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Democracy and Early Childhood: Diverse representations of democratic education in post-dictatorship Portugal

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Abstract

Education systems are often expected to play a key role in developing, maintaining and promoting democratic values and behaviours. This is particularly apparent in Portugal where, after nearly half a century of dictatorship ending in 1974, democracy emerged as a central national aspiration, especially within Early Childhood Education (ECE). However, the ambiguity of the term 'democracy' has allowed policy makers, academics and educators alike to promote diverse understandings of its meaning.

This article delves into the ambiguities of democracy, revealing its flexible and context-dependent nature through the diverse representations of democracy encountered in three early years settings in Portugal: a public (state) kindergarten, a not-for-profit kindergarten and a private kindergarten. Using interviews, documentary analysis and observations we illustrate the diverse ways in which democracy was represented in each setting. We classify these representations of democracy as structural, individual and collective. We argue that these reflect the different ideologies of the three types of schools that draw upon particular theoretical understandings and socio-political developments in Portugal's educational history.

Keywords: Democracy, Representations, Early Childhood Education, Kindergarten, Portugal

Introduction

Portugal's history has been turbulent and marred by military coups, fascism and instability. However, after nearly half a century of dictatorship, the Carnation Revolution of 1974 resulted in the collapse of the authoritarian 'Estado Novo' regime, bringing forth a new emphasis on democracy, which began to influence and shape all levels of public policy.

Democracy was promoted within diverse educational policies, including those for young children. Moss (2011) provides a helpful twofold characterisation of democracy and

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education as "inseparably interconnected: democracy as a basic value and practice in education; and education as a means to strengthen and sustain democracy." Portuguese Early Childhood Education (ECE) was particularly influenced by a strong political desire to promote a democratic society through a democratic education system. While this was a key political project for the newly formed government as it sought to distance itself from its predecessor, implementation was deliberately left to providers. The ambiguous nature of democratic education has stimulated the development of a fascinating diversity of ECE policies and practices, which we analyse in this article.

In Portugal, ECE is perceived as the first step of basic education and thus understood as the first level of 'schooling' where democratic experiences can be initiated. It is a non-compulsory level of education divided into crèche (0-3 years old) and kindergarten (also known as pre-school) (3-6 years old). Despite this division, the terms ECE and early years are used within this article as a reference to all institutions which provide care, education and more for children under compulsory school age. We investigate three early years settings in Portugal: one public, one independent not-for-profit (IPSS: Instituição Particular de Solidariedade Social), and one private setting. The public kindergarten catered for children of 3-6 years old, while the not-for-profit and private settings both comprised a crèche (0-3 year olds) and a kindergarten/pre-school (3-6 year olds). All three are described here interchangeably as either kindergartens or settings, for ease of comparison.

Democratic education is strongly promoted in Portugal as an intended purpose and feature of ECE. This is illustrated by the Pre-School Education Law of 1997, which includes as its first goal: "To promote the child's personal and social development based on democratic life experiences within a perspective of education for citizenship" (Ministério da Educação 1997a, 14). The Curriculum Guidelines for pre-school education in Portugal, from both 1997 and 2016, also include, inter alia, aims relating directly to citizenship and democratic participation. Despite the vital importance of democratic principles in the development of Portuguese ECE, there is little prior research showing how democratic education has been interpreted, enacted and delivered by early years

settings in Portugal. With the wide range of ECE providers in this context, including public, private and not-for-profit, investigating the diverse interpretations of democratic education helps us to challenge the growing hegemony of de-contextualised discourses and standardised assessments of young children, as illustrated by the pilot International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study (IELS) which is heavily critiqued as a challenge to democracy by, for example, Urban and Swadener (2016) and Sousa, Grey and Oxley (forthcoming).

The purpose of this article is therefore both to examine wider discourses about democracy and to characterise how it is represented in specific early years settings. Using qualitative research methods, we investigate these settings and identify variations in how they interpret the term 'democracy' in relation to their educational practices.

Theoretical understandings and conceptions of democracy in Portuguese ECE

There are varied and ambiguous understandings of democracy in the academic literature. For Held, democracy prima facie means "a form of government in which, in contradistinction to monarchies and aristocracies, the people rule. Democracy entails a political community in which there is some form of political equality among the people". However, he acknowledges the labyrinthine nature of the topic, stating that "...appearances are deceptive. The history of the idea of democracy is complex and is marked by conflicting conceptions. There is plenty of scope for disagreement" (Held, 2006, 1).

