School and democratic hope: The school as a space for civic literacy

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Abstract
In this article, the central question is how the relationship between democracy and education can be understood in terms of civic literacy. By taking as a point of departure John Dewey’s basic understanding of democracy in terms of communication and experience, which also forms the basis for the pragmatist knowledge concept of transactional realism, this study explores transactional realism in relation to how this concept of knowledge can promote a democratic stance in the teaching of different school subjects. Thus, the focus is on how a democratic stance is an important part in the selection of teaching content and teaching activities in the classroom in a time when democracy is challenged from different angles. The concept of civic literacy is here understood as developing knowledge about the world, learning to act responsibly in the world and realising oneself in the world. Civic literacy is both about knowledge of facts and events and about a classroom discourse opening for responsible and reflective conversations outwards from the subject, towards the social and physical environment.

Keywords
Democracy, civic literacy, transactional realism, democratic education, pragmatism

The aim of this article is to explore the role of the school beyond those aspects that are immediately possible to measure, assess and compare by drawing attention to the task of the school in a democratic society. How can we explore the role of the school in upholding and strengthening democracy in times when the meaning of liberal democracy is being challenged and the democratic form of governance at a national level is being questioned? The meanings of democracy and public education have been problematised by, among others, Clarke et al. (2022) and Heimans et al. (2022) in this journal. Clarke et al. (2022: 4) turned to the debate between Walter Lippmann and American educationalist John Dewey (see Dewey, 1991a [1927]) and argued that Lippmann’s technocratic view ‘of competition, instrumentalism and atomization’ constituted the basis for contemporary education policy rather than John Dewey’s vision of living democratic lives. In this article, my interest is directed towards the classroom and the understanding of teaching and knowledge. I take my point of departure in Dewey’s main concepts of democracy, communication and

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experience to focus on how Dewey’s concept of knowledge, transactional realism, can promote a democratic stance of reflective thinking (i.e. to understand a democratic stance as reflective communication within and between different social groups in society) (Dewey, 2008 [1916]). The responsibility to uphold democracy in a time when democracy is questioned cannot be placed on individual teachers. However, the knowledge concept of transactional realism, related to different school subjects, can foster a habit of critical thinking that is necessary for living a democratic life on the ground.

American professor in history Westbrook (2005) noted that schools have become one of the principal institutions by which modern states reproduce themselves. Democratic societies need to rely on public schools to prepare children and young people for democratic citizenship. The very notion of public education reflects the task of the compulsory school to educate students for the offer and responsibility to engage in public life. Public schools not only are publicly financed but are also the places where a public, a citizenry (i.e. the body of citizens of a country), is made (Barber, 1993). The school, as part of society, is vulnerable in relation to educational politics and policy when policy risks undermining the genuine educational ideas and aspirations of schooling. At the same time, daily school activities can be a space for maintaining democratic norms and a democratic way of living together when the school as an institution is under pressure.

Today, democratic values are being challenged in many Western countries, even in countries with long democratic traditions (Galston, 2020). Liberal democracies have diminished over the past decade, with a population share of only 14% of the world’s population in 2020. The level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen in 2020 is down to levels last found around 1990, while electoral autocracies continue to be the most common regime type globally (Alizada et al., 2021). As scholars in the fields of political science and education (e.g. Barber, 1993; Parker, 2003) have pointed out, democracy is not a natural phenomenon that brings people together. We are not born as democrats. Democracy is rather a form of ‘cultivated imagination’ in which we are asked to also imagine and understand the perspectives of others (Barber, 1993: 43). As John Dewey pointed out about a hundred years ago, the most serious threat to democracy comes from democracies themselves, when the democratic attitude erodes from within. The same institutions that uphold democracy can also be used by social forces to destroy it (Bernstein, 2000). Even today, the greatest challenge to liberal democracy comes from an internal dissatisfaction when people feel that liberal-democratic governments fail to address what they think are urgent questions for their country (Galston, 2020).

The research question that frames this article is: How can the relationship between democracy and education be conceptualised and understood in terms of civic literacy?

Starting in the first section of this article, the features of liberal democracy and some of its challenges are discussed. In the second section, a pragmatic view of knowledge is introduced as well as a correspondence between transactional realism and Bildung in some respects. In the third section, the focus is on the conceptualisation of civic literacy and education for citizenship. The final section includes some considerations of ‘the citizen’ as an ideal and dialogues opening for reflective thinking.

