



TOWARDS A CHILDIST THEORY OF DEMOCRATIC DANNELSE

An argument for the radical potential
of more age-inclusive scholarly imagination

PhD dissertation
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TOWARDS A CHILDIST THEORY OF DEMOCRATIC DANNELSE

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Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you.
And though they are with you, yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts,
for they have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies but not their souls.
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,
which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.

You may strive to be like them,
but seek not to make them like you.
For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.
You are the bows from which your
children as living arrows are sent forth.

Khalil Gibran, 1923

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TAK

CONTENT

1 INTRODUCTION	9
<i>Education and young people as the solution to a democratic crisis.....</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>A study that focuses on the 'democratic quality' of everyday school life.....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Research questions</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Towards a childist theory of democratic dannelse.....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Contributions of the dissertation.....</i>	<i>18</i>
2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK	23
<i>Conceptual framework – literature review for research</i>	<i>23</i>
Conceptual framework, part one	28
<i>The central theories dominating the field of democratic dannelse.....</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>A brief history of dannelse</i>	<i>30</i>
What is dannelse about?	30
Paideia – preparing the people (the demos) for governing (kratia) the society	32
<i>Bildung</i> – a key concept of the Enlightenment	34
Dannelse – a united common Danish people	41
The disappearance and renaissance of dannelse	45
A concept which suffers from a semantic and normative overload	47
<i>Addressing a language issue.....</i>	<i>47</i>
Summing up the brief history of dannelse.....	49
<i>Assumptions in the theories dominating the traditionally defined field of democratic dannelse and democratic education</i>	<i>51</i>
The individualism and instrumentalism in dominant ways of thinking about democratic education	52
The racism, sexism and even straightforward misogyny imbedded in Western philosophical frameworks.....	56
The adultism embedded in Western philosophical frameworks	63

The 'Age of reason' is conceptualized in <i>explicit opposition</i> to the child	67
The figure of the child is at the centre of the colonial logic.....	68
Thinking in the light of childhood to imagine a more expansive humanity	69
<i>Concluding thoughts on conceptual framework part one</i>	72
Is the concept of dannelse a convenient and self-comforting concept for those already in power?	73
Does the modern concept of dannelse actually have a political consciousness?...	74
The child is nearly impossible to perceive as a political subject	75
'Getting in the way' to explore the (perhaps radical) potential of a <i>childist</i> theory of democratic dannelse	78
A childist potential in Biesta's theory of education as subjectification	79
Aspiring to rewrite the foundation in the concept of dannelse by bringing disciplinary knowledge and practical knowledge into some kind of relationship ..	80
Conceptual framework, part two	85
<i>Conditions under which acting as a subject can take place</i>	85
The influence of transnational political corporations and global education trends on the Danish state school.....	86
The presence of particular policy trends and logics in educational practice in Denmark.	89
The reform of the Danish state school in 2014.....	92
The 'programme invasion' and the return of the 'naughty corner'	94
The 'concern industry' produces a child that not only has or may get problems, but is the problem.....	95
How much action as a subject is actually possible with the 'concern industry' as a condition?	96
<i>Findings from empirical studies aiming at exploring the democratic role of education</i>	98
Four characteristics of the literature on democratic dannelse and democratic education	98
Findings from recent empirical studies conducted in a Danish state school context	101
Concluding the conceptual framework.....	106
<i>Dannelse – a problematic concept</i>	107
<i>A political perception and a 'childist lens'</i>	108

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	111
<i>Thinking with theory</i>	<i>111</i>
<i>Thinking with a Foucauldian discursive approach.....</i>	<i>114</i>
Discourses systematically form the object of which they speak	115
Foucault's Subject and Biesta's subject	118
No claimed knowledge of democracy is either neutral or inevitable	119
<i>Thinking with childism – the child is a knower</i>	<i>120</i>
The emergence of a childist lens	120
If we understand the child in a non-adultist way, we will understand the democratic role of education better	121
<i>Thinking with Biesta – subjectification as democratic dannelse</i>	<i>124</i>
Interpreting democratic dannelse through the concept of subjectification.....	124
Democratic dannelse as an educational answer to a democratic problem.....	125
Education as subjectification	127
Ego-logical and non-ego-logical ways of being in the world.....	130
By the adultist logic, Biesta's argument falls short	131
Interruption, suspension, and sustenance.....	134
A distinction between the work of the self and the work of education because it involves two different time frames.....	135
Democracy as sporadic – police order and politics.....	136
<i>Concluding the theoretical chapter</i>	<i>138</i>
4 METHODOLOGY, DATA PRODUCTION, AND ANALYSIS.....	141
<i>Methodological considerations in the post-structuralist framework.....</i>	<i>141</i>
The discursive approach	141
A contextual condition of the dissertation in Denmark 2018-2023.....	143
<i>Research design</i>	<i>145</i>
A qualitative research design based on ethnographic approaches	145
<i>Discursive case construction and data sources</i>	<i>150</i>
Multi-sited fieldwork	150
Two Danish state schools as the social context of democratic dannelse as a practice	150
Variations of participant observations and writing fieldnotes	156
Taking into consideration the theories held by the participants.....	159
Ethical dilemmas – signing the 'adultist contract' or not?.....	160

Semi-structured interviews.....	161
Discovering other 'relevant' data sources	165
How 'thinking with theory' intertwines with the emergence of data sources	166
Selecting relevant education policy documents and conducting fieldwork in the 'world'	168
Data management, analytical strategy and shifting relationship with the data material.....	169
Rhizomatic analytical strategy	170
Literature review for research – a 'rhizomatic ad hoc strategy'	172
<i>Concluding the methodological chapter</i>	174
5 THREE DOMINANT DEMOCRACY DISCOURSES	177
<i>Paying attention to the conditions for democratic dannelsen</i>	177
<i>Defense democracy</i>	179
Ignoring radicalization processes is a privilege of the majoritized	181
The metaphorical framework in the Paris declaration	182
The metaphorical framework in project 'Democracy and citizenship'	184
The undemocratic 'nature' of the 'non-Western'	185
Defense democracy sits within a prejudicial discourse about minoritized Danes	187
A discourse with neo-racist elements.....	188
In service of a Neo-racist police order	190
A de facto apartheid school system.....	193
Defense democracy discourse as a condition for democratic dannelsen.....	196
<i>Campaign democracy</i>	197
'Why do you want to see normal everyday school life?'	198
Campaign democracy discourse in general public.....	199
Campaign democracy discourse in the reform of the Danish elementary school and in the European commitment to strengthen democratic values.....	201
Outsourcing democratic dannelsen to private suppliers	203
In service of the ongoing colonial project.....	204
Claims for equality based on the perception of injustice is critical thinking	206
<i>Competence democracy</i>	210
Democratic dannelsen poses a challenge to the governance of education.....	210
Project Competences for Democratic Culture and Intercultural Dialogue	212
Competence is an individual and individualizing term	219
A neutral, empty, and positive term, almost impossible to question.....	220

The competence-based approach establishes an active/passive dichotomy	222
Children are constructed as inadequate and inferior	222
Discussing the Competence democracy discourse	225
<i>Concluding remarks to dominant democracy discourses as a condition for democratic dannelsen</i>	229
The quality of subjectification depends on one's 'naturalized' ontological identity	230
The violence of kindness and correctness	233
6 EXPLORING DEMOCRATIC DANNELSEN AS A PRACTICE	237
<i>Bringing theory and practice into some kind of relationship</i>	237
A movement away from education as subjectification	238
<i>The case of Vesterborg elementary school: Lola and Peter</i>	240
Time and expectations pressure, and 'things that fall between two stools'	243
The mental health crisis in Denmark	245
How is the world (re)presented?	248
Excerpt: who sits where? what is fair?	250
A 'storage' of experiences with staying in the difficult middle ground	254
How the logic of learning changes interpretations of the role of the teacher	255
Excerpt: A waste of valuable learning time	256
The 'knuckleheads' and the lack of encounters with the real	260
Summing up the case of Vesterborg Elementary School	262
<i>The case of Greenhill elementary school: Adam and Betty</i>	264
Introducing Greenhill elementary school	264
The fundamental aspect of the work of educators: relational work	266
Investment and humanization	269
Challenging the culture of perfection	272
Flexibility	275
Humour	277
Academic learning and relationship go hand in hand	280
Excerpt: closet-crawling	282
Summing up the case of Greenhill elementary school	284
The 'lucky ones' enjoy conditions that allow an orientation towards the subject-ness of students	286
<i>The case of Greenhill elementary school: Catherine</i>	287
Challenging the very strict education discourse	287

The relationship between ‘the social’ and ‘the personal’ and democratic dannelse	293
<i>Concluding reflections on the exploration of democratic dannelse as a practice</i>	296
Brief summary of the analyses of chapter six	297
A paradox	298
The theories held by the participants in the study highlight <i>relationality</i>	300
7 CONCLUDING CHAPTER.....	303
<i>Towards a childist theory of democratic dannelse.....</i>	303
Choosing a research approach and a theoretical framework.....	306
Developing a research design based on ethnographic approaches.....	309
<i>Contributions of the dissertation.....</i>	310
An argument for the need of engagement with potentially embedded biases in the theories and concepts with which we theorize	310
An analysis that illuminates how dominant democracy discourses foster discriminatory practices.....	311
Democratic dannelse is perhaps better grasped as <i>the movement of relationships between things</i>	313
Contemporary educational trends and logics are a movement away from an orientation towards the interdependence of human beings (and animals and nature)	316
Educational trends and logics involve a (further) dehumanization	318
Adultist elements obstruct the childist potential of Biesta’s theory	320
How may adultist biases have shaped the study?	323
<i>Towards a childist theory that reminds adults of children and young people’s freedom</i>	326
SUMMARY	331
RESUME.....	334
REFERENCES.....	337
APPENDIX A: TOTAL DATA SET	358





1

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation studies the democratic role of education in the Danish state school. It aspires to produce knowledge about how to understand the democratic aspect of education as a *practice*, as something embedded in the everyday practices and processes of school life, in living pedagogical relationships. Furthermore, the dissertation investigates the contemporary educational trends that condition school life in a Danish context.

Education and young people as the solution to a democratic crisis

In contemporary times, there are great concerns globally about the state of democracy. In the established democratic nations of Western Europe and North America, democracy seems to be in a state of disrepair. Freedom House concludes in its annual report on political rights and civil liberties that global freedom faces a dire threat with 2021 as the 16th consecutive year of decline in global freedom (Freedom House, 2022). Europe has historically been the ‘best performing’ region with regard to freedom in the world and still is. However, the principles of liberal democracy have been under pressure in Europe as well in recent years, particularly from illiberal populism (Freedom House, 2022). According to the Pew Research Center, people globally have become more dissatisfied with how democracies work. The dissatisfaction is also apparent in some of the world’s most established democracies, such as the UK (69% of the surveyed express dissatisfaction), the US (59%) and

France (58%) (Pew Research Center, 2020). Over the last three decades, trust in political institutions, such as courts and parliaments, is declining. Voter turnouts and party membership are declining, and citizens are less willing to support established parties. On the contrary, voters increasingly support populist candidates, single-issue movements or parties that define themselves in opposition to the status quo (Pew Research Center, 2020). According to data from Waves three through six of the World Values Surveys, the number of citizens who consider democracy to be a ‘bad’ or ‘very bad’ way of running the country has gone up (Foa & Mounk, 2016; Kundani, 2020). Simultaneously, the endorsement of more radical alternatives to democracy – like the idea of a country being governed by the military or by a strongmen leader who does not have to bother with parliament or elections – is becoming more prevalent (Foa & Mounk, 2016).