The challenge of researching democracy is that it soon becomes apparent that we all attribute different values to the term and thus appear to need a revised definition for each new work on the subject. As Beetham (1994, 26) explains, "through frequent misuse the term 'democracy' in popular parlance has come to mean whatever political arrangements the speaker personally approves of, and has become emptied of any objective referent." Similarly, Wringe (1984, 7) argues that "'democracy,' rather like 'freedom', 'equality' and

'justice', is so universally approved and so universally claimed as the description of every kind of existing regime that risks becoming totally devoid of meaning." This leads to what Tarrant (1981, 9) describes as the "considerable malaise over the 'meaning' of democracy, and difficulty in defining it" or, as Morlino (2012) aptly labels it, the 'definitional conundrums' of democracy. Nevertheless, even ambiguous meanings can yield power, as Apple explicates:

> Concepts such as freedom and democracy are sliding signifiers. Their meanings are struggled over, subject to various manipulations, hegemonic and counter-hegemonic interpretations, and uses. (Apple 2009, xiii)

Problems thus arise when democracy is regarded as a self-evident and universal consensual truth, since "democracy is by definition adventurous and unfinished" (Rosanvallon 2006, 26). Keane (2009, 842) argues that democracy is "a geographic, not a global morality" and this highlights the importance of empirical research studies investigating the elastic and flexible representations of democracy in real-life educational contexts. The critical analysis of democracy in Portuguese early years settings presented in this article therefore contributes to the growing sense that the diverse representations of the term must embrace local, cultural, social and geographical narratives as demonstrated by, for example, Mouffe (2000), Carr (2011) and De Groot (2017). These types of narratives recognise the existence of personal stories that can be located within a diversity of societies and cultures. By recognising this diversity, there is an explicit acknowledgement that democracy is a complex process which illustrates a variety of practices and ideologies.

Taking into account these broad parameters, two significant forms of democracy are drawn upon in this research. The first is democracy as a form of 'political association' and the second is democracy as a 'system of government' (Villoro 1998, 95). The former is described by Villoro as: "'power of the people', where the 'people' is the totality of the members of an association". This type of democracy links to the idea of community and "in this form of community, there is no form of domination by a few persons over others.

If everybody holds power, nobody is subject to anybody else" (Villoro 1998, 95). This is what Mouffe (2000, 18) would define as a democratic tradition of 'popular sovereignty'. This can be considered an influential form of democracy in societies which have emerged from 'revolutionary' circumstances, and as such, a significant form of democracy considered in this research. Villoro defines this as "the achievement of the freedom of everyone. It is a guiding concept, under the influence of which politics can progressively bring society closer to the ideal, although it can never be claimed that the ideal has been achieved in its entirety" (Villoro 1998, 95).

The second form of democracy (as a 'system of government') represents: "a series of rules and institutions which support a system of power." (Villoro 1998, 95) This form relates to rights, elections and procedures pertaining to a "specific power system" (ibid). This is what Mouffe (2000, 18) would describe as a democratic tradition of 'political liberalism' where there is the rule of law, the separation of power and individual rights. The role of the State as paramount is key in this form of democracy and the power relations discussed in this article reflect this focus upon institutional systems within a state context. Therefore, power is discussed here as a force that is inherently neither good nor bad; neither violence, nor consent; and its exercise "can produce as much acceptance as may be wished for" (Foucault 1983). As Mouffe (2000, 32) explains, "the main question of democratic politics becomes then not how to eliminate power, but how to constitute forms of power which are compatible with democratic values".

The Portuguese political system underwent a dramatic transformation prompted by the 1974 revolution, shifting abruptly from dictatorship to democracy. At first, democracy emerged as a form of political association and, in order to guarantee the establishment of democratic practice, it subsequently manifested as a system of government. The implications of this transformation for the education system were the creation of policies intending to achieve the democratisation of education and consequently society. As revolutionary events changed the political scene, democracy was initially promoted within Portugal as a very broad global concept and subsequently modified according to the prevailing circumstances in different time periods. As a highly rhetorical and elastic

concept with many diverse and flexible interpretations, it served in essence as what Beech and Lista (2011) describe as a 'floating signifier', in which an idea or concept is abstracted from historical experience and re-signified as it enters into localised power struggles. A floating signifier is "interpreted and rearranged in a multiplicity of diverse meanings, depending on the context of reception" (Beech 2009, 355) and this was clearly the case for democracy in Portugal throughout its turbulent history. Below we explore how some of these meanings have changed over time, as manifested within high-level policy documents in Portuguese ECE.