**Democracy and its challenges**

Democracy is a multifaceted concept. A liberal democracy is, besides the right for all adult citizens to vote and run for office, characterised by substantial individual freedom of belief, opinion and speech, freedom of minority groups to practice their religion and culture, an independent legislature and court system and a pluralistic civil society with a free flow of information (Diamond, 2008). Liberal-democratic societies insist that each citizen share civic space with others with
diverse beliefs and standpoints. Citizens are not required to agree with or even like one another; however, they need to tolerate others and permit them to speak and act (Galston, 2020). Democracy is commonly associated with both decision-making and a wider ethical idea about how to live together in society. The two perspectives can be referred to as aggregative and integrative approaches. While an aggregative democracy approach is about deciding according to the will of the majority in decision-making processes, the integrative approach is about society as a social construct, where preferences for different views and empowerment emerge through communicative participation in conversations and deliberations (Morison, 2007).

In an aggregative approach to democracy, it is important to make a distinction between an understanding of the will of the people as one and the same will (i.e. a ‘general will’) and a will of the temporary majority, because this difference has a substantial impact on the view of education. A society governed by an assumed general will of the people as a single body needs an education system in which the values of a stable society are reinforced and take precedence over the encouragement of critical thinking. In a society where the government is dependent on support from a majority of the people for different issues at a particular time, the education system instead needs to be based on principles of critical analysis, tolerance and civility. In this case, the will of the people is not viewed as an entity but as a heterogeneous group of individuals with different wills who think differently about different matters and who are also going to live together in society after an election or referendum, where decisions may have been made by weak majorities (Sullivan, 2020). Thus, there is a crucial difference regarding the role of education between the understandings of ‘the people’ as a homogeneous group with a common will or as a heterogeneous group with lots of different and contesting wills. In the first case, fostering tolerance is not a main educational goal because differences that call for tolerance are subordinate to the reinforcement of common core values for a stable society on which ‘everyone’ agrees. In the latter case, however, deliberation and tolerance are placed at the centre for democratic education, with the goal of accepting differences.

Students need to be both knowledgeable about democratic decision systems and able to act in a democratic way in everyday situations. There is a positive relationship between increasing civic knowledge and a more complex understanding of democracy among young people. A deeper understanding of democracy includes, besides basic rights of freedom of expression and political rights, wider concerns about equality and pluralism in society (Quaranta, 2020). Integrative approaches to democracy emphasise a more deliberative approach that is concerned with the creation of a public space where dialogue can take place and where different views can be expressed (Morison, 2007). Deliberation, in which different views and values are presented and in which the participants need to reflect upon their own views by listening to others’ and forming their arguments, also has a place within school subjects and educational conversations (Englund, 2016). In this article, the interest is directed towards an integrative view of democracy, here interpreted as a way of living and learning together at school by means of a conscious approach to democracy in teaching.

Current challenges to democracy

During the last 15 years, liberal democracy has been under pressure and lost some of its former public support. There are many reasons for this. Globalisation and the 2008 financial crisis undermined confidence in neoliberal ideologies. Religion and culture became dividing lines when liberal ideas were understood as antitraditional, especially in terms of gender and sexuality. Also, the governance of liberal democracies in itself was seen as problematic by groups who felt unrepresented and unheard (Galston, 2020). In the following, three challenges to liberal democracies are identified.
During the last two decades, extensive research has shown that economic goals, competition and market logic dominate international policy discourses, resulting in a ‘policy of numbers’, comparisons and outcomes-based curricula, threatening to narrow the meaning of education (Lawn and Grek, 2012; Lingard et al., 2012; Meyer and Benavot, 2013; Nordin and Sundberg, 2014; Ozga, 2009; Verger et al., 2016). Professor of philosophy and politics Nancy Fraser termed this neoliberal hegemony *progressive neoliberalism*. She argued that it resulted from an odd alliance between liberal currents of feminism, antiracism, environmentalism and LGBTQ1 rights movements on the one hand and the financial sector on the other hand. These two very different fields were held together by a distinctive view of distribution in the field of economy and recognition in the field of morals and culture, in terms of respect and belonging. According to Fraser (2017), the aim of neoliberalism was to liberalise and globalise the capitalist economy. In reality, this meant de-regulating, de-nationalising, re-understanding the role of the state and dismantling barriers to promote the free movement of capital. For this questionable economic politics of distribution to be accepted and hegemonic, it needed to be connected to progressive movements of recognition – hence the expression *progressive neoliberalism*. Fraser (2017) argued that neoliberalism, despite a rhetoric of ‘empowering talented individuals’ and ‘underrepresented groups’, lacked solutions when it came to social problems that were really about class and different living conditions – that is, on the problem of distribution. It replaced equity with a narrow view of meritocracy, focussing on the merits achieved rather than on the social contexts that made the achievements possible.

