Beyond Liberal discourse: Teachers' conceptions of Democracy and Education in England and Spain

Abstract. This study explores the conceptions developed by primary and secondary education teachers in Spain and England about democracy in education. To this end, we conducted a phenomenographic study involving 39 teachers. The results identify four major conceptions of democracy in education: a) democracy as freedom, b) democracy understood as participation and collaboration, c) democracy as a principle for achieving social justice in schools and in the education system, and d) democracy as a principle to learn to live together and social norms. The discussion highlights that the way teachers articulate their conceptions is dominated by a liberal discourse of democracy in education. However, their ideas also show other nuances and traces of more open perspectives. This work stresses the importance of continuing to investigate teachers' conceptions and how alternatives to the dominant trend can be glimpsed through them.

1. Introduction

The way democracy is understood and practised has drawn particular interest in recent years, as a result of the different economic changes and socio-political movements that have affected the evolution of the globalised world (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). Education plays a key role in building ideas about democracy and must therefore be taken into account in debates on democracy (Gutmann, 1996). The educational setting makes it possible for students, teachers, and the entire education community to give democracy a meaning that goes beyond the subject of governance (Dewey, 1966; Biesta 2007, 2011). Therefore, schools can and should contribute to a broader understanding of democracy, even as a way of life that endows the educational process with a social meaning.

The concept of democracy in education has multiple nuances and forms of articulation from which different versions of democratic education emerge (Sant, 2019). The liberal version is the most widespread way of understanding democracy in education (Carr et al., 2018). From this perspective, freedom and equality are fundamental values for which democracy plays an instrumental role, guaranteeing and fostering them. The idea of individual freedom is reflected, for example, in the free choice of school by families or in the freedom of teaching. Equality, in universal access to quality education, necessary to shape citizens who can make informed decisions about their lives and common life. On the other hand, the concept of meritocracy, ever-present in educational systems through the evaluation and accreditation of knowledge, emerges as a fundamental element of liberal thinking and its idea of democratic education.

However, despite the strong presence of this dominant idea about democratic education, Domínguez (2006) suggests that it is essential to gain a deeper understanding of how key figures in schools develop their conceptions of democracy, based either on the dominant discourses observed or by glimpsing alternatives in search of greater nuance. Indeed, teachers' implicit ideas or conceptions about democracy in education is one of the least-researched areas. Therefore, understanding what teachers think about democracy in education is a profoundly interesting line of research with multiple implications (Belavi et al., 2021; Cohen, 2016, 2017; Ginocchio et al., 2015).

The main objective of this paper is to investigate the conceptions of democracy in education developed by teachers. It is broken down in two specific objectives:

- Identify the main elements that make up the conceptions developed by teachers.

- Explore how dominant or alternative ideas about democracy in education shape teacher´s views

This study uses a phenomenographic methodology and to gain a broader vision, contributions from primary and secondary teachers as well as teachers from two different international contexts are considered. The conceptions explored have a strong contextual content, and Spain

and England are two countries where, despite their closeness, there are differences in how people experience and understand politics and democracy. Both share recent events that have revitalised the debate on democracy. For example, in England this is due to the impact of Brexit (e.g., see: Martill and Staiger, 2018), while in Spain it is related to the political and social movements activated by the 15M anti-austerity protests and more recently the tensions in Catalonia (e.g., see: Pereira-Zazo and Torres, 2019).

2. Teachers' conceptions of democracy in education

Conceptions are an organised system of ideas and beliefs that are born through people's experiences and are progressively built and elaborated through interactions and experiences with other subjects (Hasselgren and Beach, 1997; Marton, 1981; Robinson and Mogliacci, 2019). Therefore, since conceptions are conditioned by people's experiences, the construction of implicit ideas has a fundamentally social origin (Pozo, 2006; Van den Berg, 2002). This assumes that each person's life path shapes their understanding of the world and thus how they act and participate in it (Pozo, 2006; Schraw and Olafson, 2003). Therefore, knowing someone's conceptions not only helps us to know their most personal beliefs or ideas; it also gives us tools to better understand their acts, practices, and possibilities both personal and professional.

In order to know conceptions of democracy, we believe it is first necessary to identify the elements around which teachers articulate the idea of democracy in the educational setting. This will enable us to discuss how different perceptions are represented by means of subsequent categorisation. We understand that teachers are not merely transmitters of knowledge. They also play a key role in connecting their worldviews with those of students (Biesta, 2012), acting as public intellectuals that facilitate the conditions for students to be moulded as critical agents capable of questioning 'the institutions, policies and values that shape their lives, relationships to others and their myriad of connections to the larger world' (Giroux, 2020: 12).