Strikingly, this development is particularly noticeable amongst millennials. It has been argued that the younger generation just has new ways of being political and new ways of being democratically engaged (Foa & Mounk, 2016). However, according to World Value Survey data, support for political radicalism in Western Europe and North America is higher amongst the young than amongst the elder generation, and support for freedom of speech lower (Foa & Mounk, 2016). The reverse used to be the case. Not so long ago (1980s and 1990s) young people were much more enthusiastic than elders about democratic principles and freedom of speech. For the first time in the collecting of World Value Surveys this is no longer the case.

Although it should be noted that the World Values Survey concludes that democracy as a form of governance still enjoys vast support globally, the increasing instability, dissatisfaction and civic disengagement in global democracies has been a wakeup call for many countries (Mounk, 2018). The need to understand what has happened and is still happening, and further, the request for answers with regard to what to do about it and how to ‘save’ liberal democracy, has become increasingly urgent and has gained a great deal of political attention (see e.g., Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2021; Müller, 2013, 2017; Seeberg & Thorup, 2020).

Democracy and education have historically been closely connected. Educational discussions have centred around questions about what kind of education could best prepare the citizens for the envisioned society. It is therefore not surprising that education is positioned at the centre of contemporary political attention as the core instrument with which governments seek to respond to the democratic crisis, and

furthermore that it is particularly young people who are envisioned as the solution to the democratic crisis (see e.g., McDermott & Fletcher, 2023).

For example, in 2012, the Council of Europe (CoE) made education the primary vehicle for its political and policy program for the first time (Barrett, 2020). It was decided to develop a common reference framework for democratic and intercultural competencies with the purpose of supporting education practitioners in promoting a culture of democracy within the member states (Barrett, 2020). Through a process to make sure that the framework met the needs of the member states' ministries of education, it was decided that the framework should take the 'Common European Framework of Reference for Languages' (CoE, 2001) as its model. The framework was to cover all age groups and all levels of education and should be linked to learning outcomes directly usable in classrooms. Furthermore, the framework should contain descriptors, expressed in 'can do' statements, of different levels of proficiency in order to make the effort measurable and governable (Barrett, 2020). The final framework 'Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture' (CoE, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c) was published in 2018 at the Council of Europe's Conference of the Danish Chairmanship in Copenhagen. The framework is currently being implemented in a number of Council of Europe member states (Barrett, 2020).

Also, the European Union (EU) has taken actions in order to respond to the democratic crisis. In 2015, the EU member states made a commitment to 'renew efforts to reinforce democratic values through education – starting from a very early age' (European Commission, 2015, p. 2). This has led to a comprehensive action plan in Denmark under the auspices of the Danish Ministry of Children and Education consisting of e.g., the establishment of taskforce of learning consultants with expertise on issues regarding democracy, the launch of a national democracy campaign which included developing a website containing a wide range of teaching resources, podcasts, movies and other activities to support teachers and schools with the democratic task (Ministry of Children and Education, n.d.-b) and the establishment of a Council of Democratic 'dannelse'.¹

The political commitment to renew efforts to strengthen democracy is also evident at the municipal level in, for example, efforts to strengthen 'the students' voice' by

¹ Dannelse is the Danish version of the German concept of *Bildung*. I shall elaborate more shortly.

incorporating student representation on various local councils or boards as target figures in accountability systems and quality reports.

This thesis examines this renewed political attention to democracy and some of the concrete initiatives that have arisen in response to the crisis, but here I want to emphasize that the initiatives mainly focus on teaching about democracy and on the fostering of so-called ‘democratic competencies’. These are initiatives that individual teachers, schools, and municipalities can choose to make use of – that is, they are initiatives outside of the school system, which is why I characterize them as *external* initiatives. Little attention has been given to the existing school system as a whole and the democratic quality, so to speak, of students’ everyday lives at school. This development entails that the European and Danish approach to strengthening democratic education primarily focuses on teaching about democracy and on ‘more’ citizenship lessons, while everyday experiences with democracy and democratic acting risk sliding out of focus. This dissertation brings the everyday life of schools into focus.

A study that focuses on the ‘democratic quality’ of everyday school life

The democratic role of education is a well-researched field in both a Danish and international context, and I shall here make a distinction between the philosophical and the empirical contributions (for explanatory reasons, in a somewhat simplified form). Historically, educational practice and theory in Denmark draw strongly on European Continental *Pädagogik* tradition influenced by ideas of Enlightenment philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and later by American progressivism, and in particular John Dewey’s ideas about democratic education (Korsgaard et al., 2017; Steinsholt & Løvlie, 2004).

The democratic role of schooling is most often conceptualized in the Danish notion called ‘demokratisk dannelse’ both in research and practice. The term ‘dannelse’ is the Danish version of the more (internationally) well-known German concept of *Bildung*, which it is one of the academic field *Pädagogik*’s fundamental concepts (Horlacher, 2012). Dannelse theories and its roots in the German philosophy of *Bildung* can be said to comprise theories about ‘becoming a subject in a culture’ (Straume, 2013a, p. 18 my translation) and these theories continue to play a role of

particular prominence in the field of education in Europe (Horlacher, 2016; Korsgaard et al., 2017; Kristensen & Fibæk Laursen, 2016). It is an academic knowledge tradition (Whitty & Furlong, 2017) that is not primarily concerned with influencing education in any direct way but contributes with ideas to ‘think with’ about educational practice and/or put forward theoretical principles for education (Oettingen, 2018a). It functions as a relatively closed intellectual community that focuses on re-interpretations of historical and philosophical theories, that is, it is primarily academic in nature and speaks primarily to philosophers (Schriewer, 2017; Whitty & Furlong, 2017).

In recent decades, the increasing global empirical interest and the impact of what Pasi Salberg (2012) has coined the ‘Global Educational Reform Movement’ have led to an educational political climate, in which the contributions of philosophical and theoretical literatures have been put in question and are disregarded as overly theoretical, too little interested in empirical reality or the question of ‘what works’. In sum, this literature is considered increasingly to be of little relevance to concrete educational practice and policymaking and the advancement of education (Holm & Thingholm, 2017; Krejsler, 2013; Moos, 2005; Oettingen, 2018a; Whitty & Furlong, 2017).

The empirically oriented literature on democratic education involves a range of different approaches and disciplines and is thus difficult to summarize. However, there are some common characteristics I wish to emphasize. The aspiration in much of this literature is to provide answers to educational practice about ‘what to do’ to *bring about* the democratic person. Furthermore, there is a tendency to focus on activities and subjects that are usually associated with democracy and are considered as specifically democratic, such as debate and argumentation practices, discussing controversial subjects, and engaging students in local community work.

Another strain of empirically oriented literature seeks to evaluate and ‘take the temperature’, so to speak, of democratic education (e.g., the ‘International Civic and Citizenship Education Study’ conducted under the auspices of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (Schulz et al., 2018)), or seeks to evaluate how ‘democratic common values’ are reflected in national school policies and curricula (e.g., the ‘Teaching common values in Europe’-study conducted for the European Parliament (Parliament et al., 2018)). There is also a tendency to

focus on the measurement and evaluation of aspects typically associated with democracy, the aspiration being to inform policymaking and the design of education.

Thus, both the theoretical and empirical research literature tend to pay little attention to what we could call the humdrum, everyday lives in schools.

This dissertation aspires to bring the everyday practices and processes of school into focus, and to investigate and produce knowledge about the *democratic quality*, so to speak, of everyday life in school. Furthermore, the thesis investigates how contemporary educational trends and logics condition life at school. The thesis aspires to bring disciplinary knowledge into a relationship with the world of practice to explore and produce knowledge that illuminates *how* philosophical contributions are in fact of practical relevance. It thus aspires to make both a theoretical and empirical contribution. The case under study is that of the Danish state school, and the research questions of the dissertation are as follows:

Research questions

How can we understand the phenomenon of democratic dannelse as a practice?

How do contemporary educational trends and logics in the Danish context produce conditions of possibility for democratic dannelse?

Towards a childist theory of democratic dannelse

Conceptual framework

The phenomenon studied in this dissertation is democratic dannelse. To articulate the focus and design of the study, the dissertation's conceptual framework is presented in chapter two. The conceptual framework examines the theories dominating the traditionally defined field of the dissertation's topic with the aim of identifying weaknesses and missing perspectives. Furthermore, the conceptual framework looks for relevant and possibly fruitful perspectives outside the traditionally defined field of democratic education with the aim of developing an imaginative approach to this research.

Among other things, the conceptual framework includes insights from postcolonial and feminist critiques of Western philosophy, which emphasize that the history of democracy and democracy are also histories of sexism, imperialism, colonialism, and even straightforward misogyny, misopedy, racism, domination, and exploitation. Furthermore, it includes a critique stemming from a relatively new field in childhood studies that has led to groundbreaking scholarly advances (Wall, 2019). Childhood studies are not interested in studying democratic education as such. Rather they are interested in the lives, experiences and perspectives of children and young people. In relation to democratic education, childhood studies are concerned with children and young people's 'lived citizenship' (Warming & Fahnøe, 2017) and have critically examined how children's rights are overlooked through 'the adult 'norm' assumed in many liberal models of citizenship, which construct children as 'not-yet-citizens' (Moosa-Mitha, 2005, p. 369). Another relevant topic in these childhood studies concerns how preoccupation with the concept of 'children's voices' (a concept also common in relation to themes of democratic education) has failed to scrutinize the issue of power and thus reproduces 'individualizing tendencies [...] which attribute autonomy, rationality and intention to the speaking child while simultaneously divorcing the production of the child's voice from its interactional context' (Spyrou, 2011, p. 152). Where education studies primarily study democratic education from the point of view of education, childhood studies contribute important insights on democratic education (however indirectly) from the point of view of those on the receiving end, so to speak, of education².

An important critique stemming from the field of childhood studies is that while it is generally accepted that scholars need to understand their object of study from diverse points of view – such as gender, class, ethnicity, disability etc. – there is one social dimension largely absent, not only in childhood studies, but across social scientific and humanistic disciplines more broadly, namely children and youth (Biswas, 2022; Cockburn, 2020; Spyrou, 2011; Wall, 2019). This literature argues how every major philosopher and theologian of different historical traditions have uncritically adopted adultist social assumptions, that is, they have grappled with the question of the nature of the human being, its purpose and responsibility, chiefly from the perspective of adulthood (e.g., Wall, 2010). The insight gained from the literature

² I do however not claim that educational research is uninterested in children's perspectives. I speak here of a general research interest that distinguishes the two fields.

of this research community is that scholarly work that fails to employ a childist³ critique must be considered ‘equally distorted and hegemonic as a failure to employ e.g., a feminist critique’ (Wall, 2019, p. 1).

The critical literature included in the conceptual framework of this dissertation thus argues that the theories and concepts traditionally defining the field of democratic dannelsen are *not* universal, gender-less, race-less or age-less and timeless. They are conceptually biased. Ignoring the biases will entail that theorizing with these theories will continue to privilege those they were initially developed for, and inhibit important scholarly advances.

Drawing on insights from this critical literature, the dissertation argues that the field of *Pädagogik* is adultized⁴ and evasive about adult domination, which has resulted in an adultist discursive scientific framework that sets up interpretive frames that make it difficult to think outside these frames. This furthermore calls for reflection on the democratic potential of one of the foundational concepts in *Pädagogik*, the concept of dannelsen. The main problem is the adultist assumption that the child must *become* a subject; this is the default assumption about the very nature of a child (Wall, 2010). This means that within this scientific framework the child is always understood as ‘not-yet’, which implies that it cannot fit the identity of a (full) political subject. A central claim of the dissertation is thus that if we understand the child in a non-adultist way, we will understand the democratic task of education better.

Informed by the conceptual framework, the dissertation aspires to explore whether it is possible to detach dannelsen from its colonizing tendencies, that is, to de-adultize its philosophical foundation and move *towards a childist theory of democratic dannelsen*.

