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THE EDUCATIONAL COMMONS AND DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION: A POSSIBLE SYNERGY

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between democratic education and the educational commons represents a powerful and transformative synergy that has the potential to reshape the landscape of education. Democratic education, founded on principles of student participation, critical thinking, and social responsibility, seeks to empower learners to actively engage in their learning and become informed, responsible citizens. Simultaneously, the educational commons embody the idea that education should be a shared resource, accessible to all, free from commercial interests, and grounded in openness and collaboration. This presentation proceedings delves into the deep connections between democratic education and the educational commons, exploring how each concept complements and strengthens the other. It examines the role of the educational commons in fostering democratic principles in education, such as access to resources, empowerment of student voice, development of critical thinking skills, and the promotion of social and civic responsibility. Furthermore, it addresses the challenges and considerations associated with implementing these principles in educational practice.

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Introduction

Education, as a cornerstone of any democratic society, empowers individuals to engage actively in the democratic process and contribute to the betterment of their communities. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the concept of the educational commons and potential relationships with democratic education. The educational commons refers to the idea that education should be treated as a shared resource, accessible to all, and not constrained by commercial interests or exclusivity. On the other hand, democratic education is an approach that seeks to empower students by involving them in decision-making processes, fostering critical thinking, and promoting active citizenship. Within this perspective, learners need to assume control over their learning and focus on the development of skills, rather than the memorisation of facts. In this presentation, we will explore the interplay between the educational commons and democratic education, examining how they can mutually reinforce and support each other in creating a more inclusive, equitable, and participatory educational system.

Understanding the Educational Commons

The educational commons is a concept that envisions education as a shared, open, and collaborative endeavour. It emphasises the idea that knowledge and educational resources should be treated as common goods, free from restrictive ownership and accessible to all. In the educational commons, individuals, educators, and institutions are encouraged to create, share, and adapt educational materials, fostering a culture of openness, collaboration, and inclusivity. It is driven by the belief that education should not be limited by commercial interests, copyright restrictions, or socioeconomic barriers, but should instead be a public good that empowers learners and supports equitable access to knowledge. The educational commons encompasses a wide range of resources, including open educational materials, open-source software, and digital platforms, all contributing to a more democratic and inclusive approach to learning and teaching.

Democratic Education

Democratic education is an educational approach that emphasises the principles of democracy within the learning process by actively involving young people as agents of their own learning. It seeks to create a safe learning environment where students participate in decision-making about the school life and learning possibilities, customise learning according to their interests while keeping a balance between freedom and

responsibilities, actively develop conflict-resolution skills, learn through active participation, and develop critical thinking and citizenship skills.

Some of the key principles of democratic education include:

- a. **Student Voice:** Democratic education places a strong emphasis on giving students a voice and impact in shaping their learning experiences. This includes involving them in decision-making processes related to curriculum, rules, and classroom activities.
- b. **Active Learning:** Learning is viewed as an active, collaborative, and hands-on process. Students engage in projects, discussions, and experiential learning that go beyond traditional lecture-based instruction.
- c. **Critical Thinking:** Encouraging critical thinking and inquiry is central to democratic education. Students are encouraged to question, analyse, and evaluate information, fostering a deeper understanding of complex issues.
- d. **Social and Civic Responsibility:** Democratic education instils a sense of social and civic responsibility in students, preparing them to be active participants in their communities and society.
- e. **Age-mixing:** Contrary to the age segregation characteristic of conventional education, age-mixing provides learners with possibilities for scaffolding experiences that supports the development of bridges of knowledge and experience across ages, promotes empathy and care, and resembles the actual life.
- f. **Free play and time:** Keeping in mind that learning covers more than academic content, free play and time accounts for learners' need to explore resources, play with the tools of the culture, exchange experiences and learn from others' experiences, develop curiosity and initiative, and focus on their own interests.

It is important to mention that, in democratic education, the role of the adult shifts from that of an authoritarian figure to that of a facilitator and mentor, participating in the learning process as a partner and supporter, never taking responsibility for what, when and how learning needs to happen. Within this perspective, adults support students in their pursuit of knowledge, orientate learning possibilities, and create a safe and inclusive learning environment by abandoning judgement and grading. Undoubtedly, this approach emphasises the co-creation of knowledge, where both students and teachers learn from each other.

The Synergy Between the Educational Commons and Democratic Education

The educational commons provide an ideal foundation for democratic education by ensuring that educational resources are openly accessible to all. Such resources, which are a central component of the educational commons, can be used to create a curriculum that aligns with the principles of democratic education, takes into account and supports learners' interests and focuses on their strengths. Students can access a wide range of materials, collaborate on projects, and contribute to the creation of new resources, fostering an environment where learning is participatory and inclusive.