Neoliberalism, even progressive liberalism, constitutes a challenge to democracy because it fails to acknowledge the structural-institutional factors underpinning injustices in the neoliberal view of both distribution and recognition. Instead, progressive neoliberalism transforms both of these dimensions into individual responsibilities. The consequence of this international neoliberalist hegemony is that the meaning of liberal democracy – including institutional regulations for both economic distribution and recognition of minorities – is under pressure.

Another challenge to liberal democracy is populism, which advocates strong, often individual, leadership. Right-wing populism is characterised by nationalism and protectionism against what is considered foreign – for example, foreign ideas, culture and people. Populists often join conservatives to defend what they regard as attacks on traditional moral values. The populist vision is based on a dichotomic view of the world, with two opposing forces (Galston, 2020). Right-wing populism is based on the assumption that society comprises two homogenous and antagonistic groups: the people and the ‘corrupt elite’ (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 6). Right-wing populists accept democracy in terms of popular sovereignty and majority but reject liberal democracy – that is, the establishment of institutions for the protection of fundamental rights such as freedom of expression and protection of minorities. In Western and Eastern Europe, practically only right-wing populism exists, while Southern Europe also contains leftist populism. At the end of 2016, populist parties had direct influence over a third of European Union member states (Boros et al., 2016).

The democratic challenge lies in the populist thinking of a people as a homogenous group with one and the same will, which risks leading to restrictions in liberal democracy’s protection of minorities by influencing the judiciary and limiting the perspective of diversity in areas such as media, culture and education.

A third current challenge to democracy is the effects of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020–2021. Especially in 2020, the enforcement of lockdowns became a familiar phenomenon in many countries. To protect their own countries from infections coming from outside, many countries have closed their borders. Overall, the response to the COVID-19 pandemic required governments to undertake a series of emergency measures that temporarily removed some democratic and civil rights. Most countries have introduced rules restricting public gatherings and citizens’ freedom of movement, and more than 50 countries have declared states of emergency (Brown et al., 2020).
Thus, governments have temporarily expanded their executive power and limiting individual rights.

There is a risk that emergency measures enacted under the COVID-19 pandemic in some countries will be used inappropriately to strengthen the executive power of the state at the expense of civil liberties and rights (Rapeli and Saikkonen, 2020). There is also a risk that experiences of restrictions about how people can meet and move in society and across borders will affect people’s trust in other people, in society and in other countries.

**Challenges in relation to the school’s democratic mission**

If a democratic role of school is thought of as a place of pluralism, where students from different social groups interact, the segregation of schools needs to be problematised. In the neoliberal ideology of governance of the public sector, the New Public Management (NPM), the role of social institutions as cohesive forces in society has been weakened in favour of marketisation and individual school choices (Gunter et al., 2016). In addition, residential segregation, where families with low and high incomes live divided into different areas, results in segregated schools where students mainly meet other students with similar socioeconomic conditions as themselves.

Rosiek (2019) termed the development in the United States as an ongoing resegregation in the school districts due to housing policies, school choice policies and zoning policies. Segregation combines race and class segregation. Also, in Sweden, residential area is an important reason for school segregation, although it is not the only factor. A key finding of a study of Swedish school segregation was that in addition to a connection between residential areas and school quality, there is also a positive connection between choice to attend independent voucher schools and increased school segregation between immigrants and natives, as well as between students of immigrant and Swedish backgrounds (Böhlmark et al., 2016).

Although school segregation is primarily a political problem, it becomes an educational problem when it leads to a more constrained and one-sided learning environment. The citizenship education that students receive in school is not just about teaching content in the form of human rights and knowledge of the political system of their own country. It is also about what students have the opportunity to learn from school structure and organisation, what they learn from their peers and what they learn from what is included and excluded in classroom discourses (see Cherryholmes, 1988).