Initially when tackling the issue of *democracy in education*, it is common to highlight ideas such as freedom, participation, collaboration, representation, distribution of power, consensus, equality, and governance (e.g. see: Apple and Beane, 2007; Ginocchio et al., 2015; Osler and Starkey, 2006). These ideas shape the dominant democratic thinking that, as Brown (2015) explains, is influenced by the liberal and market logic that ends up penetrating all aspects of life in society. These are highly politically charged ideas that also tend to be presented in the form *of floating signifiers[1],* so they require in-depth exploration in terms of the way they are defined and appear. However, while it may seem that there is a common framework for conceptualising the idea of democracy in education, there are multiple tensions associated with the concept and its practices (Davies, 1999). Authors such as Feu et al. (2017) or Fiedrich et al. (2010) call for the need to define democracy in school more broadly. The former, by considering elements such as governance, inhabitance, otherness, and ethos*,* for example, and the latter, by advocating a reconceptualisation of the idea of equality and the role of rational logic in understanding the relationship between education and democracy.

In line with Belavi et al. (2017), we believe that exploring in depth the way in which people understand democracy is a fascinating task that requires more research:

> 'Democracy is a common place, the consensus it generates around it is almost total. However, this consensus conceals a world of diverse and even contradictory positions. Although agreement on the desirability of democracy is almost unanimous, there is no concurrence about its meaning' (p. 139)

Biesta (2007) proposes two ways of explaining the link between education and democracy. On the one hand, *Education for democracy,* the most widespread notion held in today's liberal context. From this perspective, education is a tool of democracy that serves to mould citizens.

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[1] A *floating signifier* is a meaning without a clear reference to define it. Concepts associated with floating signifiers present multiple, excessive, or contradictory interpretations. This makes it easier for them to take on different forms depending on how they are used or by whom.

Teachers are responsible for transmitting knowledge about democracy, so their visions play a key role in this process. They help students develop skills that allow them to build justified rational arguments (Abowitz and Harnish, 2006). The teaching of this knowledge is regulated through the official curriculum with subjects that are directly aimed at covering these contents (e.g. education for citizenship or Social and Health Education) or by dealing with the subject through a cross-curricular approach (e.g. through history, geography, English etc.) (Osler and Starkey, 2006). As an alternative to this perspective, *Education through democracy* is proposed, in which education and democracy feed back into one another. To do this, the school must become a democratic space in which learning about democracy goes beyond the curriculum and becomes the way of being within the school. Commitment to democratic values is transformed into democratic processes and practices that influence not only the vision of students, but also that of teachers and the entire education community (Biesta, 2011).

The liberal discourse is very present in teachers' conceptions of education and democracy. Carr et al. (2018) point out that it is common for teachers to define democracy in 'a normative way' (p.38), emphasising in their conceptions elements such as elections, governability, hegemonic political structures, and specific elements of the curriculum. In contrast to this, they claim that teachers in their study barely examined critical arguments against the dominant system, rarely mentioned alternative approaches or systems, or explored issues of social justice and education. Belavi et al. (2021) clarify that both freedom and participation are key elements of teachers' conceptions of democracy and education but, in line with the previous arguments, these elements manifest themselves through a liberal or elitist perspective in which freedom is associated with competition and free choice of school, while participation is focused on voting as a tool for decision-making.

Along these same lines, Ginocchio et al. (2015) note that teachers understand democracy in schools primarily as participation in school programmes or teacher-centred actions, restricting

it to specific and procedural activities such as the election of student representatives, and this limits the understanding of democracy as a school culture. They also highlight the fact that teachers do not regard families and students themselves as active agents of the democratic process. Moreover, in some cases, they even perceive them as barriers.

Looking at studies that show us the complexity of the way teachers articulate democracy and education, Nasirci and Sadik (2018) emphasise how conceptions of democracy are strongly influenced by elements such as the family, political, or cultural context; more than by their everyday experiences at school. Along these same lines, Saada (2020) agrees that these factors that affect conceptions may also have a limiting influence. On the other hand, Cohen (2016) discusses how 'competing conceptions play out in current classroom settings' (p.391). The results show how teachers' beliefs influence the way in which they understand curriculum and school policies and how these beliefs in turn limit democratic dialogue with their students. Furthermore, the way in which classes are developed is strongly influenced by the way teachers perceive the social reality of their students. Teachers try to prepare their students to make their own way through their socio-political reality (Cohen, 2017), although without being aware that showing a limited conception of it will also limit their students' democratic understanding and ability to overcome systemic hegemonies (Amsler, 2015).