Research approach and theoretical framework

Since one of the main goals of this dissertation is to challenge a historically ingrained and naturalized assumption about the not-yet child, the dissertation employs a research approach described by Jackson & Mazzei (2012) as ‘thinking with theory’. Thinking with theory takes as starting point that research should be guided by philosophy, and more specifically a sort of embodied philosophy that enables a more

³ Childism is a concept analogous to concepts such as feminism, anti-racism and decolonialism.

⁴ Adultism is analogous to concept such as ‘sexism’ and ‘racism’, but refers to discrimination of children.

nuanced conceptual engagement with the empirical material, where theory is not simply ‘applied’, but where the aim is to enable the empirical material to speak *through* the concepts.

The theoretical framework of the dissertation is comprised of 1) a Foucauldian discursive approach, 2) educational theorist Gert Biesta’s theory of education as subjectification, and 3) the perspective of childism.

‘Thinking with Foucault’ is, broadly speaking, about thinking differently. It enables a denaturalization and problematization of what appears as natural and true knowledge with the purpose of opening paths to other (perhaps better) understandings. The Foucauldian discursive approach thus enables us to challenge the naturalized assumption of the not-yet child.

The dissertation furthermore sees a ‘childist potential’ in Gert Biesta’s theory of education as subjectification. Biesta has problematized the tendency of to think of democratic education as the *production* of democratic subjects. He proposes instead a political perception of the democratic subject. Biesta’s theory involves an ‘age-less’ perception of the political subject, and theorizing democratic dannelsen with Biesta’s theory of education as subjectification thus enables an expansion of what dannelsen theories can be, from theories about ‘*becoming* a subject in a culture’ (Straume, 2013a) to a theory about ‘*acting* as a subject in a world of difference’.

Finally, the dissertation draws on insights from the field of childhood studies and employs a ‘childist lens’ (Biswas & Wall, 2023; Biswas, Wall, et al., 2023; Burman, 2022; Spyrou, 2011; Wall, 2019; Warming, 2022) in the thesis’ theoretical framework. By drawing on important insights from childhood studies the thesis attempts to move the research field of democratic education forward by functioning more critically and thereby producing more age-inclusive scholarly imagination. The theoretical framework is presented in chapter three.

Methodological framework, empirical material and analytical strategy

To ‘access’ the everyday messiness of educational practice and bring it into some kind of relationship with disciplinary knowledge, the dissertation’s research design is based on ethnographic approaches. The qualitative methods employed to produce detailed and contextually rich ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) of ‘lived lives’ in schools are: multi-sited fieldwork involving variations of participatory observation, semi-structured interviews and informal conversations at two Danish elementary schools.

Moreover, the Foucauldian approach places the dissertation within a post-structuralist framework, which takes as its starting point the assumption that discourses run across micro-interactional, meso-institutional and macro-social levels – not as discrete territories but rather on a continuum – where they ‘systematically form the object of which they speak’ (Foucault, 1972/2013, p. 54). Thus, the dissertation’s interest in democratic dannelsse as a practice, that is, as a micro-interactional phenomenon, is understood as always complexly intertwined with meso-institutional and macro-social aspects. Therefore, empirical material is derived from a varied range of sources such as dominant democracy discourses in the general public, education policy documents, education political initiatives, investments and distribution of the public national budget, media coverage of national elections, etc.

To accompany the ‘thinking with theory’ approach, the dissertation applies a rhizomatic analytical strategy (Deleuze & Guattari, 2000; Khawaja, 2018) to make sense of the welter of constantly moving data material (Benozzo & Gherardi, 2020). Chapter four presents the dissertation’s methodology, data production, and analytical strategy.

Contributions of the dissertation

The dissertation overall makes four main contributions. Firstly, the contribution of the dissertation is an argument for the need to engage with potential biases in the theories and concepts with which we theorize. The dissertation does not provide an exhaustive or comprehensive interrogation of every single influential theory belonging to the traditionally defined field of democratic dannelsse & democratic education, but by drawing on insights from feminist, postcolonial, and childist literature, the dissertation critically conjectures that such perspectives and discussions are ‘tucked away’ in more marginalized positions in the dominant *pädagogical* academic landscape rather than appearing in textbooks and reference works. This circumstance serves to ‘mute signals’ that would otherwise make readers attentive towards how inbuilt biases potentially shape the theories, and thus it inhibits important critical philosophical scrutiny and scholarly advances. The dissertation particularly puts emphasis on the problematic effects of the historically ingrained adultist biases and thereby contributes with an argument for the need of a childist lens. This is the contribution of chapter two.

Secondly, chapter five contributes an analysis of dominant democracy discourses. The analysis illustrates how the logics of coloniality are reproduced in dominant democracy discourses and how the colonial project is strengthened by contemporary educational trends and logics. The analysis furthermore illuminates some nuances regarding how conditions for democratic dannelsen *depend* on one's 'naturalized' *ontological* identity. For example, the non-white body is presumed 'at risk' and in (particular) need of democratic 'training'. The analysis also problematizes the most prevailing democracy discourse in educational practice, which provides rationales and logics for discriminatory and domesticating practices. The extent to which initiatives to foster democratic dannelsen are based on rationales from this dominant democracy discourse is also the extent to which 'dividing practices' (Foucault, 1982) that separate the democratic from the undemocratic are strengthened, and furthermore it is also the extent to which a whole range of perfectly capable 'voices' and perfectly capable 'critical thinking' risk being disqualified, marginalized, and excluded. The dissertation contributes to the discussion of democratic dannelsen by arguing for a childist approach that focuses less on teaching children and young people to perform what is perceived as democratic ways of acting and being, and more on deconstructing and reconstructing notions usually associated with democracy, such as 'voice', 'participating', 'democratic conversation', and 'critical thinking'.

Thirdly, the dissertation contributes to knowledge about democratic dannelsen as a practice. This is the contribution of chapter six and chapter seven. By linking Biesta's theoretical concepts with everyday situations in school and adding a childist lens, the dissertation on the one hand interprets educational practice through the theoretical framework and explores a practical dimension of Biesta's theory. On the other hand the dissertation draws from the knowledge of educational practice to expand Biesta's theory. The emphasis here is on *relationality*.

Finally, the dissertation contributes a childist reading of Biesta's theory of education as subjectification and opens a discussion about the ways in which adultist elements obstruct the childist potential – which as I argue is also the *democratic* potential – of the theory. These adultist elements seem to affirm rather than challenge the powerful bedrock of adultism that grounds educational practice and theory, and therefore the theory cannot achieve what it aims for, which ultimately has to do with an interest in

the students' freedom. This argument appears throughout several chapters of the dissertation and is discussed in more detail in the concluding chapter, chapter seven.

Overall, the contribution of the dissertation is an attempt to move the research field of democratic education forward by functioning more critically through the childist lens and thereby producing more age-inclusive scholarly imagination.





2

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, I present the conceptual framework that informs the dissertation's research and design. The chapter begins with a short introduction to the role of a conceptual framework and a presentation of the purpose, focus, goal and questions guiding the development of this dissertation's conceptual framework. Hereafter follows the conceptual framework, which is divided in part one and part two. Each part will be introduced in more detail shortly. The conceptual framework will also present the case taken up in the dissertation, namely, the Danish state school, and it will address some linguistic issues. Throughout the chapter, I summarize, discuss and present the choices I make informed by insights drawn from the conceptual framework. I conclude the chapter with a brief summation of the most important choices.

Conceptual framework – literature review *for* research

Maxwell (2006) distinguishes between literature review *for* research and literature review *of* research. In a dissertation, Maxwell argues, the literature review is primarily *for* research in that the purpose of the review is to inform the study, that is 'to create a focus, conceptual framework, design, and justification for the study' (Maxwell, 2006, p. 28), whereas the purpose of the literature review *of* research is to 'summarize and synthesize a specific field of research for a wider audience' (p. 28). This implies

that the literature review *for* research should work with the criteria of *relevance* rather than criteria like e.g., *comprehensiveness* or *thoroughness*, which typically steer the literature review *of* research. The purpose of a literature review in a dissertation is not to ‘educate the reader’ (p. 28) but to ‘support and explain the choices made *for this study*’ (p. 28). The challenge is of course to determine what is relevant and what is not. Simply put by Maxwell, relevant literature is that which has important implications for the interpretation of the study, for the design and conduct of the study, as opposed to literature that simply deals with the topic. This also means that not all literature one finds and reads in the process of demarcating, analyzing, and synthesizing it will make it directly into the review.

According to Maxwell the conceptual framework does not necessarily have to focus primarily or solely on the dissertation’s topic or field of study. If one’s field is a well-researched field (and that is certainly the case for the field of democratic education) the danger of one becoming a ‘prisoner of the methodological or theoretical perspectives that dominate this literature’ (Maxwell, 2006, p. 29) and of failing to discover alternative ways of conceptualizing the issue, increases. Alternative and fruitful perspectives can very well come from other fields or other theoretical approaches, and they can even come from the researcher’s personal experiences (Grady & Wallston, 1988; Maxwell, 2013). According to Grady and Wallston, one really good source – that is often overlooked – of generating ideas for research designs or research questions is ‘observing the world’ (Grady & Wallston, 1988, pp. 40-42). We all have experiences and have noticed things, and this kind of observational or informal ‘hunch’ is, according to Grady and Wallston, what research questions are made of. Maxwell likewise argues that it can be very productive to bring in ideas from outside the traditionally defined field of one’s topic, or to integrate approaches or theories that no one had previously associated with the field. The goal is thus to develop ‘an integrated set of theoretical concepts and empirical findings, a model of the phenomena’ (Maxwell, 2006, p. 30) one is studying that supports and informs the research.

Defining a field of democratic ‘dannelsen’ & democratic education

The relationship between education and democracy is a well-researched question conceptualized in a range of different ways and studied from various approaches and academic disciplines. It is not possible to speak of a single field but rather of a range of different fields. The field I speak about in this dissertation as ‘the field of

democratic dannelse' is a field that *I* construct. However, since 'dannelse' is a Danish term, I will also refer to the field as 'democratic *education*', meant as a broad term that encompasses literature and studies stemming from fields and approaches using different terms to conceptualize their phenomenon of study, such as 'citizenship education', 'political education', 'liberal education', 'lived citizenship', 'agency', 'rationality', 'voice', 'participation' etc. The conceptual framework of this dissertation is thus my creation of a 'field of democratic dannelse & democratic education'. I will therefore use the '&' when I refer to this field.

The Danish term 'dannelse' has roots in the European continental *Pädagogik* tradition, which means that by choosing to use this term, I also step into a field with a long knowledge tradition dominated by a distinct set of theories. I shall therefore engage with this field and (some of) the theories dominating it in my conceptual framework. My aim is, however, to develop 'a model of phenomena' (Maxwell, 2006, p. 30) and an imaginative approach to research by being open to potential fruitful and alternative perspectives stemming from other fields or approaches, thus my intention is not to stay within the traditionally defined borders of the field of *Pädagogik* even though I take the liberty of using one of its fundamental concepts. The field of democratic dannelse & democratic education that I create in this dissertation is pieced together from and inspired by different literatures. In particular, I am informed by insights from the field of childhood studies, but I also draw on feminist and postcolonial philosophy.

The focus, goal, and questions guiding the conceptual framework

Informed by Hart (2018), Randolph (2009) and Maxwell (2006) I have created the conceptual framework in terms of a *focus*, a *goal*, and specific *questions*.

The focus I have chosen for this conceptual framework is:

1. To examine the dominant theories used in the traditionally defined field of democratic dannelse & democratic education.
2. To look for potentially relevant perspectives outside the traditionally defined field of democratic dannelse & democratic education.
3. To look for tendencies in empirical research on democratic dannelse & democratic education, and to look for findings potentially relevant for the research questions of the dissertation.