Citizenship education is a compulsory element in most Western democracies (Maitles, 2013). When investigating concepts of national identity and citizenship in a comparative study of 24 national case studies of civic education, prior research has suggested that these tasks are addressed from the perspective of national self-definition. However, at the same time, there is a strong emphasis on individual human rights as a universal value, which highlights the need for enquiry, critical thinking, tolerance and interactive teaching in citizenship education (Lee, 2002). The content of civics often transmits constitutional knowledge regarding both the political and economic aspects of the national constitution. In terms of civic literacy, political socialisation can only partly be understood on the basis of national curricula and course plans for formal education. Students also learn from peers, family and media. Civic literacy derived from different spheres inside and outside school is often contradictory and contested, leading to several political cultures existing side by side (Steiner-Khamsi, 2002). In a study comparing citizenship education in Australia and Singapore, Neoh (2017) emphasised that if citizenship education is not explicitly committed to democratic citizenship, it will instead be dominated by the ideology of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is directed towards the education of the individual in a globalised economy that gives rise to tensions between individual and social agency. Critical thinking needs to be linked to values of inclusion and
equality to serve as a tool for economic progress. As highlighted by Martini and Vespasiano (2016), citizenship education involves knowledge about the past, but it is also a political project for the future. Today’s challenge of ethnic and cultural pluralism needs to be addressed by discovering and rediscovering the meaning of citizenship from its aspects of openness, equality and social cohesion.

Related to the question of the purpose of citizenship education is the structure and content of curricula. A transnational curriculum trend is prescribed standards of knowledge as a consequence of an educational policy emphasising the achievement of certain competencies (Wahlström and Sundberg, 2018). The aim of standards-based curricula is to focus on achievement of knowledge, which implies that this also becomes the focus for teachers’ discussions at the school level and in classroom activities. In this way, teachers’ opportunities to maintain a broader democratic goal for teaching activities and for the school as a whole become narrower.

In the following, citizenship education will be explored through the concept of civic literacy (Barber, 1993; Westbrook, 2005). According to Barber (1993), the term civic literacy includes a willingness to participate and act with consideration and deliberation in a pluralistic world, to think critically and to act with empathy in relation to others, despite potential conflicts of interest. This meaning of civic literacy is closely linked to a pragmatic understanding of social communication and the concept of knowledge.

Transactional realism as a concept of knowledge and knowing

The point of departure for the exploration of the concept of civic literacy is the pragmatic philosophy of a democratic society developed by Dewey (2008). Pragmatism is not in itself committed to a specific political approach, and over the years, leading pragmatists have adopted different political positions. However, ‘[p]ragmatic enquiry shares a “discourse ethics” with democracy’ (Westbrook, 2005: 8). American pragmatists, such as George Herbert Mead and John Dewey, have advocated an experiential enquiry, which offers some significant methods for how social communities can arrive at democratic considerations and standpoints. The close connection between pragmatism’s approaches of fallibilism and anti-scepticism and its modes of enquiry ties it to democracy in terms of the belief of cooperative enquiry as the best route to warranted belief (Westbrook, 2005). Developing students’ civic literacy is not only about courses in civics, even if formal courses on the theme of democracy are also important. Rather, civic literacy, as the term is used here, is about adopting a democratic stance in all subjects taught by the school.

Drawing on Dewey’s (1991b) text on creative democracy, we can reach two basic conclusions regarding the meaning of civic literacy. First, democracy continuously needs to recreate itself in relation to changes in society and people’s way of living. Second, democracy primarily takes place and develops locally, through communication in the social spaces of our neighbourhoods and in everyday lives (Bernstein, 2000). Both understandings point to an element of creativity and openness in the concept of democracy, because democracy is a multifaceted concept with different understandings of what can be thought of as ‘the common good’ (Wahlström, 2020). The basic characteristics of civic literacy – participating with deliberation in a pluralistic world, thinking critically and acting with empathy in relation to others – can serve as indicators of approaches, or methods, that need to be included to call an educational stance democratic. The link between education and the adoption of a democratic stance can be further developed by the philosophical concept of transactional realism, which promotes an understanding of democracy both as a way of living together and as a way of teaching and learning. The relationships between individuals and society are shaped through transactions by which both individuals and society are influenced and altered. There is not first an individual and then a society or vice versa. Instead, humans are born
into societies consisting of individuals, social institutions and physical objects; ‘society is individuals-in-their-relations’ (Dewey, 1989 [1933]: 80).

