

More Potent than Political Power: Beyond Cognitive Dimensions of Democracy

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In “The Conflict Between Education and Democracy,” Doron Yosef-Hassidim argues that there is an inherent conflict between democratic governance and education that inevitably renders education subservient to the “powers that be.” Admittedly, in an era in U.S. policy in which high stakes tests reign supreme and can change yearly at the whim of officials (sometimes without warning), denying the reality behind Yosef-Hassidim’s position would be like claiming that the earth is flat. Thus, Yosef-Hassidim forwards that democracy—or rather, any given democratic polity—is against education, which he understands as an “arena that introduces the young to a critical view of reality and enables and encourages alternative ways of life.” Whereas, following John Dewey, “Education is autonomous and should be free to determine its own ends, its own objectives,” the democratic state is, indeed, positioned above institutionalized education and is therefore a problematic authority from the perspective of education.¹

To address this conflict, Yosef-Hassidim poses two strategies: an inside-out approach focused on political citizen education that subjects “democracy itself to scrutiny,” and an outside-in approach calling for a “long-term broad social and political struggle” that would strive to achieve a more autonomous status for education within the general democratic political machinery. In response, we stand in agreement with Yosef-Hassidim’s main point that “the mere subordinate status of education, does not provide educators ... with sufficient power” to decide what is best for education. Yet, if education were to be afforded a “good enough” measure of autonomy, we maintain that a much richer

notion of democracy could take root. In this, we stand to realize something even more potent than political power through a democracy constituted in psychological maturity.² Thus, we propose a Winnicottian approach to democracy in complement with Yosef-Hassidim's suggestions, adding a new layer to the discussion through consideration of non-cognitive dimensions of democracy.

Accordingly, the British psychoanalyst, D. W. Winnicott (1896-1971), posed an intriguing view of democracy in the aftermath of World War II that shared striking similarities with Dewey's understanding of democracy in that they both viewed democracy as being fundamentally a matter of the way individuals live and associate or relate with one another. In other words, democracy, in this sense, is a *personal* way of life. What Winnicott adds to this Deweyan conception, however, is that democracy is something that is grown into and achieved through healthy development.³ Hence, democracy, at base, is a matter of the overall psychological maturity of a particular society. In this, the true essence of democracy has very little to do with the democratic machinery of voting processes or checks and balances that may be put in place, though these mechanisms are nonetheless also essential. Accordingly, Winnicott insists, "Neither democracy nor maturity can be implanted on a society."⁴ Instead, democracy and this inner maturity alike come about through interacting within a properly supportive environment—what Winnicott described in terms of a "good enough" home environment, which we extend into broader educational environments.

Just as Dewey held an optimistic view of human nature in which democracy was understood as a natural outcome of individual development, Winnicott also believed that there is an innate (inborn) democratic tendency within all of us, which comes to fruition, blooming into "the democratic way of life (social maturity)" through "the healthy emotional development of individuals."⁵ Yet, Winnicott continues, "only a proportion of individuals in a social group will have had the luck to develop to maturity, and therefore it is only through them that the innate (inherited) tendency of this group towards social maturity can be implemented."⁶ Following Winnicott, the "ordinary good mother-infant relationship" is crucial for supporting healthy emotional development to maturity.⁷ And by extension, we pose educational environments—particularly the

non-cognitive aspects of these environments that can function in the Winnicottian “holding” capacity—as a meaningful continuation of this good-enough mothering environment.⁸

In this, we are responding to Yosef-Hassidim’s call for additional theoretical work to better conceptualize education’s autonomy, as Winnicott’s chief recommendation to support the democratic tendency was through negative, “organized non-interference with the ordinary good mother-infant relationship.”⁹ By extension, we propose that a similar organized non-interference should extend to schools. Accordingly, Winnicott notes a “special significance in the devotion of the ordinary good mother” that builds “the capacity for eventual emotional maturity ... as a result of the devotion. Mass interference at this point, in a society, would quickly and effectually lessen the democratic potential of that society, just as it would diminish the richness of its culture.”¹⁰

