about 'civility' or about 'living together' is speaking about the premises and foundations of citizenship education. Children's identities, their relationships to others and their participation in a group are at stake. In a democratic society, children's socialisation involves supporting their individualisation, autonomy and participation. Democratic societies aim for the development of individual creativity and critical thinking.

The socialisation process in a democratic society and for a democratic society assumes specific features that must be asserted at each stage of children's secondary socialisation.

When children arrive in the institution

Young children must not be overwhelmed by the group they join; they must not feel 'lost in the group' or unsafe. The transition from a familiar to a new environment is all the better when a 'secure' relationship has been established between child and mother (Ainsworth), but it is up to the institution to be attentive and take into consideration children's difficulties.

Firstly, educators must imagine what the separation from a smaller and cosy environment, dominated by affectionate relationships implies for children. They must imagine that children experience a loss, a feeling of exile. They are taken away from their families and often find themselves in complex and vast spaces. Above all, they become involved in new activities, the sense of which they do not initially understand. They must rely on adults whom they hardly recognise. They face groups whose size and strength can be threatening - they have a feeling of 'multitude' (both in terms of number and undifferentiability). The feeling of exile experienced by adults when they arrive in a new institution, such as a hospital, may help us to understand young children's feelings:

I don't really know where I am, what is going to happen to me, what I am supposed to do, who are these people looking after me, but still I know that I am in an institution which cares for me! I am going to be far from my loved ones, from my familiar habits ... first, I am going to close myself up, turn to the only personal things I have left, some clothes, some objects, some memories ...

Those children who have not yet developed an inner world and who are not sure that this is all for their own good, may feel even more helpless.

The institution must imagine this rupture and ease it, through:

- visits prior to the first day at the institution (with parents and carers)
- marking out spaces with suitable colours and logos for children who cannot read; marking visible paths towards the toilets and other rooms with specific purposes
- setting up refuge corners, rest spaces where children will not feel the pressure of the group to such an extent
- establishing time rituals (through gestures and signals).

Nothing is obvious to young children. Easily identifiable markers are a way to make them feel secure, avoid feelings of abandonment, and to provide a way through a complex institution where they will change status and grow up. But initially, the institution must ensure that the children do not feel overwhelmed by the group and that new trusting relationships within the institution are established.

Recognising children's identities is vitally important in order to ensure that their arrival in the institution is a success. Young children must be called (orally and in writing) by their first and last names. The last name alone is not enough (we need to distinguish the child from his brothers and sisters), nor is the first name by itself (we need to her from other children with the same first name). When arriving in the new institution for the first time, children must be given their full *civil identity* rather than 'babyish' nicknames used until then. Rituals can favour the integration into the group, for example handing in a paper with their first and last names written on it. The paper symbolises that the children accept the community (they want to be part of it) and that they are recognised as named and individualised persons. (The action loses its symbolic dimension if the paper is handled in by the mother!)

Feelings of belonging

Feelings of belonging to a group ensue from living together and above all from getting involved in common activities. But we must make some distinctions.

Activities in unison

Singing, dancing, and speaking in chorus are all activities that allow children to be part of a group and are important in terms of socialisation. However, they should not become the main or the only way of 'being with others'. This would lead to the child becoming over-dependent on the relationship with the group. We must distinguish between the socialisation process in societies that aim to absorb the individual into the group (where s/he will lose her/his identity as an individual) and the socialisation process in a democratic society where the ultimate aim is the autonomy (*auto nomos*) of individuals able to follow their own laws (moral responsibility) and to build a political society where the law is wanted by all (the 'social contract' of democratic societies).

Singing together, walking together, reciting the verses of a sacred text together, are the best tools for integrated and holistic societies, in which the All prevails over the individual (Louis Dumont). The ideal asserted by democratic societies is that individuals learn to govern themselves (controlling their urges through the moral law, constructing common rules for 'living together' and building the laws of the city). In democratic societies, individuals must act by themselves, think by themselves, and learn to assume their own choices.

Cooperation-based activities

Group activities involving differentiated roles contribute towards developing integration and individualisation. Activities in which each person is given a place, a role to play and a contribution to make deepen children's self-consciousness and their consciousness of other people's roles. Collective work (al fresco or a model made by all) precedes the construction, through the participation of all, of the political city. Being recognised by others increases self-esteem. Group activities also favour the understanding of the 'rules of the game'.

Children arrive in the institution after primary socialisation in the family, where most of the time they were still in a fusional relationship with their mother. The institution plays a separation role, contributes to their growth and to their departure from the family cocoon.

However, Françoise Dolto has warned against reproducing a dependency on the group which would only contribute to the furthering of the initial fusional relationship with the mother. Some children, often quiet, shy and still immature when entering the institution; will closely imitate older children; they will not take any initiative and will become used to following others, submitting to others, stepping aside, and delay in terms of socialisation will increase precisely because of this 'carrier group' effect, which can often pass unnoticed because such children are not disturbing or undisciplined.

Learning to follow the rules

Among peers

The regulation of exchanges among children takes place very early. As soon as children can have physical contact, they are capable of 'acting dialogues' (Bruner): exchanging, cooperating and even negotiating; accepting giving up an object, offering in order to appease. At a very early stage, babies know, often without the intervention of an adult, how to solve their conflicts and even how to set up rules for cooperation. Nurseries are not only made of cries and violence. Young children are not only competitors or rivals. Expressions of solicitude are more frequent than we think: children know how to comfort, how to be in empathy with the one who cries. Because we perceive nurseries as a kind of natural state, we separate children and watch them, out of fear for the risks and dangers of fighting. Research by Pikler (Locksy, Hungary) and by French CRESAS shows that peaceful exchanges can take place only if children have a free rein and adult intervention is not constant or constraining. If all children's activities are programmed, if all objects are formatted for 'educational purposes', then no real space of exploration is

possible, and no 'rules of the game' can be built on non-genuine experiences of communication with peers.

Institutional rules

Not all rules can be established by children: some need to be learned. Rules against incest and violence are the basis of all societies - what psychoanalysis has called 'the Law'. Respect for these laws gives us our humanness and allows us to exchange and speak through the access to a symbolic dimension. This initial law can not be challenged since it is precisely the one which allows language and discussion.

Historically all other rules change: their content is likely to vary depending on context. Helping children to understand the value and importance of rules, in situations tailored for them, is essential. They must understand that laws are created by men and women. The way they will obey the law and will contribute to the establishment of new laws will depend on this initial understanding. Citizenship education does not begin with a detailed learning of the laws of the individual's own country, but by a deep understanding of what laws are for. During the early years, the finality of laws may be understood on the basis of limited experiences which are nonetheless real.

Neither adoration nor submission, democracy is not only about citizens complying with the law, but also is about citizens willing to change the law.

Conclusion

The first experiences of young children when they are separated from their families may already be an experience of citizenship if we ensure that they understand they are recognised to the same extent as others, that they are fairly treated, and that their participation in the peer group and in the institution is not detrimental to their own freedom, but rather opens more possibilities for action and gives them more power to exert themselves on the surrounding environment. Secondary socialisation is not only a matter of 'respecting' individuality, it is also a matter of supporting the development of individuality - through structures, pedagogical practices, etc. This is the only educational project compatible with democratic ideals.

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