In all aspects of life, communication is central. Through communication, people get a common understanding of aims, beliefs, aspirations and knowledge. People live together in society because of the things and norms they have in common, and the way they get things and norms in common is through communication (Dewey, 2008 [1916]). Hence, social life and communication are the cornerstones of both democracy and education.

Not only is social life identical with communication, but all communication (and hence all genuine social life) is educative. To be a recipient of a communication is to have an enlarged and changed experience. One shares in what another has thought and felt and in so far, meagerly or amply, has his own attitude modified. Nor is the one who communicates left unaffected. (Dewey, 2008 [1916]: 8)

A central foundation for all aspects of life is communication. Through communication, people get a common understanding of aims, beliefs, aspirations and knowledge. When Dewey argued for freedom as ‘equality of opportunity’, it meant to provide ‘all the members of a society with the means for self-realization’ (Westbrook, 1991: 165). For Dewey, there was a close and obvious relationship between philosophy and education. If philosophy represents the wisdom of how to live a better kind of life, then education, broadly conceived, is a question for philosophers. Dewey thought of what he termed scientific thinking as a prerequisite for a democratic society. In this term, he included free enquiry, toleration of diverse opinions and free communication, as he understood scientific thinking as essentially social in nature. The aim of education is to educate children and young people to deliberate both on judgements of facts and on moral values related to facts, with a certain emphasis on the latter (Westbrook, 1991).

The way we can understand the world around us is through our experiences of it. Dewey placed the concept of experience in a wider ecological relationship between an organism and its environment. An organism, or an individual, is always already embedded in an environment from the beginning. The natural world, with all its physical objects, exists independently of the organism. What constitutes the environment are those parts of the physical and/or social world with which an organism – or individual – interacts (Dewey, 2008 [1916]). The interaction is a transaction because of the changed relationships between the individual and the environment in terms of meaning that arise as a consequence of the experience. Because of this transactional process by which the world is incorporated into the concept of experience, experience is not a subjective expression. Instead, experience is the means by which humans can obtain valid knowledge about the world through their transactions with their environment (Levine, 2019). This version of Deweyan realism is called transactional, or ‘natural’, realism (Biesta and Burbules, 2003; Levine, 2019; Sundström Sjödin and Wahlström, 2017; Sleeper, 2001).

Researchers interested in Dewey’s philosophy have suggested conceptualising citizenship education and cultivating a democratic attitude through the lens of a pragmatic understanding of the concept of habit (Dishon, 2018; Hansen and James, 2016; Stitzlein, 2014). Habits, in Dewey’s version of the term, express a dynamic relationship between the individual and the environment rather than an unreflective action in everyday life. Habits are related to the meaning of democracy as ‘a mode of associated living’ (Dewey, 2008 [1916]: 93). In this article, the central interest is how to understand teaching content from a democratic perspective. Thus, I argue that the concept of transactional realism is helpful for exploring what it means to take a democratic stance in teaching school subjects.

At the heart of experience lies a careful enquiry to clarify a problem, which leads to a tentative hypothesis on how to handle the situation, followed by an action to test the hypothesis. Reflective
thinking is the deliberate establishment of connections between actions and their consequences. Actions can be intellectual as well as physical. For pragmatists, even theories are practical in the sense that they create a coherent organisation of ideas, through which the knower can act efficiently (Rusche and Tilman, 2007). The measure of the value of an experience lies in the connections and continuities that lead to further experiences where thinking as a process of enquiry can be further deepened. Already attained knowledge contributes to more complex thinking, which opens for richer experiences in the future (Dewey, 2008 [1916]).

From the perspective of transactional realism, school education is about establishing meaningful and productive connections between the student and the curriculum content. This means that the teacher needs to coordinate the students’ interests towards the curriculum (Biesta, 2014), making the teaching content an environment with which the students transact. As a teacher, you cannot know beforehand exactly how well the students will learn or what kind of influence you, as a teacher, will have on your students (Hansen, 2002). What teachers can do is continuously support the students’ reflective thinking in relation to intellectual, moral and practical consequences on issues raised within the content of teaching.