Table 1 outlines democratic conceptions, manifestations and intentions derived from our analysis of key policy documents within Portuguese educational governance, which are identified in column (a). We situate each conception within one of three ten-year periods: the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, when key legislative transformations occurred. These periods were influenced by both types of democracy identified by Villoro (1998): democracy as a form of political association and democracy as a system of government. The comprehensive changes made to the early years curriculum in 2016 are the focus of a future article. Column (b) labels each conception of democracy and column (c) illustrates the ways in which each policy document manifested its democratic aims and intentions: as an idealistic vision (1970s), a guiding principle (1980s) and a rhetorical symbol (1990s). Column (d) summarises the overall democratic intention, exposing ideological shifts from democracy as equal access to education towards education for democratic citizenship as a means to reduce social inequality.

Table 1: Conceptions, manifestations and intentions of democracy within Portuguese post-revolutionary policy in relation to ECE

Period	Policy (a)	Conception (b)	Manifestation (c)	Intention (d)
1970s Period of	1976 Constitution	Revolutionary Democracy	National Ideology	Create and maintain a democratic

democratic hegemony	of the Portuguese Republic		(Utopia)	society through equality of opportunities of access and success for all
1980s Period of democratic ubiquity	1986 Basic Law of the Education System	Ubiquitous Democracy	Guiding Principle	Affirm the Constitution and foment democracy as a form of citizenship
1990s Period of democratic regulation	1997 Framework Law for PreSchool Education & Curriculum Guidelines for Pre-school education	Regulatory Democracy	Rhetorical Symbol (Heterotopia)	Continue all the above and construe democracy as the means to reduce social inequality

In the first section, the 1970s are presented as a period of Democratic Hegemony in which democracy emerged as a strong motif throughout all aspects of public policy. This period is described as a Revolutionary Democracy insofar as it was a product of the 1974 revolution. Democracy in this period was manifested as a National Ideology with the intent of creating and maintaining a democratic society through equality of opportunities of access and success in school. The 1980s are presented as a period of Ubiquitous Democracy in which democracy was portrayed as an omnipresent principle in all education policy. It was manifested as a Guiding Principle with the intention of affirming the principles of education and democracy as constitutionally 'prescribed', alongside the intention to foment democracy as a form of citizenship. The 1990s are presented as a period of Regulatory Democracy in which democracy played a central role within ECE policy by becoming a standard item within the objectives of pre-school education. Democracy was manifested as a Rhetorical Symbol with the main purpose of continuing all of the intentions above while further reducing social inequalities.

The research study

Three settings run by the three major providers of ECE in Portugal, i.e. public (state) IPSS (not-for-profit) and private, were investigated to provide a variety of lenses and perspectives through which to analyse representations of democracy.[1] These settings were unique and as such we were not seeking generalisability at the level of types of school governance. We describe each setting in more detail below. In each setting we conducted interviews with educators, examined school documents (such as Education Projects, Rules of Procedure, and Curricular Projects), and carried out non-participant observation. Our analysis of this qualitative data draws out distinct ways in which democracy is represented in the three contexts.

Interviews with educators were semi-structured and designed to provide an understanding of their perceptions of meanings and enactments of democracy within their specific institution. The interviewees were not told that democracy was the subject of the research: rather, they were informed that the research aimed to investigate the guiding principles of their educational practice. A flexible interview schedule allowed the interviewer to add explanations, change the wording or change the order of questions (Robson 1995) if deemed necessary or appropriate in order to gather rich data. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. We interviewed 20 educators: five in the public (state) setting, seven in the private setting and eight in the IPSS (not-for-profit) setting. All educators interviewed were female (reflecting the preponderance of females in such roles) and all were Portuguese. In order to preserve anonymity, neither specifics about the settings nor educators' characteristics have been described here in detail.

A significant challenge related to transcribing and translating while attempting to preserve meanings. Since the data was collected in Portuguese and translated into English, some of the richness of language (both in interview speech and in documents) was lost in the process. Sources such as interviews, speeches, historical documents and policies each have their own rules and linguistic/lexical representations. Translations were

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[1] The national network of pre-school education in Portugal is constituted by the public network, fully funded by the state and comprised of public settings; and the private network, partially funded by the state and comprising IPSS (independent non-profit organisations - charities) and private (for-profit) settings. Other 'modalities' of ECE recognised by the state are itinerant ECE and communitarian early years initiatives.

contextualised to the greatest possible extent in order to maintain the essence of the meanings in what was being said or written.