Especially interesting is the study by Zynger (2012), which shows similar results on limitations in the conceptions of active teachers and shares this concern about the consequences of this trend. In contrast to the above, this research adds that trainee teachers do display a more open and critical view that is given by their participation in the academic world. In the same vein, Castañeda and Santisteban (2016) report the results of a study carried out on social representations of democratic participation among trainee teachers, based on their experiences in the student movement. The results make it possible to differentiate between three profiles of

participation, the first of which, a "democratic participant", corresponds to a critical perspective of education and to teaching for social change.

Despite the tendency of teachers to align themselves with the dominant discourse, their conceptions continue to contain more extensive elements of participation and coexistence, as well as demands for a democratic education that includes ideals of social justice. These ideas are also present in the work of Vidal et al. (2019), Collins et al. (2019) and Carr (2008), contributing to a more hopeful vision by identifying traces of a more open and critical discourse on democracy in education.

3. Methodology

3.1. Phenomenography as a methodological approach

Phenomenography focuses on understanding the set of qualitatively different ways of experiencing a particular phenomenon (Cousin, 2009; Marton, 1981; Pramling and Pramling, 2016). It is based on the idea that conceptions about what people understand are based on the human psyche (Hasselgren and Beach, 1997) and are made concrete in the social environment in which they live; thus their life experiences have a tremendous influence on their conceptions (Pozo, 2006; Reed, 2006). Conceptions are not only an individual construction but a particularly collective one since they are eminently social in their origin.

The role of the researcher in the development of phenomenography is to analyse and explore how people understand different phenomena. Once researchers identify the different conceptions, they organise them into conceptual categories allowing for a data-based analysis of the ways in which the phenomenon studied is experienced and conceptualised (Trigwell, 2000). Phenomenography is therefore a qualitative methodology suitable for exploring the various ways in which teachers from Spain and England participating in this study conceptualise democracy in education.

3.2. Study participants

The research participants were 39 primary and secondary education teachers from Spain and England. When conducting phenomenographic research, it is important to make an adequate selection of key informants. It is essential to ensure that participants' conceptualisations present as much variation as possible through the selection of "critical cases," understood as people who, because of the characteristics of the setting in which they work, might develop a different understanding of democracy in education. In this regard, by considering teachers from two different countries such as England and Spain, rather than presenting a comparative study, we seek to add a contextual element that expands the potential repertoire of responses.

Two criteria have been used for the selection of informants that, based on the experience of the research team, as well as the reviewed literature (e.g. Griffiths et al., 2006; Lupton, 2005; AUTHOR 2016), are believed to influence conceptions:

- *Educational level of the school*: teachers have been selected who work in Primary and Compulsory Secondary Education Schools. The training received by teachers at different educational levels, as well as their experiences in schools, are different, and this can contribute to different conceptions of democracy in education.
- *Ownership of the school*: the study will include teachers from state-owned and private schools. The characteristics of these schools, with different sources of funding, permeate the culture and project of the school, so it is considered important to have teachers from both types of schools.

In addition, teachers from Spain and England were included in the research to have the greatest possible variation in conceptions. Spain and England are two different countries, but they share a political moment with certain similarities. For instance, in both countries concerns about nationalism and populism are very common in political debates about democracy and consequently translated to educational discussions (Sant, 2021). In this sense, having Spanish and English teachers in the study enriches the kinds of conceptions available for us to explore and gives the most complete response to the objective of this research.

Regarding the final number of participants in the study, Trigwell (2000) considers that a range of fifteen to twenty is suitable for discovering the variation of a given phenomenon. However, since data have been obtained from two countries, we have sought to maintain this proportion for both contexts and also take into account a homogeneous distribution of the criteria mentioned in the previous point in order to have a duly balanced representation (Table 1).

Table 1
Distribution of study participants

	England		Spain	
	State-run school	*Private school*	*State-run school*	*Private school*
Primary Education	7	2	4	8
Secondary Education	6	1	7	4
Total	16		23	

Note: Authors' own.

3.3. Data collection

Phenomenographic interviews were used to develop the study (Trigwell, 2000). The interview starts with a trigger question *What is democracy in education for you?* And from there, a conversation develops to explore in depth the teacher's conception about what democracy is in the field of education. During the interviews and based on the responses to the initial trigger or generative questions, the interviewer adds new questions with the aim of clarifying or deepening the understanding of relevant concepts and ideas posed by the interviewed. These are some examples: What do you mean by participation? How do you think that participation should be improved? Why do you think that the school assembly is a democratic space? Does democracy need a hierarchy structure in schools? Etc."