Society is a space that includes various unsolved problems, sometimes without actual solutions. The only way to handle these challenges is through communication among citizens, across their controversies, conflicts and differences. People need to share their interests with others, deliberate on different complex issues and learn from each other’s perspectives. Included in a democratic way of life, Dewey (1991b [1939]: 228) argued, is ‘the belief that the expression of difference is not only a right of the other persons but is a means of enriching one’s own life-experience’. The common ground for education and democracy is constituted by an experiential approach to gaining knowledge about the world, based on the concepts of experience and communication. An open and free search for knowledge requires a free society without social barriers. A democratic society, on the other hand, requires engaged and knowledgeable citizens with an interest in reflective thinking and deliberation.

**Transactional realism and Bildung**

With its historical roots in German thinking during the 19th century, the movement for the democratic idea became realised by the state as a movement for publicly conducted schools, where the aim of education included educating a citizen and not only a person (Dewey, 2008 [1916]). According to Levine (2019), Dewey’s expression of *growth* is a naturalistic term for what is called *Bildung* in German tradition. Dewey understood growth as the process of reflective thinking that leads to new insights that are added and integrated into previous experiences, which in turn leads to increasingly complex experiences. The idea of Bildung has its roots in the neohumanist tradition flourishing in Germany in the period between 1770 and 1830. In Bildung, the dynamic between the individual and the culture is placed at the centre. Bildung theorists were interested in the question of how to link the individual with his or her cultural heritage. The interest in and learning from culture was seen as a reciprocal process of actualising the individual character of the self and of re-understanding the meaning embedded in cultural expressions (Lovlie, 2002). The development of individual self-determination and emancipation can occur only in the objectification of activities in the culture. Central concepts for culture are humanity, humaneness, objectivity and the general. Self-determination, in terms of independence from determination by others, can happen only from a point of knowledge about nature, the social world, aesthetics, religion, philosophies and so on (Klasfi, 2000). Through education, the student gets access to the world through encounters with teaching content selected by the teacher for a certain educational purpose. As in the case of transactional realism, neither can this tradition of knowledge offer any direct access to Bildung – that is,
‘unfolding the learner’s individuality and sociability’ (Hopmann, 2007: 115). Only the unique encounter between content and an individual, establishing a transformative relationship between the individual and the world, can create the conditions necessary for Bildung to take place. The deep insight from the tradition of Bildung is that it is not possible to know beforehand exactly what, if anything at all, a student will learn about him- or herself or about society through teaching. The only thing teachers can know for sure is the need to devote their students’ encounters with the teaching content to as much care and thoroughness as possible (Hopmann, 2007). In the same spirit, but from a pragmatic perspective, Hansen (2001: 164) noted that the teacher ‘strives to establish an environment in which students can learn, while also keeping in view . . . images of the kind of flourishing adults students can become’. The knowledge concept of Bildung opens up citizenship education as a creative and transformative process that changes the relationships between the self and a changing social and cultural world. In this transformation process, the recognition of the other emphasises the social construction of the individual subject (Bauer, 2003).

Common features of transactional realism and Bildung are the transformative meanings of experience (transactional realism) and cultivation (Bildung). Accordingly, both transactional realism and Bildung point to an education with an experiential quality of knowing, an interest in others from a position that is not one’s own and the transformation of both individuals and society, or culture, by understanding things in new ways and asking new questions (Wahlström, 2007). These two traditions differ in the view of the individual. While the individual learner is the central actor in Bildung, the focus of transactional realism is on the individual in transaction with the social and physical world (Wahlström, 2022).

**Civic literacy: Educating for democracy**

Drawing on the meaning of transactional realism as a concept of achieving knowledge of the world, both as content and as a way of knowing, we can qualify the potential meaning of the concept of civic literacy (Barber, 1993; Westbrook, 2005) in terms of adopting a democratic stance. Educating students in civic literacy, as the concept is understood here, requires teachers to consciously adopt a democratic stance in education. As the tradition of Bildung shows, education is about the encounter between a student and teaching content. In transactional realism, content is viewed as part of the environment in which the student chooses to interact. The concept of environment in pragmatism differs from the term of surroundings in that the environment constitutes the part of the surroundings with which the individual actually interacts (Dewey, 2008 [1916]).