The Settings: Missions and Objectives

The three settings researched were located in an urban area, geographically close to each other within a large Portuguese city. The settings differed in nature and size, and catered for children from different socioeconomic backgrounds. The public kindergarten was a fully state funded institution which belonged to a 'Mega Group' of public schools of various different education levels. It catered for children aged 3-6 years old, from diverse backgrounds, mainly from lower/medium socioeconomic households. The missions and objectives presented by the Mega Group's educational project encompassed a combination of the principles described in Portuguese policy throughout the years specifically in relation to "building a more just, solidary[2] and united society", resonating with the 1976 Constitution, and "the formation of active citizens, stakeholders, responsible and civically engaged", echoing some of the principles stated in the 1986 Basic Law for Education (quotes from public school Mega Group's mission statement). Interviews with educators in this setting found that their own objectives as practitioners aligned both with the Mega Group's overarching mission and also with specific aspects of ECE legislation. For example, one interviewee from the public setting described her objectives as "helping children to become responsible, free, solidary and critical citizens," words which link both to the 1976 Constitution and to the 1986 Basic Law. Another suggested her objectives as an educator were to "develop children's competences, their personal and social development for citizenship, for respect of/for the other and also for his/her own personal and cognitive development," wording which closely mirrors objectives from the 1997 Framework Law for Preschool Education.

The IPSS (not-for-profit) kindergarten was managed by a religious institution of Catholic orientation and was partly funded by the State and partly by families. Children from across the whole socio-economic spectrum, from 4 months to 6 years old, attended the crèche

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[2] Solidary in this context relates to the word 'solidarity'. It refers to an individual who gives and works in collaboration with others to address systemic inequalities, injustices, and its causes.

and kindergarten rooms. The kindergarten's internal regulations document described its mission as "respecting the democratic principles of coexistence, rights, [and] freedom," echoing some of the key principles from the 1976 Constitution. Additionally, many educators within this setting perceived their mission to encompass education as actively complementing the learning that takes place within the family. This aligned with the general principle of ECE as a collaborative extension of family activity, as defined in the 1997 Framework Law.

The private kindergarten was a family-owned setting that catered mainly for children from medium to high socioeconomic backgrounds, from 4 months to 6 years old, in both crèche and kindergarten rooms. Several themes emerged from analysis of this kindergarten's educators' views on the mission and objectives of the setting. There was a general understanding of education as linked to children's rights, with the school's role being the provision of hope for the future (by generating optimistic children), whilst working in partnership with the families and wider community through principles and values such as democracy, participation and cooperation, instilled by the Portuguese Modern School Movement (MEM) to which this setting ascribed. This movement has been in constant development since its clandestine inception in the 1960s, during the authoritarian rule of the Portuguese dictatorship. The MEM bases its educational practice around communication and cooperation, with a focus on learning and teaching emphasising sociocultural development in the sciences, technology, arts and everyday life (Niza 1998). It also sees children as having the right to actively participate in the construction of an inclusive and democratic school culture (Niza 2012, 382).

All three settings were located within the same policy context, the national Pre-school Education Framework Law of 1997 and the equivalent 1997 curriculum guidelines for pre-school education (now replaced by the 2016 guidelines). Nevertheless, it was clear that each setting had its own philosophies and approaches, manifested by somewhat divergent written principles and mission statements. All settings had a pedagogical coordinator, which in the public and private kindergartens was one of the educators and in the IPSS (not-for-profit) was the school psychologist. They had similar sets of

documents, which included the 'education project,' a document defining the broad objectives of the kindergarten as determined by the pedagogical team (i.e. by all educators in the setting) and the 'curricular project,' a classroom document in which each educator defined the broad objectives for their own classroom.

The missions and objectives of the kindergartens were not only defined within written text but also by each educator's perception of the purpose of ECE, and of the setting they worked at. Each educator had their own ideas of what the kindergarten represented and how they engaged with that representation as professionals. Educators emphasised specific aspects of ECE they personally related to. For example, some educators saw the personal and social development of the child as a citizen as the most important mission of their kindergarten, whilst others saw the collaborative support and extension of family activity as their principal aim. Nevertheless, most educators across the three settings agreed that the kindergarten is a space of relationship; a social space; an extension of the family, which aims to 'form' free and responsible citizens. In addition, none of the documents or interviewees referred to parents or families as consumers, but rather as collaborators. The IPSS and private kindergarten's missions presented a particularly strong focus on the family, emphasising their roles as partners.

Each kindergarten's rhetoric about its mission (as accessed both through documents and interviews) also portrayed some level of connection with democratic principles and notions. Before it was mentioned by the interviewer, many educators referred to democracy and its associated values as principles of both the kindergarten and of their pedagogical actions. Rather than simply being part of their curricular focus, democracy was considered an inherent and central part of their actions as educators and of their discourses. All educators across the three settings described democracy as a principle of unquestioned importance in their practice. They believed democracy to be an inherent feature of ECE because of its nature as a holistic and non-compulsory level of education, and because of its emphasis on relationships with children, parents and communities. They further reinforced the idea of democracy as a 'broad concept', whilst referring to it as a key component of the personal and social development of children.