The interviews lasted an average of 20 minutes, and we sought to ensure a good rapport between interviewer and interviewee, carrying them out in quiet, comfortable places, familiar to the participants.

3.4.Study development and data analysis

Ethical approval for this study was gained from the Education Research Ethics and Governance Committee of [NAME OF INSTITUTION] and recorded under the EthOS Reference Number [NUMBER]. The participation in the interviews was voluntary, written informed consent was obtained from participants and data anonymised. The field work was carried out between 2019 and 2020. Once the interviews had been completed, the data were processed in a systematised manner. They were transcribed and organised into a document for further analysis. Each interview was identified anonymously and tagged based on the characteristics of the school where each teacher worked using the following code format: [T4,Sp,Sec,St,p.10][2]

To analyse the data, the logic of phenomenographic analysis of the interviews was followed (Akerind, 2012). According to Marton and Booth (1997), the different ways of experiencing a phenomenon are related to one another, so the phenomenographic representation of a phenomenon is a structured set where the results space is organised inclusively. In this regard, the process includes six step analysis process:

a)   Comprehensive reading of interviews to include the expressions most used by participants. This phase is closely linked to the emerging and exploratory research design of this study and therefore an open reading of the interviews is carried out. The researcher looks for the most relevant elements of each teacher's speech, without a priori theoretical categories, avoiding discarding or not being interested in any fragment (Creswell, 2005). Following the principles of phenomenographic research (Marton, 1981), we avoided the use of previous categories of analysis that are external to the ideas presented by the participants. In this way,

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[2] The interview coding is made up of 5 elements:
1.   Teacher identification number: T1-T39
2.   Country: Spain (Sp) or England (En)
3.   Level of education: Primary (Prm) or Secondary (Sec) Education
4.   School ownership: State (St) or Private (Prv) School
5.   Page where the quotation is located: from 1 to 82

the interviews with teachers are articulated around one open-ended generative question, and the analysis departs from their conceptions. Their responses are approached as implicit ideas of democracy in education.

b)   Creating pre-categories from selected extracts of different texts (Trigwell, 2000). These fragments selected in this second phase were labeled without taking into account previous theoretical categories, but categories linked to the discourse of the teachers themselves. In this way, the narratives of interviews are analyzed according to teachers' ideas and discourses. Once these initial pre-categories are identified, they are compared with each other, reviewed and organized to produce the category system that later appears in the results of the study.

In that sense, the codification is grounded in the participants' own discourse and is developed from their individual ideas. Some examples of these emerging categories are: representative vote, use of the assembly, participation of the educational community, horizontal power, empowerment of students, critical thinking, empathy, etc. These pre-categories were converted into more developed categories that include ideas from the initial labels. The categories are grouped into families or larger groups that include some of the generated categories.

c)   Selecting the most illustrative citations from each of the categories, avoiding sampling error or cherry picking (Morse, 2010). We followed the criterion of greater explainability and "representativeness" that involves selecting the citations within each category that best represent the idea of the group of teachers. Moreover, quotes with some distinctive or conflicting elements are also considered to avoid the biased or intentional selection of quotes.

d)   Reviewing the entire organization with special emphasis on giving voice to the participants of the study from a critical and contextual perspective. This final step involves moving from a disaggregated worldview of teachers to a comprehensive view of each category (Harris, 2008).

e)   A final review of the data obtained, paying attention to teachers' discourse and the relationship between the different conceptions shown in the results".

4. Results

The teachers interviewed move between conceptions more focused on individual freedom and those more focused on social aspects: participation, the need for a more socially just education, or the learning to live together and school culture. Figure 1 shows, in a comprehensive form, the different concepts and main elements highlighted by the participants.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

This figure is developed below, explaining the four conceptions found in the study. In order to give a voice to participants, each conception is labelled with a quotation that reflects the way a certain group of teachers understands democracy in education.