According to Hart (2018), one's research either makes a contribution to the existing research or it challenges it or at least some aspects of it. The goal of this conceptual framework places an emphasis on critically analyzing the literature and possibly identifying a weakness or a missing perspective (Hart, 2018). Therefore, the questions I have chosen to guide the framework are:

- What are the central theories that have been used to conceptualize, study, and explain democratic dannelsen & democratic education?
- What are the implicit assumptions about the human being, the child/student, the adult/teacher, and the role of education in these theories?
- Which questions or perspectives are not asked or pursued?
- How has research in democratic dannelsen & democratic education been conducted?
- What has previous research in democratic dannelsen & democratic education concluded in relation to the research questions of this thesis?

Since I am encouraged to be open to perspectives outside the traditionally defined field of the thesis topic and to my own and others' 'speculative thinking' (Maxwell, 2006, 2013) as well as my 'own personal experiences' and 'observational or informal hunches' (Grady & Wallston, 1988, pp. 40-42), I have added a rather broad – and at first glance seemingly unhelpful – question:

- What else may be relevant and/or interesting and puzzling?

This question does not provide much help in the development of search strategies. It does, however, serve as a reminder to be:

[O]pen to ideas regardless of how or where they originated; questioning and scrutinizing ideas, methods and arguments regardless of who proposed them; playing with different ideas in order to see if links can be made; following ideas to see where they may lead (Hart, 2018, p. 20).

The purpose of such openness is to help me develop 'an *imaginative* approach to research' (Hart, 2018, p. 19). The question serves as a reminder of being open to

whatever might catch my attention for one reason or another. Much of what catches my attention is not relevant (enough) or cannot be pursued further within the scope of this project, and yet sometimes a really fruitful and interesting idea or perspective comes along after all, and that is how an impossible and seemingly unhelpful question like this gets its justification. In what follows I present the conceptual framework and the literature review *for* research that informs the development of the dissertation's phenomenon of study and my research imagination and further serves to explain and justify the design and choices made in this study.

The conceptual framework is separated into two parts. In part one I attend to the central theories of the field of democratic dannelsen & democratic education and its dominant assumptions about the human being, the child/student, the adult/teacher, the role of education as well as potential missing perspectives and weaknesses. This will inform the development of the dissertation's studied phenomenon. In part two, I first focus on literature on contemporary educational trends and logics and how they have been manifested in a Danish context. Then I attend to previous empirical studies on democratic dannelsen & democratic education. Here I emphasize four dominant tendencies in the literature to illustrate missing perspectives and questions not asked, and furthermore to situate the contribution made by this dissertation. Finally in part two, I highlight some of the conclusions of recent empirical studies conducted in a Danish context with the aim of discussing possible links to the research presented in this dissertation.

Conceptual framework, part one

The central theories dominating the field of democratic dannelsen

Approaching the central theories of the field of democratic dannelsen & democratic education from the concept of dannelsen

The two main concepts of this dissertation, dannelsen and democracy, are two highly contested concepts with a very long history. In fact, the concept of democracy is perhaps *the* most contested concept in the history of human language (Dunn, 2018; Gallie, 1955; Mounk, 2018). Both concepts have roots in ancient Greece and are extensively intertwined; when we seek to determine the central theories pertaining to these concepts we are largely speaking about *Western philosophy*.

The word ‘democracy’ began as a term for a particular political arrangement that arose in ancient Greece two and a half thousand years ago. Here the term flourished briefly, but then faded away for all but two thousand years. It then returned again as a real modern political option – however, this was a very different political idea than the one in ancient Greece – and it is particularly ideas from Enlightenment philosophy that form the architecture of modern democracy and political theory and that also influence contemporary ideas, in both theory and practice, about the role of democratic education.

The concept of dannelsen is as old as the concept of democracy, and we might say that dannelsen is a concept that has been the link between society (whether democratic or not) and education. The history of dannelsen is a story about an educational idea that arose in the ancient Greek idea of *paideia* as an educational answer to the Athenian political arrangement. This educational idea spread and was adopted in Roman culture as *humanitas*, and in German humanism, neo-humanism, and Enlightenment as *Bildung*. Finally, the concept of dannelsen – initially as a direct translation of *Bildung* – merged with the Scandinavian ‘dannelsen of the nation-project’ [in Danish: *folkedannelsessprojekt*], and in the aftermath of the Second World War became closely connected with ideas of (modern) democracy.

The central theories dominating the literature on *dannelse* thus overlap with central theories that form the backbone of the idea of modern democracy. In this conceptual framework, I have chosen to approach the field primarily from the perspective of *dannelse*, and I shall therefore present *a brief history of dannelse*⁵. Along with this history I will attend in more detail – however, in no way exhaustively – to how these theories also comprise the architecture of modern democracy.

Establishing the scope of the dissertation's topic as something as intimidatingly broad as Western philosophy, and even roughly two and half thousand years of Western philosophy, of course entails that I have made choices, selections, and delimitations. The literature, philosophers, and ideas selected to create this conceptual framework are of course but an immensely small part of the entire history of *dannelse* and democracy, and should also be read as such. This presentation is furthermore shaped by the particular perspectives that I have found interesting, important, and relevant to emphasize in relation to the research presented in this dissertation.

Following the *brief history of dannelse*, I look closer at some of the implicit assumptions in these theories. The goal is, as was stated above, to possibly identify a weakness or a missing perspective (Hart, 2018), and I therefore approach the implicit assumptions from a rather critical angle. I do this by drawing on 1) an analysis by educational theorist Gert Biesta that demonstrates the instrumentalism and individualism that characterizes democratic education in both theory and practice, 2) insights stemming from critical feminist and postcolonial philosophy, and 3) insights from a relatively new field within childhood studies – among these I particularly draw on a 'childist'⁶ reading of Western philosophy by theoretical ethicist John Wall.

These critical perspectives emphasize that the history of *dannelse* and democracy is also a history of imperialism, colonialism, sexism, adultism⁷ and even straightforward misogyny, misopedy⁸, racism, domination, and exploitation. Such aspects of the subject are, I contend, necessary to take into consideration in a study aiming at producing knowledge about democratic *dannelse* & democratic education.

⁵ For more comprehensive work on the history of *Paideia*, *Bildung* and *dannelse* see e.g., Andersen (1999), Horlacher (2012), Koselleck (2002), Løvlie et al. (2003), Masschelein & Rickens (2010), Nabe-Nielsen (2007, 2008, 2011), Steinsholt & Løvlie (2004), Straume et al. (2013).

⁶ The term *childist* is meant as an analogy to terms such as feminist, anti-racist and postcolonial, but related to children.

⁷ The term *adultism* is analogous to terms such as sexism and racism but related to discrimination of children.

⁸ The term *misopedy* refers to the aversion for both children and childhood in general.

They raise important questions about the potential and/or limitation of the concept of *dannelse* as a concept appropriate to theorize the democratic role of education. It is against this background that I discuss weaknesses and missing perspectives in the theories traditionally dominating this dissertation's topic. This is also how I develop this dissertation's model of phenomena, as well as what informs my research imagination.

A brief history of *dannelse*

What is *dannelse* about?

The idea of *dannelse* is simply put about 'the connection between the human being and the world' (Rømer, 2019, p. 13 my translation). Such an idea exists in many forms in many languages and cultures. They are present in most if not all streams of thought dealing with education and the philosophy of education. There is, however, no universal term for this, but each culture and language has its own term⁹ (see e.g., Blok Johansen, 2002; Straume, 2013a). Despite the simple characterization of *dannelse* as being about the connection between human beings and the world, it is at the same time utterly complex to determine what that actually means, because such a meaning never exists independently. It exists 'in relation to its societal, cultural, and historical context' (Straume, 2013a, p. 17 my translation). In other words, there are as many ways of understanding *dannelse* (here used as encompassing all terms in different languages) as there are ways of thinking in different cultures, societal orders, and philosophical systems. What holds in general for *dannelse* theories across languages and time periods is that *dannelse* is both a process and a product (Koselleck, 2002). It is also both a concept and a norm (Straume, 2013a).

A fundamental idea in theories about *dannelse* is that the human being can become something *other* or *more* than what it originally is (Straume, 2013a, p. 15). Thus, *dannelse* always involves a certain 'shaping' of the individual in the context of a

⁹ E.g., in Swedish there is the concept 'bildning', in Norwegian: 'danning', in Finnish: 'sivistys', in English: 'edification' or 'liberal education', in Italian: 'creazione' or 'educazione', in Portuguese: 'formação', in German: 'Bildung', in French: 'culture générale', in Arabic-Islamic: 'adab', in Russian: 'obrazovanie', in Latin: 'humanitas' or 'mentis animique informatio', in Chinese: 'xiushen', and in Greek: 'Paideia' (Blok Johansen, 2002; Straume, 2013a).

certain societal order and in relation to certain ideas about the good, valuable, and desirable society and human life. However, since societies and their ideas about the good and desirable can appear in very different and in principle an endless number of different versions there can also be an endless number of ideals of *dannelse*. Educational philosopher Ingerid Straume thus sums up *dannelse* as that of ‘becoming a subject in a culture’ (Straume, 2013a, p. 18 my translation).

It is most common in contemporary times to speak of *dannelse* as primarily an open process rather than to speak more specifically about content and purpose. This has to do with the fact that it is not only difficult, but also potentially controversial to determine the goal of *dannelse* in a modern society characterized by multiple cultures (Foros & Vetlesen, 2014; Løvlie & Standish, 2002). We can say, however, that if it is considered within a given culture that democracy and democratic life are good and desirable, it implicitly follows (and this is mostly ‘below the radar’) that *dannelse* – as a certain ‘shaping’ of the individual – is considered a *democratic* shaping. However, since the concept of democracy is highly contested and used about basically anything considered desirable (Dahl, 1989; Mounk, 2018; Møller & Skaaning, 2013), the expression ‘democratic shaping’ does not really say much other than that the shaping is considered good and desirable by those who call it democratic.

According to Straume there are three dimensions common to the structure of all theories about *dannelse* (Straume, 2013a, pp. 21-26). Firstly, every *dannelse* theory involves a *social* dimension. *Dannelse*, Straume argues, is a relational phenomenon. There can be no *dannelse* without a relation between the individual and the ‘outside world’. Secondly, *dannelse* involves what Straume chooses to call a *movement* [in Norwegian: *bevegelse*] (p. 23). The point here is that something disrupts or disturbs, creates a dissonance which fosters reflection or wondering and puts the individual and the world in *movement*. The third dimension concerns the becoming *subject*. The formation [*dannelse*] of the subject. It is the subject that reflects and wonders and becomes [*dannes*] not once and for all but continuously throughout life. *Dannelse* can be understood as a process with these three interrelated dimensions, which also reveals that *dannelse* is not a linear process; it cannot be controlled by someone outside oneself, e.g., by a teacher through specific pedagogical programs or the like. There is no manual on education’s role in *dannelse*, and *dannelse* cannot be subjected to measurement and accountability systems to see ‘what works’ (Straume, 2013a, p. 28). This also means, Straume argues, that education – e.g., the teacher – can never set

goals for a dannelsen process. Nor can the teacher know in advance whether a situation will be suitable for dannelsen. Rather it is the work of the *self* that it dannelsen. But that does not mean that the teacher is unimportant in relation to dannelsen. The teacher and education are in fact very important, but the teacher cannot ‘do the job’ for the Other, but only attempt to create possibilities and encouragement. The hope of the teacher is that the Other will have a desire and the strength to do the ‘self-work’ of dannelsen (Straume, 2013a, p. 28).