Interviewees considered democracy as associated with many areas of ECE (such as pedagogy and activities) and as a concept that does not happen in isolation. Thus, during the initial stages of the interviews, when describing the mission of each kindergarten, educators mentioned features that, in later questions, they considered as manifestations of democracy in practice. For example, practices such as sharing, choosing and participating were presented as guiding principles and as key elements of democracy within education. However, the democratic 'ethos' of the three settings diverged, presenting a contrast between those who created physical spaces for democracy to happen, thinking critically about the term and providing concrete democratic experiences for the children, and those who had idealistic democratic intentions, presenting democracy through their discourse rather than concrete actions. Effectively, the missions and objectives of the three kindergartens were steeped in broader national discourses, but the underlying principles of the settings themselves heavily influenced and reshaped the nature of the prevailing rhetoric. Below we analyse the ways in which this rhetoric was represented within the three settings and the extent to which these aligned with the types of democracy set out in Table 1.

Representations of democracy in each setting

We encountered different representations, features, theoretical understandings and conceptions of democracy across the three kindergartens; they not only differed in their principles/missions but also in the ways democracy was understood by the educators. Each setting had its own organisational representation of democracy, with its conceptions, understandings and features aligning with the principles of the setting.

Through interviews with educators and document analysis we were able to ascertain the diverging priorities of each setting. Even where they shared some of the same principles arising from the overarching policies, the weight they gave to each was different. Table 2 summarises our interpretation of the different organisational representations of democracy.

Table 2: The organisational representations of democracy within the three Portuguese ECE settings

	Public (state) kindergarten	IPSS (not-for-profit) kindergarten	Private kindergarten
Organisational representation of democracy:	Structural Representation of Democracy	Individual Representation of Democracy	Collective Representation of Democracy
Key features/focus:	Respect for rules of 'coexistence'	Individual opportunities of choice	Group decision making
Associated theoretical understandings of democracy (adapted from Villoro 1998):	Democracy as a system of government (power)	Democracy as a system of government (power) and as a form of association	Democracy as a form of association
Associated conceptions of democracy:	Revolutionary, Ubiquitous and Regulatory democracy	Revolutionary and Regulatory democracy	Ubiquitous democracy

As Table 2 shows, there were several important distinctions between the three settings in the ways in which democracy was represented. The public kindergarten presented an emphasis on structural democracy, a type of democracy focused on rules of coexistence. This setting aligned with Villoro's (1998) definition of 'democracy as a system of government'. This setting also illustrated characteristics of the revolutionary, ubiquitous and regulatory conceptions of democracy, particularly through its guiding principles, as discussed in the previous section. In contrast, the priorities of the IPSS kindergarten were focused on an individual representation of democracy, emphasising individual opportunities of choice. This setting presented a balance between ideas of democracy as

'a system of government' (power) and as 'a form of association' (Villoro 1998). Democracy in the IPSS kindergarten also aligned with revolutionary and regulatory conceptions of democracy.

The private kindergarten tended towards a collective representation of democracy, with a particular emphasis on group decision making. This setting mainly aligned with democracy 'as a form of association' (Villoro 1998). In addition, the perceptions of educators in the setting aligned mostly with the ubiquitous conception of democracy, i.e. the idea of democracy as an omnipresent principle within education. In the next section, we illustrate the categorisations made within Table 2 using interview quotes to show how democracy was reconceptualised and characterised by classroom practitioners themselves.

The reconceptualisation of rhetoric by classroom practitioners

The public (state) kindergarten

In the public kindergarten some interviewees expressed their mission as a service intending to prepare children for future life and school, while others emphasised social coexistence and relationships. For example, when asked what values they hoped children acquired in their school, educators stated:

> "Knowing how to democratically resolve the problems that emerge in their life, by making agreements with their colleagues, rather than conflicts" (Amarílis, educator)

> "Respect for themselves and respect for the other. That they take with them well developed global skills: cognitive, physical, motor, to then be ready for future acquisitions" (Begónia, educator)

There was consensus amongst the interviewees that democracy was generally represented through sharing with others and respecting the space, freedom and opinion of the other. Attending an early years setting was seen as an opportunity for children to

learn respect, which was mainly connected with social skills; for example, to wait for their turn, not interrupt each other, resolve conflicts between themselves. ECE was also perceived as an opportunity to learn that diversity exists and that it was within the group that children had the opportunity to learn how to live in society.

> "I think we live in a democracy but with respect. And I think that that is lived in the kindergarten. They [children] learn (…) they know that they have to respect their own time, not to interrupt their colleague, to respect the opinion of their colleague, [learning] that there is much diversity. [Democracy] is manifested by respect, by listening until we join the knowledge that one has with the knowledge that another one brings, because each one has its own experiences (…) it's a way of learning to live in society" (Begónia, educator)

According to another educator, democracy was often enacted through the opportunity children sometimes had to individually choose their activities, or, if it was a group activity, to talk through the options, vote, and reach a consensus.