4.1. *"Democracy is freedom, or it isn't democracy"*

When talking about their conception of democracy, some teachers present the idea of freedom as a constituent element of democracy. They understand democracy as legitimate freedom in the process of participation through voting and the power that emerges from it. In the words of two teachers:

> For me, democracy in general is the possibility that every citizen can choose or make their decisions on the various issues. For example, you can choose which party to vote for and it's not imposed on you. Then, whether there is democracy or not is another matter. We are all supposed to have that freedom to choose. [T4,Sp,Sec,St,p.10]
>
> For me it means the ability and possibility to vote for the people who are going to lead the country, in a free and fair way. [T29,En,Sec,St,p.67]

For teachers, the forms of freedom involved in the educational context condition their perception of democratic viability, emphasising control by Government and excess paperwork as factors that condition their freedom. Thus, democracy is limited by the power of the

management teams and/or the Government, as a clear condition of the way they conceive of democracy in education:

> Teachers can make a series of decisions or choices, but our hands are increasingly tied by the Government. We have less and less freedom to teach; everything is much more regulated, and we have more and more paperwork. [T4,Sp,Sec,St,p.10]

The participating teachers are aware that freedom in education is conditional and therefore seek ways to give democratic values the importance they have in the educational field. Illustrating this idea:

> Reality is much dirtier than the absolute, than ideas. That is why we must not lose those fundamental ideas that guide democracy, so we must appreciate the freedom through which there are tools of popular legitimacy. [T23, Sp, Sec, Prv,p.58]

The teachers interviewed conceive of democracy as freedom in two directions. On the one hand, they recognise that freedom can be individual, for example the freedom exercised by parents to decide on a school or a type of education for their children:

> In some ways, the freedom of parents to choose schools and the type of education they want for their children must be respected. Of course there must also be limits [T6,Sp,Sec,Prv,p.14]

On the other hand, the teachers state that freedom of choice goes beyond individual decision-making, since it entails the responsibility of accepting existence as part of a group and acceptance of consensus as a legitimising element. In this regard, teachers consider that

democracy is not just an individual freedom but that it also emerges from group decisions. A Spanish Secondary Education teacher explains this in the following terms:

> That people have freedom of choice and that once things are decided, it is something that we have decided among all of us, and so the decisions that have been made must be respected. [T16,Sp,Sec,St, p.37]

However, despite the teachers' commitment mentioned initially to the idea of freedom as a central element in their understanding of the link between education and democracy, there are still evident arguments that question the extent of this freedom and therefore the possibility of a democratic education:

> I do not know what total democracy is in a secondary school really, can it actually exist? I don't know. It's true that there are methods of education, that there are schools, that I have read books on my master's degree that talk about total freedom for the child to choose what they want to do. And they really say that there are children who decide to study physics, but at my school, I don't think that anyone would study of their own accord. So I don't know to what extent they can give them total freedom to make their own decisions. [T15, Sp, Sec, Prv, p.35]

4.2. *"Democracy in education is understood as collaboration, participation, and representation"*

Secondly, in the way teachers define democracy, we also find links with ideas of collaboration, participation, and representation. For some participants, democracy in education is seen in the school culture, since, when it is collaborative and favours the participation of all the

protagonists of the teaching-learning process, democracy is experienced as an intrinsic part of education:

> A collaboration or a way of living or living together. A way of working in a society where everyone has their own voice. They have an opinion; they have contributions to make. [T17,Sp,Prm,St, p. 40]

> It is part of our culture. That's what we do. In this country [England], everyone takes part in the decision-making process. [T32,En,Prm,St, p. 71]

For some teachers, the ideas of education and democracy are intrinsically linked to participation. This participation is conceived of as a tool to give a voice to all the actors involved in the teaching-learning process and in decision-making. One of the teachers further clarifies that this participation has to be equal, giving equal voice and vote to students, families, the management team, teachers, non-teaching staff, illustrating this idea as follows:

> For me the purpose of education is in itself democratic, and what we try to do is give people an understanding of the world so that they can have equal participation. [T24,En,Sec,St, p. 61]

For some teachers, it is essential to create spaces and procedures through school and administration to promote democracy, since students will only learn if the school promotes it. Thus, for teachers, it is a form of participation and collaboration that teachers generally extend to a broader representation, and which seeks to integrate the entire educational community. As an example, two primary education teachers in private schools consider that:

> Structuring various ways for the entire educational community, students, teaching staff, family to participate, I always include the non-teaching staff, the maintenance staff, the

secretary, that is, to create or make the space or atmosphere where there is room for all of us and where we can care for ourselves. [T2,Sp,Prm,Prv, p. 5]

With the absolute participation of mothers, fathers, students, non-teaching staff, etc. [T14,Sp,Prm,Prv, p. 31]

While some teachers recognise that despite the existence of different structures to facilitate the collaboration and participation of the educational community, it is not always achieved:

In schools, there is no participation at the level of teaching staff or families. There is a PTA, there is a school board, but everything is biased, and all meetings are two-directional, but they are not horizontal at any time, either in the teaching staff or on the school board. [T5, Sp, Prm, St, p. 11]

4.3. *"Democracy cannot be detached from Social Justice: Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity"*

For another group of teachers, democracy is linked to achieving a fairer distribution of resources among students, which encourages critical thinking, promotes the empowerment of students and the elimination of barriers and injustices from the education system. Therefore, to be democratic, education should equal opportunities for students. This levelling and inclusive force is highlighted as being fundamental by both English and Spanish teachers in conceptualising an idea of democracy in education:

I thought that when they arrive at school, it's worrying to think that their destiny is already set. The purpose of school should be about equal opportunities. If they are good enough to do something, then they should be able to access it. [T24, En, Sec, St, p. 60]

A democratic education is one that promotes the understanding that all kinds of students have a place in school. That does not mean that they are all together in the same school, because that is at best unworkable. But the education system does give absolutely

everyone opportunities; regardless of their background, race, ideology, etc. I believe

that this is the fundamental principle there should be. [T6, Sp, Sec, Prv, p. 13]

Some teachers believe that, in order to be democratic, the distribution of resources must be carried out in an equitable way, giving more to those who need them most or who have less, compensating for their starting situation. Such resources are described by the teachers interviewed as human, economic or in terms of activities and tasks themselves, as indicated by one Spanish primary school teacher:

Democracy begins at home, I mean, if I'm teaching English, and in my class there are

people who belong to a certain type of family, where the parents are educated and know

English, those parents will be able to help those children at home. But there are other

students in class, whose parents have a lower or different cultural level, who don't know

English, and I am already making a difference, I am already differentiating between

those who can be helped and those who cannot. Therefore, I believe that simply by

setting homework, this already limits access to the same opportunities. [T21, Sp, Prm,

Prv, p. 51]

Democratic education is understood as a type of education capable of analysing the characteristics of students and their context, as an institution that compensates for inequalities and is able to help and equalise those differences.

I see democracy in education as being associated with the idea of equal opportunities

in relation to something where access has been an equalising force. There are children

who come from very adverse backgrounds and who come to school with very low

reading and writing skills, cultural capital, who have never seen the sea, who have never

been to a theatre, who don't do anything or go anywhere, and their knowledge of the

world is very limited. For me the purpose of education is in itself democratic, and what

we try to do is give people an understanding of the world so that they can have equal participation. [T24, En, Sec, St, P. 61]

On the other hand, democracy in education also entails a redistribution of power. A redistribution that teachers often understand in favour of the empowerment of students. More value is given to student participation and voices as opposed to the power that exists in schools where decisions are made by the management team and/or teachers.

Empowering students is vital. None of these institutions is really willing to give real power to their students, and it is very rare to see real quality power given...there is so much fear about what would really happen. [T38, En, Prm, Prv, p. 79]

In order for this redistribution of power to be meaningful and actually mobilise democratic change towards a fairer society, teachers emphasise the idea that the school must foster a critical mindset:

I believe that in school this is where that democracy should be formed, that critical judgement, classes are a mini society where social relations, power relations are developing, a little bit like outside the classroom in some ways. So, you have to know how to use all the opportunities that these relationships give to make children see how they have to behave and you as a teacher should not have a power relationship over them; you have to respect the rules, so that they feel treated fairly as well. [T11, Sp, Sec, Prv, p. 24]

4.4. *"The idea of Living together defines democracy in education"*

Finally, for some teachers, talking about democracy means talking about a number of values, a way of life that is reflected in how school is understood and experienced. Understanding it this way implies commitment and responsibility on the part of the teacher. Teachers feel that they are democratic in the way they make decisions in the classroom, in the way different

aspects are agreed on, etc. This is perceived, and students learn it from the example set in the teaching-learning process. In the words of one of the participants:

> I believe that it's also a little about your character and your way of being because...the way you are in your everyday life, you bring that to the classroom. [T16, Sp, Sec, St, p. 39]

The values that teachers understand as being linked to a democratic way of being and educating include the ability to listen and be heard as the main foundation of democracy. Listening actively and affectively leads to the empowerment of both teachers and students and to valuing the existence of "others" as necessary for democratic and harmonious coexistence in the school. Illustrating this idea:

> I also think it's a feeling, a feeling that you're seen and heard, and you have... Obviously, when we work with children, and with adults too, it is their desire to be an active political agent, in different ways, broadly. [T38, En, Prm, Prv, p. 78]