Paideia – preparing the people (the demos) for governing (kratia) the society

According to Andersen (1999), it is within the ancient Greek culture that the first reflections on human dannelsen are found. ‘Paideia’ originates from the Greek word for child: ‘pais’ and ‘paideuo’ [I raise a child] (Andersen, 1999, p. 10). To raise a child is to ‘danne’¹⁰ it, and schools and education are the ‘instruments’ for both academic education and human dannelsen (Andersen, 1999, p. 11). Philosophers of ancient Greece were preoccupied with the question about what kind of education, what kind of paideia could best prepare the people (the demos) for ruling/governing (kratia or kratos) the society, and thus paideia and education have historically been closely related to the idea of ‘governing by the people’, that is, the idea of democracy. Of course, in ancient Greece it was only men of a certain age and status that were considered ‘the people’, thus the idea of democracy in ancient Greece in no way resembles what we would consider particularly democratic today (Dunn, 2018; Held, 2006; Lovenduski, 2019). The Greek noun *demokratia* did not originally mean a form of regime defined by its ‘good intentions’ or ‘noble mission’ (Dunn, 2018, p. xix), nor was it a basis for legitimacy or a political value as we tend to think of it today. *Demokratia* was simply a term to denote one particular form of governance. It was the word chosen for the political arrangement that began as an improvised solution to a very local Greek difficulty two and a half thousand years ago (Dunn, 2018; Møller & Skaaning, 2013). It was an arrangement that enabled the citizens of Athens (and ‘the citizens’ here means a relatively small number of the population and only men) in the fifth and fourth centuries BC to gather personally in frequent and lengthy meetings to discuss, argue, and make decisions about their community. It was a

¹⁰ I here use the word ‘danne’ as a verb.

‘direct’ method, and a rather inefficient one. Furthermore, the freedom required to actually participate in these lengthy meetings depended on the labour of women, slaves¹¹, and children (Lovenduski, 2019). Thus the Greek *demokratia* was a political arrangement involving the exploitation of unpaid and forced labour of some categories of human beings.

‘Democracy’ was the word for this political arrangement that enabled the citizens of Athens (that is, only some men) to govern themselves (*as well as* those who were not considered ‘the people’). It is also this political arrangement, out of all that have existed up until this day, that can be said to be most accurate to the literal claim embedded in the word ‘democracy’: rule of the people¹². As Dunn (2018) emphasizes, no modern population can govern themselves in a way in which the claim embedded in the word ‘democracy’ can be true, and hence when modern states claim to be democracies, they necessarily misdescribe themselves (Dunn, 2018, p. xxii). The point here is to emphasize that the reference to the ancient Athenians as ‘inventors of democracy’ – which we so often hear – is a truth only with modifications.

The Greek *demokratia* did not survive because anyone admired this particular political arrangement. Rather, after briefly flourishing, this form of governance, along with the word ‘democracy’, faded away for almost two thousand years, and to those who used the word it was overwhelmingly judged as a form of government that had proven heavily illegitimate in theory and completely disastrous in practice (Dunn, 2018, p. xix). What enabled the word ‘democracy’ to survive in the history of the world’s languages was its intellectual enemies. It survived because of the critiques of democracy. It was not until the period of the French Revolution (1789-1799) that ‘democracy’ as a word and an idea arose again as a political option and acquired the political momentum it has never since lost (Dunn, 2018; Held, 2006). The modern idea of democracy has however changed almost beyond recognition compared to the ancient Greek version. Today it is a source and embodiment of political power itself (Dunn, 2018). I shall return to that later. For now, I return to the educational idea in the concept of *paideia* in ancient Greece.

The term ‘*paideia*’ came to denote *collective* cultural efforts to develop the most valuable human qualities, where this was a life-long process (Andersen, 1999; Nabe-Nielsen, 2007). Thus ‘*paideia*’ also referred to the character and attitude of the

¹¹ Slaves were of course both children, women and men.

¹² The claim of course involves the premise that only some men are ‘the people’.

population of a city (and not so much in relation to the individual) and was thereby about moral norms, cultural distinctiveness, and political attitudes (Fossheim, 2013, pp. 67-68). Paideia has an ethical, an intellectual and a physical aspect, and these are to be fostered through education. Paideia concerns the ‘whole human being as a harmonically developed whole’ (Straume, 2013a, p. 31 my translation), and in the ancient Greek perception one was not a human being without paideia (Nabe-Nielsen, 2007 p. 51). The German philologist Werner Jaeger wrote in his treatise: ‘Paideia’ (1943) that the Greeks made it a primary purpose of their life to elevate the human being. Western philosophers of posterity have often sought inspiration and answers to human dannelsen from the ancient Greeks (Andersen, 1999), and Western culture is thus an Hellenistic culture in which it has been an ideal to seek for ‘true humanity’ in an exemplary past (Andersen, 1999; Jaeger, 1943).

However, following these rather beautiful and seemingly admirable descriptions of the ‘moral norms’ and the ‘ethical’ and ‘intellectual’ aspects of paideia, it is important to emphasize that paideia was exclusively a matter for *male* children. Paideia was *in opposition to* being a woman. As Fossheim notes ‘marriage as institution comprised the systematic deprivation of control for the woman, among other things because she was married to a grown man while still being more or less a child, and was kept incarcerated in the back of the house, away from the street, by the man who was paideia enough to afford it’ (Fossheim, 2013, p. 73 my translation). Furthermore, in Ancient Greece, slavery was an integral part of society with significant impact on the economy and culture. Children were considered to be the ‘property’ of fathers or slave owners, and it was common to buy, sell or loan out children as slaves, e.g., for labour or sexual exploitation (Laes, 2011; Rollo, 2018a). Paideia was also related to an idea of being a gentleman, which among other things was regarded in opposition to those who could not speak proper Greek, that is, those who said ‘bah, bah, bah’ (Andersen, 1999). The point I wish to emphasize here is that the ‘exemplary past’ of ancient Greeks that subsequent Western philosophers admired and sought inspiration and answers to human dannelsen and ‘true humanity’ from also had a decidedly sexist, racist, adultist, and even misogynist and misopedic element to it. I shall return to this later.

***Bildung* – a key concept of the Enlightenment**

Historian Reinhart Koselleck distinguishes between three periods in the history of the German concept of *Bildung*: a *theological* period, an *Enlightenment-pädagogical*

period, and a *modern* period, the latter being primarily ‘self-reflexive’ (Koselleck, 2002). The second and third periods, however, inherit aspects from the previous period(s), e.g., through forms of expression and in the use of metaphors.

The etymological origin of the word ‘*Bildung*’ is the mystical theology of the Middle Ages (Masschelein & Ricken, 2010). In the 16th century human beings were regarded as God’s imagination, and the concept of *Bildung* was strongly connected to the notion of Bild (image) (Masschelein & Ricken, 2003). The human being is a ‘Gebilde’ (building, structure) and an ‘Abbildung’ (a picture, image, or a representation). Humans are the sign or the illustration which shows that God exists, and the task of *Bildung* is to make this image or illustration clear, to let it appear through one’s actions, so to speak, that one is a representation of God. By the beginning of the 17th century, it is particularly the German Protestant Reformer, August Hermann Francke (1663-1727) who influenced the goal and purpose of ‘upbringing’ [in German: *Erziehung*] (Kristensen, 2016). The human being is regarded as being sinful by nature, and the goal of education and *Erziehung* is to convert this sinfulness through the mercy of God (Kristensen, 2016).

In the period around 1770-1830, a renewed interest in *Bildung* arose among German Enlightenment philosophers, along with a problematization of a range of philosophical ideas: e.g., about the characteristics of nature, the role of metaphysics, and the relation between the human and nature, the world and the universe (Straume, 2013a). The emergence of new sciences raised new theoretical questions, and philosophers discussed what the modern subject was. The concept of *Bildung* was secularized particularly under the influence of Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), and later Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Johan Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), Friedrich von Schiller (1759-1805), Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) and Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) (Straume, 2013a).

Bildung became one of the key concepts of the Enlightenment. The human being was no longer thought to be shaped as the picture of God, but as the picture of humanity itself (Haugaard Jeppesen & Kristensen, 2002). The purpose of *Bildung* was to foster the human being to become a ‘whole, harmonic, and many-sided human being. For a human being is not something one is just like that, but something one must ‘danne’ oneself to’ (Haugaard Jeppesen & Kristensen, 2002, p. 102 my translation). The idea of *Bildung* was now ‘*Bildung zur Humanität*’. Where tradition and faith had previously grounded political and social hierarchies, the Enlightenment vision of human progress advocated institutions based on rational content (Brewer,

2012). Put differently, the Enlightenment era is the ‘Age of reason’ – an idea that is still very influential today.

It is not possible within the scope of this conceptual framework to go into a detailed discussion of every Enlightenment philosopher (for more details, see Steinsholt & Løvlie, 2004), but I will here emphasize aspects of some of the most influential people in order to highlight some fundamental assumptions relevant to this dissertation.

An Enlightenment philosopher whose ideas have had a significant influence on democratic theory as well as on educational practice and theory is Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). Rousseau put forward ideas about ‘the social contract’¹³, ‘popular sovereignty’ and ‘the general will’ (Held, 2006). He was critical of the notion of democracy, but he did defend the idea of assembly politics (Held, 2006, pp. 43-45). Ideally, citizens should be actively involved in the creation of the laws by which their lives are regulated. However, he was aware that this kind of political arrangement was for small states like those of ancient Greece, and he introduced the idea of a ‘social contract’ (Rousseau, 1762/1975) which involves that people voluntarily give up some of their rights and freedoms in order to enable a society governed by a collective agreement. For Rousseau, human beings could only achieve the development of their nature, their capacity for reason and their fullest experience of liberty if they established a system of cooperation upheld by a lawmaking and enforcing body (Held, 2006). The political power and authority of such system should rest on the ‘general will’ of the people (Rousseau, 1762/1975). According to Rousseau, the general will represents the common good and the *true* interests of the people (Dahlerup, 2017) even though – as Rousseau held – ‘ordinary citizens lack the ability to see the general and abstract’ and ‘cannot understand what is ultimately in their best interest’ (Rousseau quoted in Finley, 2022, p. 12). This is where education plays a role. Rousseau believed that the citizens needed preparation for the political society he envisioned, and in his treatise ‘*Émile, ou De l'éducation*’ [*Émile – or on education*] (1762/2004) Rousseau describes in detail the type of instruction and character appropriate and necessary for a (male) person in the political order that Rousseau imagines. *Émile* thus represents a political *Bildung* ideal, and the end goal of the

¹³ Rousseau was inspired by predecessors of the social contract tradition such as Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and John Locke (1632-1704) (Held, 2006; Finley, 2022).

treatise is the boy, Émile's, entrance – as a human being – in the political sphere (Finley, 2022). I wish to emphasize here that what Rousseau says about the education of Émile concerns the education of male children. He had a very different vision of the education of girls, because women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were simply not thought of in relation to the public political sphere. I shall return to that later.