> "When children do their morning planning, they can sometimes choose, opting to do various activities. Or otherwise we reach a consensus, when there are various themes, and we see what is best for that day." (Amarílis, educator)

Also connected to their perception of democratic enactment, some of these educators mentioned that children also had the opportunity to learn friendship values and to help the poorest – i.e. children were in an environment where they could learn how to live in solidarity with others. One of the educators stated:

> "[Democracy] has to do with whether they learn to share, learn to wait for their turn, learn friendship, learn to help the poorest." (Zínia, educator)

For three out of the five educators interviewed in this setting, democracy was represented within opportunities for children to understand that: "my freedom ends where someone else's freedom begins". These perspectives combined elements of democracy and freedom in the idea of citizenship, hinting at the power relations inherent in society. This was a clear illustration of Villoro's (1998) description of democracy as a system of power, i.e. not an 'ideal', but a form of management that 'conforms to certain procedures'.

In our analysis of the perceptions of democratic practice presented by the educators in the public kindergarten alongside the previously discussed missions and objectives, it was notable that democracy represented 'the ideal citizen' as delineated by the constitution. The intention was to create an individual who values solidarity, who respects others, knows how to live within the rules of society and is, essentially, a democratic citizen for 'the public good'. There was an emphasis on democracy as a standard which could only exist through compliance with the rules, such as respect, waiting for their turn, not interrupting each other. In essence, this represented a democracy that was strongly based on respecting and following a structure predetermined by adults. While the discourse of classroom practitioners was highly centred on the child, our observations of classroom practice noted that the power balance within the classroom tended to be adult-centric. For example, many of the setting's internal procedures (whether outlined within local rules or central Mega Group rules) were defined equally for all levels of education; and children's daily routines would often be interrupted to accommodate celebratory days and Mega Group events. The practitioners' pedagogical beliefs or philosophies also tended to reflect the kindergarten's focus on ECE as preparation for future life and schooling, for example in allowing children to choose '*sometimes*' rather than always; imposing particular circumstances by grouping children; and having clear normative expectations of what ECE 'should' look like.

The IPSS (not-for-profit) setting

The IPSS setting presented itself in its mission and objectives as aiming to protect and support children and their families with a strong component of care, associated with its educational and religious mission. This included promoting values specific to the institution, such as respect for oneself and the other; and respect for the child as a unique individual. When asked which values they expected children to retain after their time at the kindergarten, most educators focused on the children's capacity to be individuals and think critically for themselves, while maintaining relationships with others:

> "… [I hope] that they respect the other and have critical thinking, that they can think for themselves and have their own opinions. I think that's the basis for everything, if they have

their own identity, I think they can cope much better with all situations that can happen, because the changes are immense after. I hope they have respect for the other and that they have their own identity" (Hortência, educator)

Some educators felt that democracy was generally represented by the idea of respect: both for the opinions and choices of each child, and respect for others. Democracy in this setting was significantly focused on the child having a voice, i.e. children having opportunities to say what they think; to give their opinion even if it was contrary to other children's opinions or an adult's opinion.

"I always think about the child, starting from the educational need of that child. Each child is unique; we have to respect the time of each one. Promote the functional development of each child, and inclusion of each child in our school. In accordance with their own culture, we are Catholic, but we accept Islam, we accept all other religions, therefore I cannot demand that a parent brings a cake if they don't like to sing 'happy birthday'; we have to respect that. It's the most important point of this institution, the individuality of each child, and then, integrating the family" (Camélia, educator)

They believed that respect would help children learn to live with difference and also be aware of the other, for example by feeling like part of the group and giving others a turn. Part of this respect was based on listening to others and also being listened to.

Several educators mentioned that in their practice it was crucial to give children an opportunity to choose what they wanted to do or what they did not want to do. For some, it was important that children felt that they participated in decision making, in choices, and in the organisation of work and projects.

"For example, if you want to choose something in the classroom you ask in the big group [i.e. the whole class], here [in this kindergarten] it happens frequently, even though we prioritise working in small groups (…) but I think that almost every classroom already has that so called 'meeting moment' exactly to debate problems linked to citizenship and democratic education. Making decisions together, learning to live in groups." (Petúnia, educator)

"I speak for my classroom, but from what we [educators] share with each other, my perception is that here [in this kindergarten] we try to ensure that children feel that they really participate in decision making, in the choices, in the decisions that we make; at organisational level, at the project level, at the level of everything we are working on." (Hortência, educator)

One of the educators stated that, in the IPSS kindergarten, children had an active role in choosing what they learn and explore. For example, if there were several proposals from the children, each of them would vote on the themes or questions they wanted to see answered in their projects. They then discussed and decided in groups how they were going to address those questions.