> It would be a social education that would take account of the other, that we should not always put our selfishness or interests first, but it is also in our own interest to protect the interests of others, and then that is linked to a critical judgement so that our thoughts are that way inclined as far as possible. [T11, Sp, Sec, Prv, p. 25]

This conception of democracy in terms of fostering the idea of living together does not explicitly aim for students to know the meaning of democracy, or what democracy implies. The objective of this conception is to experience it, to shape responsible people who are able to listen and live harmoniously alongside one another, so that students understand what democracy is and its importance. One British teacher states that:

> Here you have for example a 6-year-old boy who doesn't really care about the concept of democracy but has a feeling that you hear him express in an abstract way and this can start as something small, but it starts to grow and grow until he is able to see the

bigger picture, he sees as all the relationships through which the democratic process is

maintained. [T38, E, Prm, Prv, p.79]

This conception emphasises the experiential character of democracy. Teachers highlight that

democracy must be experienced as a fundamental part of the teaching-learning process so that

students understand what it is and see it as an essential element both in school and in their lives.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The moments of political and social tension experienced both in Spain and England in recent

years have led teachers to reflect more deeply on their role and that of education within and for

democracy. In this initial exploration of the different elements that articulate teachers'

conceptions, whether in England or Spain, and regardless of the level of education we are

focusing on, we find certain common elements. The ideas of freedom, participation,

coexistence, and in many cases the ideals of social justice are, as in this case, also highlighted

in other studies as central elements to explore and discuss the relationship between democracy

and education (Belavi et al., 2021; Belavi and Murillo, 2020; Ginnochio et al., 2015; Zyngier,

2012). Although is not the purpose of the study, it is possible to glimpse certain differences in

the conceptions of the teachers analysed in light of their educative level or country. We found

that for example, the English teachers who participated in the interviews seem to show more

commitment to and political awareness of the education system, understanding democracy in

education as a process of citizenship that works in connection to educative and social

institutions. On the other hand, Spanish participants construct their understanding of

democracy in education from concepts more linked to the classroom, school context and

mechanisms of school participation. This proposition is developed from the difference in the

number of references made by English teacher to issues related to the redistribution of power

and, Spanish teachers to channels and forms of participation". .

Through interviews with teachers, a common or dominant discourse is identified that has a strong impact on the way teachers address the issue of democracy, not only within the school setting, but also outside of it. Liberal logic structures and shores up this dominant discourse, conditioning the way in which education and democracy intertwine (Sant, 2019). It is therefore no surprise that we are seeing a trend among teachers towards a liberal conception of education and democracy. This is due not only to the fact that pedagogy and modern school organisation are influenced by this approach, which is not without criticism (e.g., Apple, 2006; Brown, 2015), but also because their personal lives and visions of the world are located within this discursive framework. However, this discourse is not homogeneous and, as our results show, it also contains nuances, tensions, and differences that allow us to glimpse alternatives and address the subject in a more open and positive way, in line with the work of Carr (2008) or Collins et al. (2019).

The idea of freedom is a central element in teachers' conceptions, through which democracy takes shape in the educational setting. Teachers claim that without freedom there is no democracy in education. Exploring in depth the understanding of a concept as complex as freedom is fundamental to understanding the presence of liberal discourse, as well as alternatives to it. Freedom is primarily represented by teachers in its liberal form, conceptualised as something individual and linked to the possibility of choice (e.g., school, homework, representation etc.). They also express concerns about how this freedom can be conditioned. Paradoxically, the limitations mentioned by teachers are the product of the education policies and liberal logics that inform many of their approaches. This is worrying because it involves the acceptance and subsequent implementation of dynamics of *surveillance* and *accountability.* These dynamics in practice mean an increase in teachers' bureaucratic workload, and they eventually end up paring it down (Giroux, 2015), bringing it closer to a

normative vision of democracy, moving away from more open, deeper, and critical approaches to education and democracy (Carr et al., 2018).

The study presented here also identifies conceptions that go beyond the individual and reflect on the conditioning factors of this freedom and their impact on the development of a democratic conscience and practices in the educational setting. From these perspectives, freedom is more than something individual and also takes into account the implications for other members of the education community. When the group component transcends the boundaries of the individual, teachers begin to explore in greater depth the concepts of participation and coexistence as constituent elements of their understanding of democracy in the school setting. Some teachers believe that the mechanisms of participation in the school system are appropriate. While other members of the school community demand more "real" participation, in which the voices of teachers and students have a stronger influence at pedagogical and organisational levels. They sometimes develop approaches that radically question how to design participation and equality in the current education system.