Moreover, we should also consider the implications for education in a developmental context that values existing cultures before critiquing social norms. For instance, a developmental task in late-childhood is to first internalize prevailing cultural worldviews, not to challenge or deconstruct them; enduring reconstruction can best come later once existing worldviews are sufficiently held. All of this points to powers that are more potent than mere political power—powers that extend beyond and grow beneath the cognitive dimensions of democracy. In this sense, generative power, like generative love, recognizes what endures beneath diversities. It is the purposiveness of generative power and generative love that drove Martin Luther King (MLK) to poignantly state that “Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic.” To view power without consideration of love is to consider only one of two fundamental drives. We must consider both power and love. And, as MLK further points out: “... one of the great problems of history is that love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites—polar opposites—so that love is identified with the resignation of power, and power with the denial of love.”¹¹

In sum, we agree that it is worthwhile to work in the direction of striving to gain external, political power in conjunction with efforts to improve

educational practices such that internal qualities of democracy stand to be cultivated and enriched, but in doing so, it will be important to not lose sight of a possibility of a democratic potency that stands to surpass political power. In this generative power, coupled with generative love, we acknowledge that the internal quality of democracy that we are addressing is a far cry indeed from the external mechanisms of democratic governance that Yosef-Hassidim tends to in his central argument. Our aim in stressing the internal quality of democracy is not to refute Yosef-Hassidim's argument, but rather to point to an enduring causality—of power and love—that transcends and includes even the strongest of either/or arguments.

1 John Dewey, *The Sources of a Science Education* (New York: Liveright, 1929), 38.

2 Here, we are drawing from Winnicott's well-known conception of the "good enough mother." For a more comprehensive description of this Winnicottian concept, see Jan Abram, "The Good-Enough Mother," in *The Language of Winnicott: A Dictionary and Guide to Understanding His Work* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc., 1997), 193-194; in addition to the Winnicottian approach to psychological maturity addressed in this article, we also recognize the grossly misunderstood field of psychological maturity amongst adults as expressed in Robert Kegan's, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

3 For further description of Winnicott's conception of the healthy individual, see "The Concept of a Healthy Individual," in *Home is Where We Start From: Essays by a Psychoanalyst* (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1986), 21-38, where he states: "The main thing is that a man or woman feels like he or she *is living his or her own life*, taking responsibility for action or inaction, and able to take credit for success and blame for failure" (original emphasis, 27).

4 D. W. Winnicott, "Some Thoughts on the Meaning of the Word 'Democracy'" (1950), in *Home is Where We Start From*, 258.

5 See, in particular, John Dewey, "Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us," in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 14, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), 224-230; Winnicott, "Some Thoughts on the Meaning of the Word 'Democracy,'" 243.

6 Ibid.

7 For a comprehensive discussion of this process, see Jane Blanken-Webb, "The Difference Differentiation Makes: Extending Eisner's Account," *Educational Theory* 64, no. 1 (2014): 55-74.

8 Holding is an important concept for Winnicott, which he discusses widely throughout his work. See, in particular, D.W. Winnicott, "The Concept of a Healthy Individual," in *Home is Where we Start From*, 27-28, and Jan Abram, "Holding," in *The Language of*

Winnicott, 183-189.

9 Winnicott, "Some Thoughts on the Meaning of the Word 'Democracy,'" 250.

10 Ibid., 259.

11 These ideas are drawn from Adam Kahane's, *Power and Love: A Theory and Practice of Social Change* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010). The Martin Luther King excerpts are from his sermon, "Where do We Go from Here?" as printed in this book. Kahane draws on theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich to articulate power as "the drive of everything living to realize itself, with increasing intensity and extensity," and love as "the drive towards the unity of the separated," 2.