Democracy was also perceived as the mechanism through which the children exercised the right to give an opinion, the right to make their own choices, and to accept that often they were limited by the choices of the majority of the group:

> "I see our classroom group as a miniature society, and to be able to coexist in the day-to-day there are a series of rules which presuppose democracy, respect, knowing to wait, not to push, to ask to speak, to sit without disrupting the other (…) a series of things (…) that make part of this process of deciding together, of seeing what we are going to do (…) they are young but they start to understand that they have the power to choose (…) and also that there are limits and from a certain limit sometimes the choice belongs to the adult, and sometimes there are some conflicts and even their capacity to understand how far they can go and supersede them. But I think they have the opportunity to choose and they have that right." (Magnólia, educator)

One of the educators also suggested that this democracy was represented by ensuring that the opportunities were equal for all, rather than fomenting the opportunities of those who were 'natural leaders'. This educator felt she had a role to play in managing equality in the classroom.

Overall, democracy in the IPSS setting was perceived as a concept emphasising the individual relative to the group. This understanding was based on managing the tension between the individual in relationship with the other and in their individual capacity, emphasising the opportunity of choice. As a result, in terms of the theoretical understandings of democracy, this setting balanced between democracy as a 'system of power' (Villoro 1998), by fostering the equality of children within the context of the institutional rules within its organisation; and democracy as 'a form of association' (ibid), by engaging in an associative project which was guided by values inherent to the religious character of the institution. With regard to the conceptions of democracy that have emerged in policy, this setting aligned mainly with revolutionary and regulatory conceptions. This was primarily engendered by the school's mission of promoting equality

of opportunities by providing access to those that are socially disadvantaged and consequently having as one of its purposes the reduction of social inequality.

The private setting

The private setting emphasised the rights of every child to receive an education as a key element of its mission, including the child's right to participate and have an active voice in educational processes. The child's voice and expressive capacity were referred to by most of the educators interviewed in this setting. For example, when asked which values they hoped children would acquire in their kindergarten, educators emphasised links between voice, democracy and citizenship:

> "… This democracy that we try to transmit to them throughout all this time, this active voice that they have (…) that they are willing in cooperation, sharing, mutual help, in showing that they have a voice, that they have opinions" (Calla, educator)

> "Autonomy and active citizenship, of telling the 'truth' that they feel…" (Violeta, educator)

In addition to the children's capacity to express their opinions and feelings, some educators also reinforced ideas of collectivity which were attached to specific values:

> "Firstly, that they have a critical spirit, that they have a voice to express when they go to other educational contexts, to real life contexts. We always aim for children to be ready for real life, that this is not a kindergarten of make-believe. Also that they have human values, of sharing, cooperation (…) generational coexistence (…) optimism (…) resilience, that helps them not to give up at the first setback". (Sálvia, educator)

Most educators claimed that within this kindergarten everything was democratic: from the meetings educators had with the children and the choice of activities to the establishment of classroom rules. One of the general principles of this setting was that everything had to align with the type of democracy that they tried to transmit where everything in the school was discussed and each opinion had value.

> "Because here [in this kindergarten] everything is democratised. The meetings that we have, the choice of activities, even the establishment of the classroom rules, everything, everything counts [as democracy], in fact, I think one of the global principles is everything

aligning with this democracy, that we try to transmit, and everything is discussed, each opinion is valued and so in my opinion it is one of the main [principles]" (Tulipa, educator)

"Here [in this kindergarten] we don't decide anything alone. Everything we do in the classroom school trips, the work, the reality in the classroom, even the agenda we create, the maps, everything is discussed with them [children], everything is dialogued in a way that they also feel part of all these dynamics" (Calla, educator)

As part of following the MEM (Modern School Movement), educators in this setting considered everything they did as democratic. One of the educators gave an example:

"The children participate in every decision about everything... when we had to review the [kindergarten's food] menu, we played a game in the classroom of writing every day what we were eating and after we did a voting of what we liked the most to know what was coming off the menu and what could go in, other dishes that they have said to be their favourite. (…) [this is] the quotidian life, democracy exists in everything from planning to conception" (Violeta, educator)

As illustrated by this assertion, for many of the private kindergarten's educators, democracy was something that happened in their daily lives. They believed their mission was to let an 'effective' form of participation happen naturally, within day-to-day interactions: not imposing things from the adult side; not 'conducting'; and not fomenting obligatory participation, while giving the child freedom to say "no, I don't want to participate".