Rousseau's *Émile* has become a classic text in modern *Pädagogik* (Løvlie, 2013; Oettingen, 2001; Rømer, 2013). In that age the book was interpreted as a critique of the king, the church, and of the French upper class, but for posterity it has put the child and experience at the centre of *Pädagogik* (Løvlie, 2013). A century later it inspired Northern European reform pedagogy and American progressivism's 'Learning by doing', and in the 1970s it inspired 'dialogue pedagogy' with ideas of listening to the students, just as it laid out the pattern for today's child psychology (Løvlie, 2013, p. 2). The at the time radical idea that Rousseau put forward was that the human being was naturally born good (Rousseau, 1762/2004). This was a break with the church's definition of the human being as fallen or sinful and in need of absolution (which according to some creeds could be provided by the church itself following its rules and dogmas). Furthermore, Rousseau presented childhood as a unique life period fundamentally different from adulthood. Thus the child should not be treated as a miniature adult (Løvlie, 2013). For Rousseau it is not the human being by nature that is amoral, but it can become amoral due to the influence of society. The key question for Rousseau therefore is how to become a good human being in an inhuman society (Rømer, 2013). The purpose of *Bildung* is to enable the child to *become* human, that is, to develop judgement and morality (Oettingen, 2001; Rømer, 2013). Throughout *Émile*, Rousseau describes in minute detail the measures that the teacher must take to ensure the proper upbringing necessary for eventual participation in the political society. He even stipulates the proper bath temperature. By the end of the book it is clear that the education of Émile is no less controlling than the church's discipline. The discipline works in a more subtle (and perhaps preferable?) way. Émile's teacher deceives Émile into believing that he is in control of his own life, while actually he is not. Everything is orchestrated by the teacher. Even the choice of a suitable (by nature) girlfriend that Émile must choose when he grows up is a choice Émile *thinks* he makes, but is in fact a choice already made by the teacher (Løvlie, 2013). The educational ideal in this classic text in modern *Pädagogik*, might also be called *manipulation*.

Rousseau assumes that reasonable people are universally able to submit to and appreciate the ‘general will’ which is indisputably good and can be reached ‘either through rational agreement about an *a priori* conception of the common good or through “overlapping consensus” about that which is normative’ (Finley, 2022, p. 17), and furthermore that those who might choose not to submit to the ‘general will’ must be ‘forced to be free’ (Rousseau quoted in Finley, 2022, p. 16). While Koselleck interprets the parallels between the theological period of *Bildung* and the Enlightenment-pedagogical period of *Bildung* as overlaps merely in terms of forms of expression and the use of metaphors, Finley argues that the Enlightenment’s request for submission to the general will (represented by Rousseau) is not any different from the Church’s request for submission to the will of God. Thus according to Finley, the vision of democracy emanating from the Rousseauan idea of a ‘general will of the people’ and a ‘social contract’ effectively transforms the meaning of ‘rule by the people’ into nearly its opposite, while claiming that secularization is emancipation (Finley, 2022, p. 17).

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) is primarily known for his writings on moral and political philosophy, and these have influenced the shaping of democratic theory by emphasizing the moral and ethical foundations. For Kant the human being can become free when it starts using its own reason and intellect (Fauskevåg, 2013). Kant defines enlightenment as ‘a man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage’ (Kant, 1784/1996, p. 106) and this tutelage is ‘self-incurred’ ‘when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another’ (Kant, 1784/1996, p. 106). The fact that the human being possess intelligence and reason is not a guarantee that he will use it or use it well (Schou, 2004). Kant defines the self-work of *Bildung* with the idea of ‘rational autonomy’ (Schou, 2004). In contrast to Rousseau, however, Kant perceives the human being as inherently unruly and in need of discipline, thus the (hu)man – as the only animal – needs education and *Bildung* through discipline in order to reach rational autonomy. Kant viewed education as a means of promote social progress and the improvement of society. He believed that an educated and morally enlightened citizenry was essential for the establishment and maintenance of a just social and political order. Freedom and morality are basically the same thing and are both realized through reason (Fauskevåg, 2013, p. 157).

This new humanistic idea of *Bildung* was grounded on an anthropological idea of individuality and development, and involved the thought that the human being must strive to develop its will and morals and to make itself independent of outer influence and societal limitations (Masschelein & Ricken, 2010). The *Bildung* of the enlightened man aimed at the harmonious and free development of his potential and power, and thus had a critical and liberating purpose (Bauer, 2003, pp. 133-134).

This idea of rational autonomy and critical thinking continues to influence today's ideas of what kind of subjects democracy needs. Whether one aligns more with the Rousseauan perception of the human being or with the Kantian perception, the goal is still to *reach* a state of the enlightened, rational, morally good, capable of (good) judgement. The task of education is to nurture the human being's predisposition for developing and perfecting itself. In Masschelein and Ricken's words: 'Bildung was given the endless task of developing, unfolding, and enlightening the human mind and making real the independence of human will and action from natural and social determinations, coercions, and constraints' (Masschelein & Ricken, 2010, p. 127).

In the conception of Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), *Bildung* referred to a cultivation of the 'inner life', 'a process of self-production through self-activating dealing with the world' (Masschelein & Ricken, 2010, p. 127), and this self-work could not be produced from the outside but only initiated and encouraged (Koselleck, 2002). Humboldt draws on Kant's idea of reason, and for Humboldt, reason is the ability to arrange and classify, which led him to formulate the idea of fostering *Bildung* through science (Fossland, 2004). But first and foremost, *Bildung* for Humboldt was concerned with the shaping of individuals as citizens with social responsibility (Kemp, 2015, p. 18), it was a 'shaping of character' (Kemp, 2015, p. 55 my translation), a type of moral capacity in the use of scientific skills and knowledge. Humboldt's reformation of Prussian higher education with *Bildung* as central concept became a guiding star, first in Germany and later also in the Scandinavian countries, in particular in Denmark and Norway (Kemp, 2015, p. 17; Straume, 2013b).

Johan Friedrich Herbart (1776-1841) is considered to be the one who formulated a coherent, systematic *pädagogical*¹⁴ academic discipline that gained great influence on

¹⁴ I shall elaborate on when and why I use the German term *Pädagogik* shortly.

the 19th century's *pädagogical* ideas, not only in Germany as Geisteswissenschaftliche *Pädagogik* (human science pedagogy) but also in Continental Europe including Scandinavia (Oettingen, 2001; Sæverot & Kristensen, 2022; Sæverot & Lomsdalen, 2023). In his treatise; 'Allgemeine Pädagogik' (1806), Herbart argued that *Pädagogik* had to formulate 'its own concepts' if it was to be established as an independent academic discipline. A 'fundamental principle' is a basic notion that is fundamental for the theoretical underpinning of a discipline and furthermore is considered to belong exclusively to that discipline (Horlacher, 2012). This was necessary, Herbart argued, in order to avoid the danger of *Pädagogik* being controlled and influenced by current educational fashions. The concept of *Bildung* was formulated as a basic notion of *Pädagogik*, a fundamental principle (Horlacher, 2012), and as an autonomous academic discipline *Pädagogik* had to step ahead of philosophy, but without distancing itself entirely from philosophy (Oettingen, 2001, p. 76).

Some scholars have written about the history of *Bildung* as a history of decay. Wolfgang Bauer argues that the humanistic perception of *Bildung* weakened during the second half of the 19th century. At the time of Humboldt's idea of *Bildung*, only a certain privileged group of society was able to and given the opportunity to become 'Gebildete' at universities through science, music, arts, philosophy etc. *Bildung* came to denote a snobbish sense of etiquette (Fossland, 2004; Kemp, 2015). Bauer argues that the critical potential of *Bildung* vanished 'as *Bildung* turned into the private acquisition of cultural assets by the politically defeated German bourgeois' (Bauer, 2003, p. 134) and became naïve towards political extremes.

It is often emphasized that this strong humanistic *Bildung* tradition showed itself to be incapable of resisting the greatest collapse of civilization in Western history in the period of 1933-1945. Masschelein and Rickens (2010) for example, emphasize how people at the top of the Nazi party were considered 'Hoch-Gebildete' (highly Gebildete or highly educated) (p. 129), and many have discussed the relationship between *Bildung* and Nazism. Koselleck (2002) has rejected any such relationship. Instead, Koselleck sees Nazism and Nazi-ideology as representing the absolute break with the semantic structure of *Bildung*. Theodor Adorno (1959) develops a theory of half-*Bildung* by which he means a form of *Bildung* that proved to be unable to resist the Nazi barbarism. The so-called 'Gebildete' humans requested for democracy turned out to be quite capable of voting for tyranny. They were able to become murderers

with a good conscience because this *Bildung* was only an illusion of *Bildung*, that is, a half-*Bildung* (Adorno, 1959; Jepsen, 2013; Kemp, 2015).

According to Koselleck, *Bildung* has survived in the aftermath of the second World War with the acknowledgement of that ‘it can no longer exist without the creation of a political consciousness [...] and without the ability to level political criticism in modern society’ and that ‘the task of *Bildung* is to continuously reflect upon its political or social function in order to attune agency and action to it’ (Koselleck, 2002, p. 206).

There are more recent worries about the capabilities of *Bildung* related to contemporary educational trends and logics and the ‘global education reform movement’ (Sahlberg, 2012), but before we attend to those, we will first look at the history of the Danish concept of *dannelse*. While *Bildung* in Germany gradually came to be associated with a certain elite and may have degenerated into an absolute breakdown, the Scandinavian version developed – according to Scandinavian authors – somewhat differently (in Straume, 2013a).

Dannelse – a united common Danish people

The word ‘*dannelse*’ appeared for the first time in the Danish language at the end of the 17th century – it was first mentioned in 1793 by the Danish literary historian Knud Lyne Rahbek in the weekly journal ‘*Den danske Tilskuer*’ [‘The Danish Spectator’] (Kemp, 2015, p. 34), but it was not until the beginning of the 19th century that it got its *pädagogical* character as a direct translation of the German new humanist concept of *Bildung* (Haugaard Jeppesen & Kristensen, 2002). Whereas the German *Bildung* came to be associated with a certain elite during the second half of the 19th century, the Danish (Scandinavian) version of *dannelse* first and foremost revolved around the idea of a *universal* ‘*folkedannelse*’ (public education) and it would later come to have an important role in the project of modernizing and democratizing society (Korsgaard et al., 2017; Løvlie et al., 2003; Straume, 2013a).

The Danish priest and teacher Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783-1872) played a central role in the development of the Danish idea of public education and the enlightenment of the people (Straume, 2013a). Grundtvig was not an advocate of democracy. On the contrary, he was a strong proponent of absolute monarchy, but he advocated the education and enlightenment of the general public regardless of background and class. This must, however, not be understood as a token of an

endorsement of the idea of equality or equal rights. Grundtvig believed in class division (Korsgaard et al., 2017). It was rather a matter of a practical necessity in that the farmers needed basic skills and general knowledge in order to function adequately and productively as members of a co-operative society [in Danish: andelshavere].

At the time, Denmark was a multicultural kingdom. About 40% of the people living in the kingdom spoke German (Karpantschof, 2019). Grundtvig despised the German language and people, whom he saw as an ‘imperious, gruff and greedy people’ and even ‘ungodly’ (Grundtvig quoted in Karpantschof, 2019, p. 40 my translation). He was very occupied with Danishness and he articulated the people and the nation as a community [in Danish: fællesskab] (Korsgaard, 2004b; Korsgaard et al., 2017, p. 230). This narrative influenced a conversation in Denmark that put emphasis on the particularly Danish that connects and unites the Danish people rather than on whatever dividing lines might distinguish them (Korsgaard et al., 2017). To Grundtvig, the particularly Danish was the mother tongue of the people and distinctive national tales, and this perception gave rise to a form of nationalism (Korsgaard, 2004b; Straume, 2013a, p. 43). This was a nationalism that involved a commitment to defend Danishness and the homeland from ‘all evil from the South’ with ‘any sacrifice necessary, whether bloody or not’ (Grundtvig quoted in Karpantschof, 2019, p. 40 my translation).

Grundtvig argued for a common school of the Danish people, in which ‘classes’ (in Danish ‘stænder’), the noble, the religious, the citizens and farmers were united as *one* common people (Korsgaard et al., 2017, p. 233). As was noted above, Grundtvig’s goal was not to transform existing power relations but to unite the people emotionally *while* accepting their class positions and associated roles (Karpantschof, 2019). Where the school of German *Bildung* emphasized the importance of learning Greek and Latin, Grundtvig opposed this idea in that only a small minority of the population attended the school of the erudite [in Danish: de lærdes skole]. Rather, it is the mother tongue, the language that the people speak, that can enlighten, educate and ‘danne’ the human being (Korsgaard et al., 2017, p. 234).