Both transactional realism (Biesta and Burbules, 2003; Levine, 2019; Sundström Sjödin and Wahlström, 2017; Sleeper, 2001) and Bildung (Hopmann, 2007; Klafki, 2000; Lovlie, 2002) are based on philosophies of the relationships between the individual and the world. The two philosophies share the idea of existence as a connected whole, in which the individual is always already embedded. In transactional realism, the space of transactions is the environment with which individuals interact, and in Bildung, the cultivation of the self takes form through interactive processes with human culture in a broad sense. In both philosophies, the mutual character of the influence of the individual and the environment or culture is emphasised. From the perspective of civic literacy, both theories of knowledge are relevant because both emphasise that knowledge about the world transforms both the one who knows and what is known. Drawing primarily on transactional realism, while acknowledging the affinity of some of its characteristics with Bildung, I will elaborate on a closer conceptualisation of the three cornerstones of civic literacy (Barber, 1993; Westbrook, 2005): developing knowledge about the world, learning to act responsibly in the world and realising oneself in the world.
Developing knowledge about the world

Civic literacy includes developing knowledge about the world. It contains an intellectual aspect of learning built on the basic idea that humans are always in a continuous transaction with the physical and social world around them, which highlights the importance of thinking reflectively about how even individual facts are linked to the physical and social world through relationships and consequences (Dewey, 2008 [1916]). To develop an approach to civic literacy in students through the teaching of school subjects, it is not enough to teach inwards towards a discipline or a subject matter; the content of teaching also needs to be directed outwards and forward, towards the physical and social world around the students in the future (Roberts, 2007). Consequently, developing knowledge about the world means more than being able to present facts about it. It includes careful enquiries into both practical and moral matters of relations and consequences of what is taught. Reflective thinking is always about reflecting on something for some purpose – that is, to find out possibilities, risks and constraints with a phenomenon at hand (Dewey, 2008 [1916]). Thus, reflective thinking is not an inner process but a process of sharing and communicating with others in one form or the other.

These kinds of enquiries and reflective thinking in the classroom place students in their role as citizens in society here and now (Dewey, 1991a [1927]). In what contexts does this particular knowledge become important? What different forms of relationships do these particular facts have for individuals and society and with what consequences? The two curriculum traditions – social reconstructionism (Deng and Luke, 2008) and critical-constructive Didaktik (Klafki, 1995), based on the knowledge philosophies of pragmatism and Bildung, respectively – both represent knowledge traditions that direct subject knowledge outwards towards society. Both knowledge approaches include reflections on relations between subject-specific knowledge on the one hand and social and cultural conditions and perspectives on the other.

Learning to act responsibly in the world

Civic literacy also comprises acting responsibly in a world of pluralism. This moral aspect of civic literacy is closely related to developing knowledge about the world. Learning to act responsibly in the world includes being accurate with one’s use of facts and making efforts to base one’s reasoning on actual knowledge. This is an important element of being respectful to others at a time when the concept of truthfulness (Frank, 2022) is increasingly challenged. A second crucial feature of acting responsibly is learning to listen from a perspective that is not one’s own. By listening to others, an individual not only learns more about others’ conditions but also gets to learn more about him- or herself (Dewey, 2008 [1916]). Garrison (1996) referred to German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer and his theory of interpretation, where Gadamer emphasised the significance of striving to understand what a speaker is saying from the speaker’s context and tradition and not just from your own. When we truly try to listen from another person’s perspective, we are at the same time putting some of our own prejudices at stake. However, if we do not expose our prejudices in the face of others, we do not get the opportunity to know ourselves either (Garrison, 1996).

A third element of acting responsibly in the world is civility. Civility in interacting with others contributes to the mutual communication that forms the foundation of a society. To learn to act responsibly in the world thus denotes the ability to engage in common interests based on well-founded arguments and respect for those directly and indirectly affected by the communication. Communication with indirect consequences for those not directly involved in the communication can also be characterised as public (Dewey, 1991a [1927]). When teachers and students deliberate on issues with potential consequences for different parts of society outside their own classrooms,
they are at the same time a part of the public. Forming a public requires a willingness to show mutual respect and listen to others.