"How is it [democracy] manifested, in what things? In the power of choice that they [children] have, they can choose if they want or don't want to work, 'yes or no' to participate in a project, in the choices that they make in the tasks. I don't know, throughout the whole day they have a democratic life, that's our life. They also have limits, they know that they can choose, they know that they can say 'no, I don't want to'. I think often it happens in this way: 'no, but I prefer that', and it's here that we give them the opportunity to say that, which I don't hear often; it's not said; it's not present at all times in our life" (Papoila, educator)

Most of the educators in this setting perceived that nothing was decided unilaterally, but at the same time the individual choices of the child were considered. This indicates that in the private kindergarten there was an emphasis on democracy as a 'collective' responsibility, very much based upon the role of the group in decision making. This emphasis on community and collective decisions aligns this setting to a theoretical understanding of 'democracy as a form of association' (Villoro 1998). In addition, the

focus on the creation and maintenance of democracy as an active principle within the school, which, according to the educators, is ever-present in the everyday life of the kindergarten, connected this setting closely with the ubiquitous conception of democracy, reflecting the idea of democracy as an omnipresent principle in education policy.

Conclusion

Across the three researched ECE settings, all educators presented strong democratic discourses which aligned with broader policy discourses. In general, educators feared being perceived as authoritarian and, accordingly, they connected robustly with the idea of democracy. However, due to the conceptual meanings of democracy being highly symbolic and subjected to multiple interpretations, the forms in which democracy was represented varied markedly across the different settings, with each kindergarten presenting a specific organisational representation of democracy. The three kindergartens focused upon enactments and discourses of democracy which partially aligned with different conceptions of democracy that had emerged within post-revolutionary national education policies. By exploring the similarities and differences between these conceptions of democracy, this research contributes to the range of literature studying alternative discourses of pedagogical thinking and practice, strongly rooted within local, cultural, social and geographical narratives.

Democracy within the research contexts was a transversal concept that did not operate in isolation. The research unveiled a range of interconnecting discourses, with a strong emphasis on the use of language in strengthening the power of diverse concepts of democracy to make a difference within educational practice. The language used to define the settings' missions and objectives within their documentation closely aligned with language used within the relevant legislation, and educators' discourse within classroom practice reflected both these intentions and their own values, missions and motivations. Accordingly, for the enactment of democracy a conscious critical effort appeared to be necessary, within the roles of the educator, the parent, the child, the school and the State. As Mouffe (2000, 70) argues:

"It is necessary to realise that it is not by offering sophisticated rational arguments and by making context-transcendent truth claims about the superiority of liberal democracy that democratic values can be fostered. The creation of democratic forms of individuality is a question of *identification* with democratic values, and this is a complex process that takes place through a manifold of practices, discourses and language games" (original emphasis).

As such, the research indicated that a conscious use of language and power, which were highly interconnected, enabled active voices to emerge within the ECE settings. This, in turn, illustrated Foucault's (1983) observation that, "while the human subject is placed in relations of production and signification, he is equally placed in power relations which are very complex"; and it was clear that broader manifestations of power were important factors in the differences between the democratic discourses constructed within the three kindergartens.

In Portuguese ECE the complexity and ambiguity of education policies alongside the diversity of provision and flexibility in practice allows for a wide range of democratic enactments. The social and political changes following the 1974 Revolution and subsequent democratic enactments transformed ideals into reality through policy and practice. Contexts in which democracy is central, such as those researched here, offer the opportunity to develop new thinking and new practice: an ever-changing educational paradigm. New initiatives to support democratic education are still being developed in Portugal, for example the 2017 regulation enabling increased curricular flexibility, discussed by Nada et al (2018). We suggest that, through the spaces created within educational governance for the organisational representation of democracy, Portuguese early years educators have the scope to reflect, listen and critically question practice, allowing democracy to be continually reimagined, evolving and reinventing itself in response to the contexts in which it manifests. In a forthcoming article we explore the ways in which these discourses were manifested within each setting's classroom practice; but, furthermore, future research exploring the potential influence of the wider discourses on the children themselves and on Portuguese society in general would be a highly valuable addition to the field.

Our research indicates that democracy is elastic, flexible and distinctive within specific contexts, rather than a self-evident and universal consensual truth. Thus, democracy needs critical discussion and analysis in order to 'survive' within the contexts of its practice: it cannot be taken for granted. Each setting had a distinctive range of representations of democracy, with foci varying from the individual to the group. While political intentions mandating the presence of democracy in education could be imagined as constructing a monolithic vision of democracy, we illustrate that the opposite was the case here: the three ECE settings interpreted democracy in their own ways, opening up the educational arena to new forms of active and critical democratic citizenship with the potential to contribute to the reduction of social inequality.

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