Grundtvig composed around 1500 songs and along with other poets, writers, and composers of the time he contributed narratives about the nation, the mother tongue, the landscape, or in other words, everything constitutive of Danishness. Over the course of the 19th century countless songs, poems, and stories were written and became a mandatory part of the common (public) school [in Danish: almueskolen] curriculum. The folksongs and the tradition of singing them (there was even a minister

of school singing in the Danish government at the time) played a significant role in the development of an idea of a common nation in which people shared an emotional identity (Korsgaard et al., 2017).

In the 19th century, Danish children were still divided by class in schools, but around the year 1900 the Danish school system was reformed, and this was the beginning of the Danish ‘Folkeskole’ (the People’s school) – a school for everybody – and thus illustrates the influence and strength of the narrative of ‘the people’ as a *dannelse* ideal for the Danish state school (Korsgaard et al., 2017, p. 235).

To this day, Grundtvig is by many Danes considered an icon of what it means to be Danish. Grundtvig and ‘Danish’ are often so closely interwoven that it can be difficult to distinguish the two. Furthermore, he is given credit for the particular history of the Danish education system which is often given a lot of credit for the relatively well functioning welfare state and democracy that Denmark developed into. Grundtvig is thus also often credited for the Scandinavian (more successful) version of *dannelse* (e.g., Wieser, 2023). However, some argue that this gives Grundtvig way too much credit, particularly because he was no proponent of the idea of democracy and actively worked to avoid it (see Karpantschhof, 2019; Korsgaard & Wiborg, 2006), but I shall not pursue this discussion here.

The point is that *dannelse* became associated with an idea of a common people. This common people who live together in a society – even if a class-divided one – must also meet each other, learn to know each other, and learn to live together despite differences, and they do this by developing a shared emotional identity in the common people’s school. ‘Folk-*dannelse*’ and ‘folk-enlightenment’ [in Danish: *folkedannelse* and *folkeoplysning*] basically became the same thing (Korsgaard et al., 2017; Oettingen, 2018b).

The concept of *dannelse* was explicitly present in Danish educational policy documents for 123 years from the school law of 1814 up to and including the 1937-law which prevailed up until a reformulation of the preamble in 1975 (Kristensen, 2017a). The exact content of *dannelse* has changed over time according to cultural and political changes, but the overall purpose was to strengthen the moral and ethical character of the common people (Korsgaard et al., 2017).

Strong endorsement for democracy in the aftermath of the Second World War

During and in particular in the aftermath of the Second World War, the democratic aspect of the concept of *dannelse* was emphasized. In light of the atrocities, the endorsement of democracy rose dramatically (Korsgaard et al., 2017). A political post World War vision of the welfare state model emerged in close connection to a discourse on democratic *dannelse* (Moos & Wubbels, 2018). In this period, Danish discussions of democracy and school centred around two influential ideas in particular. These were the ideas of the jurist Alf Ross (1899-1979), who wrote the book 'Why democracy?' (Ross, 1946), and of the theologian Hal Koch (1904-1963), who wrote the book 'What is democracy?' (Koch, 1991/1945). While these two authors largely agreed on many things, they emphasized two different aspects of democracy. For Koch, democracy was first and foremost a *form of life* and he thus emphasized the 'democratic conversation', in which one must 'listen sincerely' (Koch, 1991/1945). This idea was in alignment with the ideas of the American pragmatist John Dewey, whose ideas were taken up and came to have a tremendous influence on the Danish *dannelse* ideal in the aftermath of the war. Ross primarily thought of democracy as a *form of government* and thus emphasized constitutional and legal rights. He was occupied with the question of how to build a system in which all interests are able to make themselves heard (Ross, 1946).

Another very influential albeit less often acknowledged thinker was the school principal and politician Inger Merete Nordentoft (1903-1960), who emphasized the relation between the *pædagogical* and political spheres. Nordentoft was an influential force in criticizing Danish children's living conditions and the undemocratic structures of the state school. In 1944, she published an (illegal) text; 'Opdragelse til demokrati' (1944) (Upbringing for democracy) in which she emphasized the thesis that democratic nurturing could never have as its aim to foster people with a predetermined outlook on life [in Danish: 'livsanskuelse']. Rather, the purpose of democratic nurturing was to foster human beings who could think freely and independently, who could cooperate with others, and relate their own actions to the common good. Such persons would 'dare to take responsibility and initiative when needed and would be able to tolerate those who think differently while firmly and courageously stand up for their own beliefs. Such persons would be aware of their own limits but could confidently use their skills and abilities – whether normal or unusual, great or insignificant – for the common good' (Nordentoft, 1944, p. 1 my

translation). Where Nordentoft's contribution differed was that she specifically targeted poverty, poor living conditions, poor health conditions, inadequate opportunities for play (due to the child ideal at the time), poor conditions in daycare institutions and nurseries, and a school focused on teaching children to sit still and obey orders. In short, Nordentoft situated the democratic disposition within living conditions more generally.

Around 1970 the ideas of a professor of *Pädagogik*, Wolfgang Klafki (1927-2016) had a great influence on the perception of education's role, and in particular the discourse of democratic dannelsen in the Danish welfare state vision (Moos & Wubbels, 2018). For Klafki, general education must be an education oriented towards promoting self-determination abilities (*Selbstbestimmung*), participation abilities (*Mitbestimmung*) and solidarity abilities (*Solidaritätsfähigkeit*) (Klafki, 2011), and until recently, it was the ideas of Klafki that were specifically referred to when one visited the website of the Danish Ministry of Education to search for information on the state school's role in democratic dannelsen.¹⁵

The disappearance and renaissance of dannelsen

The term dannelsen more or less disappeared from Danish educational language and public debate in the period of 1960-2000 (Kristensen, 2017a). The first Danish professor of *Pädagogik*, Knud Grue-Sørensen (1904-1992), for example, preferred the word 'opdragelse' (in German: *Erziehung*) (Rømer, 2019). However, after being absent for almost forty years, the concept of dannelsen has had a sort of renaissance in the Danish educational debate (Korsgaard, 2004a; Kristensen, 2017a; Løvlie et al., 2003; Nabe-Nielsen, 2022). It has even moved to the centre of this debate and functions today as *the* battlefield for politicians, economists, practitioners, administrators and scholars (Hermann, 2007; Moos, 2017).

This debate must be understood in the context of the global empirical interest in, and the emergence of, 'learning societies', 'the global educational reform movement' (Sahlberg, 2012) and new discourses about what counts as knowledge in educational

¹⁵ The website is regularly updated and/or adjusted, and today (in 2023) there is no longer reference to Klafki (or any other theorist) when searching for information on democratic dannelsen. The material available in forms of news on e.g., political decisions or changes in the law or guiding documents and analyses or reports etc. (often produced by private consultant companies such as Rambøll <https://ramboll.com/who-we-are>) have what I will refer to as more technical administrative character.

research knowledge. Parallel to this trend is the marginalized position of *Pädagogik* and philosophy of education (Krejsler, 2021; Krejsler & Moos, 2021; Kristensen, 2022a, 2022b; Sæverot & Kristensen, 2022; Sæverot & Lomsdalen, 2023; Whitty & Furlong, 2017). I elaborate on this topic in more detail in part two of the conceptual framework.

Today the concept of *dannelse* is a highly ambiguous notion which seems to belong nowhere and everywhere. Today everybody involved in education – whether policymaker, educator, or scholar from various disciplines claim and use the notion in various arguments and to various purposes, and it is thus also a term that has been highly politicized (Sæverot & Lomsdalen, 2023).

The discussions can – roughly speaking – be divided into two ‘camps’ (Oettingen, 2018a). The one camp in the debate is oriented towards the idea of education as an evidence-based practice. The advocates of this approach champion the idea of providing knowledge through empirical studies about effects, which can support the professional judgements of teachers and inform education policy (Oettingen, 2018a). This camp has made attempts to redefine the concept of *dannelse* by detaching it from philosophy and connecting it to more instrumental ideas of ‘schools effectiveness’. Macchelein & Rickens (2010) argue how the German concept of *Bildung* has become a key term in politics of the learning society where it is frequently invoked and used by administrators and politicians to legitimize the transformation processes of educational systems. Here *Bildung* appears as a concept representing the different competences which are (claimed to be) required to survive in a learning society (Masschelein & Ricken, 2010, p. 130). The concepts of *dannelse* and *Bildung* have in other words also been subjected to what Biesta has coined as ‘learnification’ (Biesta, 2006), and this development makes Masschelein and Rickens question whether *Bildung* has lost its critical potential.

Some argue that it is simply time to retire the (antique) concept of *dannelse* (*Bildung* as well), release it from its duties and discard it, and instead focus on the concept of learning and on promoting ‘21st century skills’, for example, the ability (or competence) of ‘learning to learn’ (e.g., OECD, 2019; Qvortrup, 2003, 2006; Rasmussen, 2011).

The arguments for renewing, or simply retiring *dannelse* have met strong critiques from the other ‘camp’ in the debate (e.g., Kemp, 2015 ; Nepper Larsen, 2016; Rømer, 2019; Raahauge et al., 2015). This other camp in the debate is mostly oriented towards normative and theoretical approaches to education. Its advocates are not largely

interested in empirical research¹⁶ but rather in questions about normative categories and interpretations of phenomena such as school, *dannelse*, and teaching. This approach sees philosophical and theoretical contributions as a means to strengthen teachers' *pädagogical* judgement, and as means to criticize trends in educational policy (Korsgaard et al., 2017; Kristensen, 2017a; Oettingen, 2018a). The main argument for the need of *dannelse* as a *pädagogical* concept grounded in philosophy is that the dominant trends and logics in contemporary educational policy are either not capable of addressing the new conditions, challenges, and crises of society, or they are simply part of the problem (Kristensen, 2017a).

A concept which suffers from a semantic and normative overload

In the Danish educational debate (among educational scholars as well as in the general public) there is a strong emphasis on the idea that education is something *more* than learning, competencies, and skills. This surplus, as the general belief would have it, can be grasped with the concept of *dannelse* (Straume, 2020). The perception is, as Straume formulates it, that 'no other term has the richness of *dannelse*' (Straume, 2013a, p. 40 my translation) and therefore we will lose the ability to articulate and perceive this 'more' if we abandon the concept of *dannelse*. However, even though *dannelse* is positioned rather strongly in Denmark as an answer to new challenges and crises, the diagnosis of these challenges differs, and thus the concept of *dannelse* is highly ambiguous. As Kristensen puts it, the notion has been subjected to 'a normative and semantic overload to such an extent that it is at risk of being diluted' (Kristensen, 2017a, p. 51 my translation).

Addressing a language issue

It is often claimed that there is no English equivalent to *dannelse*. It is claimed that the Continental *Pädagogik* tradition encompasses a range of concepts that are simply not translatable into English. Not only in the case of *dannelse*, for which there is no adequate translation, but also because English equivalents simply do not mean the same. Norwegian professor of *Pädagogik*, Herner Sæverot, describes this in an interview in the following way:

¹⁶ The interest in education as a practice is however not absent but rather implicit and indirect.

”[P]edagogikk” is not the same as “pedagogy”, “didaktik” is not the same as “didactics”, “danning” [in Danish: dannelse] is not the same as “formation”, “opdragelse” is not the same as “upbringing”, and “vitenskap” is not the same as “science”. The problem is that [in contemporary times] one is almost forced to use English terms and concepts that do not capture what these Continental concepts basically mean. Moreover, the Continental concepts are flexible, that is, they are concepts that continuously must be studied and transformed in order for them to be able to respond appropriately to contemporary challenges and problems. When one turns to the English language, one is in danger of undermining the necessary exploration of Continental and *pädagogical* concepts that originate from another culture, another way of thinking, and another language (Sæverot & Lomsdalen, 2023, p. 8 my translation).