Studies such as Zyngier (2012) link more conservative visions of democracy to more experienced teachers, while more innovative notions are associated with younger newly qualified or trainee teachers. This author explains that the latter, having more recent links with the academic-university world, seek more depth and thus offer more resistance to a more conservative discourse on participation or democracy in general. Although we have not considered this relationship with the age of teachers in our study, we do share the idea that greater dialogue between the academic world and the school world would encourage teachers and the education community to develop a much broader discourse on education and democracy. There is a need for discourse that allows participants not only to question educational elements but also other contextual factors that, as Saada (2020) explains, can also limit teachers' visions.

One example of the potential of this collaboration can be found in the pedagogical initiative developed by AUTHOR (2020), involving teachers and students as well as representatives of higher education. In this case, the study allowed participants to reflect and broaden their understanding of the value and limits of consensus and conflict as pedagogical elements that, although linked to democratic education, are rarely discussed in the education setting. This initiative allowed participants to explore antagonistic approaches to democracy that invited them to develop their conceptions about democracy and education, opening up the debate on some of the fundamental elements on which the dominant approaches are based.

Authors such as Biesta (2007) suggest that it is problematic to pretend that democracy can be created or saved from schools, especially when the ideas and beliefs about democracy and education presented by teachers end up emphasising *an education for democracy* as the main focus, limiting the approaches of an *education through democracy* to one-off activities or democratic simulations that undermine their democratising ability. For most of the teachers who participated in this study, the former represents a fruitful way of linking democracy and education while the latter is rather an aspiration. However, we also find teachers' conceptions that show more sceptical and critical views of how they understand both approaches and their ability to mobilise ideas about democracy in education. For these teachers, democratic approaches to education must be transformative at the personal, school, and social levels. These teachers argue that only through a profound commitment to ideas of equality, participation, and social justice can a truly transformative *Education through democracy* be considered (Applebaum, 2003; Carr, 2007).

In line with the statements made by the teachers interviewed, authors such as Applebaum (2003) consider that classrooms and schools are spaces that represent the culture of dominant power. In this regard, if the school is not critical, it will reflect and reproduce the injustices of society. It is therefore necessary for the education system to have teachers with conceptions of

democracy linked to social justice and thus be aware of giving a voice to traditionally excluded students, eradicating segregating practices, etc. It is interesting that teachers' conceptions remain eminently liberal with a limited critical capacity, especially when they conceive of socially just democracy as the opposite of equality. The link between education, democracy, and social justice remains blurry when we try to understand the extent to which it sets itself apart from liberal discourse. Thus, the work of Sant (2019) states that, beyond an alternative to liberal discourse concentrated on the idea of social justice or critical pedagogy, we can find other proposals. Although they do not appear explicitly or centrally, it is possible to find traces of these in teachers' conceptions.

Future research can focus on expanding the sample and selection criteria. This would allow the study to gain a better understanding of the participants' socio-cultural reality to determine how this influences their perceptions. Moreover, we understand that our study is limited when providing arguments for a comparative analysis that stresses differences between countries or school levels. It is expected that future studies follow this line of research to provide more detailed and situated views of the relationship between education, democracy, and other contextual elements. Therefore, we suggest the use of other methodologies to discuss the differences between English and Spanish teachers —and perhaps including teachers from other countries —as it will be a good way of enriching the discussion that this paper commences. Finally, combining the reflections presented in this study and the conceptions offered by the teachers, it is highlighted the responsibility and role played by schools in the construction of a society that is conscious of the prevailing model of democracy and how it influences the teaching-learning process (Belavi et al., 2021), but also accepting of its limitations (Biesta, 2007). It is important to be aware of the democratic space that school becomes and how teachers directly affect the way students experience and understand democracy. Therefore, to understand in more depth the conceptions of teachers, teachers themselves must be made aware

of how their implicit ideas affect their professional practice, thus contributing to the achievement of a school, and thus a society, that is more just and able to understand the complexity and plurality of democratic thought and practice. Teachers play a fundamental role with their ability to imagine alternatives and enrich the educational debate at all levels. Encouraging teachers' reflection on how to conceptualise the relationship between democracy and education in an open, critical, and profound way is a democratic exercise per se and brings us closer to an education through democracy. By way of conclusion, we could say that, by taking into account and celebrating the multiplicity of visions and nuances presented, we will be extending the educational imaginary beyond the normalised and dominant vision that, although it has a great presence, must be questioned.

6. References

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