Furthermore, democratic education is rooted in the principle of student voice and participation in decision-making. The educational commons provide an abundance of resources that enable students to shape their educational experiences. For instance, they can select learning resources, contribute to the creation of new content, and engage in open discussions and forums to express their opinions. This collaboration empowers students to have a direct impact on their education, leading to a sense of ownership and engagement in the learning process.

What is more, the educational commons, through its open and collaborative nature, encourages critical thinking and inquiry. In a democratic education setting, this aligns perfectly with the goal of developing critical thinking skills. Students can explore multiple perspectives, challenge existing knowledge, and engage in debates and discussions on various topics. The availability of diverse educational resources in the commons allows for a rich and multifaceted learning experience, enhancing students' ability to think critically and make informed decisions.

Moreover, both democratic education and the educational commons emphasise the development of social and civic responsibility. In democratic education, students learn to be active citizens and engage in community projects, while the educational commons can support this by providing resources related to social issues, civic engagement, and active citizenship. Students can use these resources to better understand their roles in society and develop the knowledge and skills necessary to contribute positively to their communities.

Finally, one of the powerful aspects of the educational commons is its ability to connect learners and educators from around the world. This global collaboration aligns with the democratic education goal of fostering a sense of interconnectedness and global citizenship. Students can engage in collaborative projects with peers from diverse backgrounds, gaining a broader perspective on global issues and developing empathy and tolerance.

Conclusion

One of the main goals of education is the development of critical thinking skills. However, standardised curricula and assessment, authoritarian habits, and learners' decline in mental health seem to characterise conventional schooling practices. The educational commons, by providing a plethora of diverse learning possibilities and positive relationships, offers an environment conducive to critical inquiry. Students can access a wide range of perspectives and engage in debates and discussions on various topics, thus honing their critical thinking abilities. The rich array of educational materials in the commons encourages students to question, analyse, and evaluate information, ultimately leading to a deeper understanding of complex issues.

In terms of social and civic responsibility, both democratic education and the educational commons share a common goal. Democratic education endeavours to prepare students to be active citizens, engaged in their communities, and informed about social issues. The educational commons, by offering resources related to social responsibility and civic engagement, provides the necessary materials to further this goal. Students can access information and materials that help them understand their roles in society, build empathy, and develop the knowledge and skills necessary to contribute positively to their communities. Moreover, the educational commons promote global collaboration, which aligns with democratic education's aim of fostering global citizenship. Students can engage in collaborative projects with peers from diverse backgrounds, gaining a broader perspective on global issues and developing empathy and tolerance. The interconnectedness fostered by the commons promotes a deeper understanding of the global landscape, encouraging students to become active global citizens who are aware of their responsibilities beyond their immediate communities.

Nevertheless, several challenges and considerations must be addressed to fully realise the potential of this relationship. To start with, one pressing issue is the digital divide. Not all students have equal access to technology and the internet, limiting their ability to participate fully in an educational common that relies heavily on digital resources. To address this, efforts to bridge the digital divide are crucial, ensuring that all students, regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds, have access to the necessary tools and infrastructure. Furthermore, another issue refers to the need to question and problematise standardised curricula and timetables, promoting young people's assumption of responsibility and development of agency towards their learning, breaking up monolithic power structures that perpetuate passiveness, indifference, lack of motivation and a decline in young people's mental health. Finally, quality control is another challenge. In addition to the horizontal decision-making and positive relationships that encourage learners to co-design, co-create, co-modify, and co-assess their learning experiences, the educational commons has become increasingly populated with open educational resources, which means that ensuring the quality and reliability

of these resources is essential. This is especially important in the context of democratic education, as educators must curate and use resources that align with the educational goals set together with learners. A robust system for quality assurance and curation is needed to maintain the integrity and efficacy of the educational commons.

In conclusion, the interplay between democratic education and the educational commons represents a potent force for positive change in the field of education. The educational commons, with its focus on open access, collaboration, and inclusivity, aligns seamlessly with the principles of democratic education. By promoting student voice, critical thinking, social and civic responsibility, and global collaboration, this relationship has the potential to create a more equitable, engaging, and democratic educational system. However, addressing challenges such as the digital divide, stagnated power relations and quality control is imperative to ensure the successful implementation of this powerful synergy. Ultimately, the integration of democratic education and the educational commons can lead to a more inclusive, equitable, and participatory educational landscape, nurturing informed, responsible, and empowered citizens of the future.

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