**Realising oneself in the world**

Civic literacy includes getting the opportunity to realise oneself in the world by expressing well-substantiated proposals and standpoints as well as participating in contexts of shared interests to fulfil one’s individual potential across social boundaries. In transactional realism, the term *self*-realisation expresses an ethical idea of freedom in the meaning of making the best of oneself as a social being. Self-realisation is about establishing active relationships between one’s own specific capacities and the particular environments that promote the well-being and growth of oneself. This relationship between individual capacities and the environment is one of mutual adjustment that transforms both the individual and the environment (Dewey, 1989 [1933]; Westbrook, 1991). There is an affinity between the idea of freedom as self-realisation within pragmatism and the idea of autonomy by developing one’s own individuality in Bildung.

Realising oneself in line with one’s own unique opportunities is not primarily an inner journey. Instead, it requires the will and courage to transact with the environment based on one’s own needs and interests. Included in the ethical and aesthetical endeavour of self-realisation is both appreciation and criticism (Dewey, 1980 [1934]). While appreciation denotes a personal awareness and understanding of what we as individuals have experienced, educational criticism represents a public aspect of the same experience that involves a reeducation of our perceptions, which helps us see things in continuous new ways (Eisner, 2005b [1976]). Eisner argued for using two types of educational objectives. While instructional objectives form a predefined model of a curriculum, stating what the students are expected to achieve, expressive objects formulate the problems with which the students are expected to cope and the tasks with which they are to engage (Eisner, 2005a [1969]). Thus, self-realisation represents an aesthetic aspect of civic literacy, which includes both a personal element of appreciation and a public aspect of criticism, helping an individual see things from standpoints other than just his or her own – that is, to learn from the transactions with different social contexts throughout life. From the perspective of an aesthetic ideal of being both thoughtful and fair in social participation, the combination of instructional and expressive goals represents a creative approach to promoting self-realisation.

**Civic literacy as a democratic stance in all school subjects**

The meaning of civic literacy, as it is presented here, can be defined as taking a democratic stance in education with the purpose of inviting students to participate in a world of pluralism. In sum, civic literacy is characterised by the following qualities:

- *Developing knowledge about the world*: an intellectual aspect of civic literacy, involving contextualising facts in a reflective and critical way concerning the implications for society and the physical world
- *Learning to act responsibly in the world*: a moral aspect of civic literacy, involving an effort to base one’s reasoning on actual knowledge, learn to listen from a perspective that is not one’s own and act with civility
- *Realising oneself in the world*: an aesthetic aspect of civic literacy, involving participating in contexts of shared interests across social boundaries and fostering a critical perspective of thoughtfulness and justice regarding expression of one’s own viewpoints
The core of teaching is about the selection and presentation of content as well as the forming of the students’ learning activities in relation to the specific content. The meaning of civic literacy reveals itself in the manner with which a teacher makes the selection, presentation and activities in relation to content. Civic literacy is both about knowledge of facts and events and about a classroom discourse opening for responsible and reflective conversations in the direction outwards from the subject, towards the social and physical environment. This is why teaching civic literacy can be understood as teaching a ‘democratic stance’ in relation to different subjects rather than developing certain competences.

A concluding reflection

Democratic education means teaching students about ambiguity and conflict in factual knowledge, recognising conflicting goals in society and seeing human aspirations as complex and contested (Westheimer, 2019). Thus, citizenship education cannot be transmitted to students only in terms of facts concerning the governing system; it needs to be developed in terms of civic literacy in all subjects. Civic literacy defines a democratic stance that helps students develop their capacity to reflect and deliberate on complex issues raised within the teaching content of school subjects. In this sense, civic literacy assumes a view of classroom deliberations as included in the public and students as citizens here and now. The focus of civic literacy is deliberations on future possibilities as well as potential risks based on the knowledge at hand. Civic literacy is based on two forms of dialogue: deliberations and seminars. While seminars are an activity aimed at exploring and expressing meanings of complex problems by asking the question ‘What does this mean?’ to deepen knowledge and broaden individual horizons, deliberation is an activity pointing at weighing different consequences for different social groups in society by answering the question ‘What should be done?’ (Parker, 2003, 2006). Civic literacy – educating each student to develop knowledge about the world, to learn to act responsibly in the world and to realise oneself in the world – is of vital concern for education in all school subjects to prepare students not only for working life but also to take responsibility as citizens in challenged democracies.

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Note

1. LGBTQ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer. The abbreviation often functions as an umbrella term for sexuality and gender identity.

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