Danish philosopher Thomas Rømer argues that too many aspects of education are all compiled in the English word ‘education’, which makes it difficult to make the kind of distinctions that the vocabulary of Continental *Pädagogik* enables (Rømer, 2019, p. 38). This, he argues, has however more to do with the contemporary educational political landscape and the hegemonic educational discourse rather than problems with the English language more generally or the Anglo-Saxon education tradition. According to Rømer, there are ‘plenty of dannelse’ (Rømer, 2019, p. 39 my translation) in the idea of Liberal Education, a very influential educational idea that arose in the aftermath of World War two, particularly promoted through theorists like Michael Oakshott (1989) and Richard Peters (2004). Furthermore, in an article from 2002, British Paul Standish and Norwegian Lars Løvlie rethink and combine German *Bildung*, American pragmatism and the British Liberal Education tradition (Løvlie & Standish, 2002). Thus, according to Rømer, the frequently proposed distinction between a Continental *Bildung*/dannelse tradition and an Anglo-Saxon effectiveness curriculum tradition as irreconcilable is overly simplified (Rømer, 2019, p. 39).

Danish historian of ideas, Jens Erik Kristensen, argues that along with an internationalization and standardization of Danish educational policy through transnational corporations such as the OECD, EU, the Bologna process, in which the language is English, the Danish concept of dannelse has simply vanished from Danish

policy documents as a result of translation processes rather than as a deliberate and carefully thought out choice (Kristensen, 2017b).

In this dissertation, I do not take any standpoint regarding whether the originally Continental concepts can be adequately articulated in the English vocabulary or not. However, as a pragmatic choice considering the current hegemonic educational discourse, I will use the Danish term ‘dannelse’ and the German *Pädagogik* and variations hereof to illustrate that I am speaking of a Danish version of a European Continental idea and to avoid the danger that the meaning of my text and arguments are potentially ‘imprisoned’ and distorted by the hegemonic educational learning discourse.

Summing up the brief history of dannelse

Dannelse has a long history from ancient Greece (and Roman philosophers which I have not covered in this outline), from Humanism and the Protestant Reformation over secularization in the Enlightenment era (e.g., Rousseau) and in particular philosophers of German Idealism (above all Kant, Hegel and Schleiermacher – I have however only here touched upon Kant), up to 19th century ‘scientifying’ of *Pädagogik* (Herbart and followers) and the Scandinavian ‘nation building’ project (Grundtvig), and later an international Progressive education movement (e.g., Dewey).

It may seem from this outline of the history of dannelse that the Scandinavian version has succeeded somewhat better than the German *Bildung*. It seems to have managed to maintain a better reputation and developed into a more egalitarian concept which enables a closer connection to ideas of democracy. At least, so it seems to be interpreted in contemporary Scandinavian dannelse literature.

Furthermore, despite its current normative and semantic overload (Kristensen, 2017a) the concept of dannelse has managed to maintain a strong position in the common language of many Danes as something utterly positive and necessary. The Danish dannelse, it seems – despite its ambiguity – enjoys vast support and recognition as something other and more than learning, competencies, and skills, and it is thus also used as a concept of resistance so as to bring more nuance into the current (over)emphasis on learning goals. The dominant perception is that dannelse is indeed still relevant, not least in relation to democratic life. Dannelse holds the position of a focal point for social transformation (Straume, 2020).

If we take as a starting point Straume's general definition to the effect that *dannelse* theories can be described as theories about 'becoming a subject in a culture' (Straume, 2013a, p. 18), then it follows that if a given culture considers itself democratic and has democratic life as an ideal, *dannelse* is democratic *dannelse*. It thereby seems that adding 'democratic' to 'dannelse' is redundant. In the Scandinavian literature on *dannelse*, it seems that because *dannelse* is a focal point for social transformation it is democratic *per se*. But again, since the concept of democracy is immensely contested (cf. Dahl, 1989; Dunn, 2018; Gallie, 1955; Held, 2006; Mounk, 2018; Møller & Skaaning, 2013), it follows that any assumption about *dannelse* being democratic *per se* does not really say much before it is specified what 'democratic' actually means.

Different versions of democracy in different historical periods may not be considered particularly democratic by today's standards. As Danish-Swedish professor of political scientist Drude Dahlerup points out, for a long time the exclusion of women was simply a non-issue in political theory, plainly considered as insignificant or even natural (Dahlerup, 2017, p. 5). Likewise, the political arrangement of ancient Athens depended on the labour of women, slaves, and children to even function, that is, it was an arrangement based on the labour of those who had no say in decision making. This version of democracy was a political arrangement based on exploitation and domination. But even today, there is no agreement on what counts as democratic. As Dahl notes: 'It is a term that means anything and nothing' (Dahl, 1989, p. 2) and yet it is a source and embodiment of political power itself (Dunn, 2018, p. xxi).

Dannelse (*paideia* and *Bildung*) have historically been closely related to ideas about the envisioned *good* society, and such visions have shifted over time and context and hence so has the content and purpose – and we might add; *the democratic quality* – of *dannelse*.

Assumptions in the theories dominating the traditionally defined field of democratic dannelsen and democratic education

One of the questions that guides this conceptual framework is this: what are the implicit assumptions about the human being, the child/student, the adult/teacher, the role of education in the theories dominating the traditionally defined field of the thesis' topic? An author who has proposed a perspective on this question is educational theorist Gert Biesta. In the following section, I outline Biesta's critical analysis of the individualistic and instrumentalistic assumptions dominating democratic education in both theory and practice. I also present his suggestion on how to move beyond this individualism and instrumentalism. This is a suggestion this dissertation will draw on.

Furthermore, in my search for relevant or interesting perspectives outside the field of education I have come across quite some bodies of critical feminist and postcolonial literature that have something to say about dominant assumptions in Western philosophy. One might say that themes such as 'feminist critiques of Western philosophy' and 'postcolonial critiques of Western philosophy' may each require an entire dissertation. Moreover, the concepts of feminism and postcolonialism comprise core ideas but they have multiple and contested interpretations. In this dissertation, I shall not engage with such nuances but rather introduce critical perspectives from these fields because they raise important questions and call for reflections which are relevant for research that aims to study democratic education. More specifically, they raise questions about the potential of the theories dominating the field of democratic education as *the* main foundational knowledge sources to theorize democratic education, and they thus also raise questions about one of the central concepts stemming from these theories, the concept of dannelsen. In this section, I therefore briefly address what feminist and postcolonial scholarships have called out as the sexist, misogynist and racist foundation in Western philosophy. Here we may derive important questions for to reflect upon in this thesis.

Finally, I then turn to a more recent development within the field of childhood studies, and I will elaborate in more detail on a childist reading of Western philosophy by theoretical ethicist John Wall. His contribution demonstrates how the theories dominating the field of democratic education are not only built on sexism and racism

but also on a powerful bedrock of adultism – a term that denotes discrimination against children. I present findings from childhood studies that specifically focus on the theme of citizenship and related concepts such as agency, rationality, voice, and participation. As was already hinted in the introduction, the thesis is informed by the argument these studies all have in common; an argument for the need to take into consideration a ‘childist lens’ in the theoretical and methodological framework with the purpose of producing more child-inclusive scholarly approaches. I conclude the section with reflections on how this literature informs the phenomenon of study, my research imagination and the design of the dissertation.

The individualism and instrumentalism in dominant ways of thinking about democratic education

Biesta (Biesta, 2006, 2007) has made a critique of a dominant assumption in the literature on democratic education. Biesta directs his critique at the influence of the Enlightenment period in which political authority was in principle rooted in reason. The continuous influence of this idea is that the task of education is to *produce* democratic subjects, that is, *preparing* students by ensuring that they ‘acquire’ the skills, knowledge and values that will ‘turn them into’ democratic citizens (Biesta, 2007, p. 742). Biesta’s critiques thus also relate to the foundation of *dannelse* theories, that is, to the *becoming* a subject in a culture (Straume, 2013a).

According to Biesta, the problems with this line of thinking are firstly, that it is *instrumentalistic*, and thus schools become the institution – the *instrument* – solely responsible for securing future democracy. It is not fair, Biesta argues, to burden schools with such a task, but it is also not realistic to ‘assume that schools can “make or break” democracy’ (Biesta, 2007, p. 742). Secondly, it comprises an *individualistic* approach, where education’s task becomes focused on ‘equipping’ individuals with (the right) skills, knowledge, and values and thus fails to consider the social, political and relational context, in which individuals live and learn. Thus, responsibility for democracy is placed on the individual and on education rather than where it belongs; on society at large. Thirdly, it is also an individualistic view of democracy itself. Here it is assumed that democracy is only possible if the citizens are ‘properly’ educated and if they are ‘willing’ to act democratically. The problem is that such a perception of democracy makes a ‘common identity’ the necessary foundation for democracy, but the real challenge of democracy lies precisely in the ability to co-exist with those who are *other* than ourselves (Biesta, 2007, p. 742).

A Kantian perception of democratic subjectivity – an individualistic conception

Biesta illustrates two influential conceptions of what a democratic person is that have influenced the thinking of the relationship between education and democracy in educational research and practice from the Enlightenment until this day. He labels these: an individualistic conception of democratic subjectivity and a social conception of democratic subjectivity. The first is represented by Immanuel Kant's and the European Enlightenment's answer to what it means to be a democratic person. As already elaborated earlier, Kant locates subjectivity in the ability to think rationally, and he views rationality as the path to moral life. Democracy needs individuals who are capable of thinking for themselves, and this for Kant could only be achieved through education. Education must "release" the rational potential of the subjects so as to make the subject into a rationally autonomous being' (Biesta, 2007, p. 750) which is ultimately a universal ability – that is, it is not historically or socially contingent, but something that every individual can, in principle, reach. This line of thinking provides a rationale for what Biesta labels education *for* democracy where education must *equip* students with what democracy *needs*. Although the idea of rational autonomy has been heavily criticized, for example, for its individualism, there are direct lines leading from the Kantian line of thinking to ideas characterizing modern educational theory and practice, e.g., ideas about democratic education (Biesta, 2007, p. 750).

A Deweyan perception of democratic subjectivity – an instrumentalistic conception

Biesta illustrates the second conception of subjectivity – a social conception – with John Dewey's answer to what it means to be a democratic person. Dewey views human beings as 'living organisms who, through their interaction with a social medium form their habits, including the habits of thought and reflection' (Biesta, 2007, p. 751). For Dewey we become who we are through the life we live and experience, and the task of education becomes to ensure a life in which the experiences of 'immature' persons can *foster* the democratic person. This means that a social group with many different interests is preferable in that it offers many opportunities for development and growth. This is not the case because of the mere existence of many different interests. Instead, 'what is crucial is the extent to which individuals are aware of the fact that their actions are part of the wider "social fabric" so that, each individual "has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own"' (Biesta, 2007, p. 752 with

quotes from Dewey). Also the Deweyan line of thinking has influenced and continues to influence ideas of democratic education today, and as mentioned previously, the Deweyan idea has also had a tremendous influence on the Danish state school and the idea of democratic *dannelse* (Korsgaard et al., 2017). According to Biesta, the line of thinking represented by Dewey to some extent overcomes the individualism in the Kantian line of thinking, but it does however remain instrumentalistic in that Dewey views participation in democratic life in a way in which the democratic person is *produced*. Thus, responsibility for democracy and the ‘production’ of democratic individuals remains placed on education.

An Arendtian perception about democratic subjectivity – a political conception

To enable shifting responsibility back where it belongs – society at large – Biesta proposes a third possible conception of what it means to be a democratic person. He labels this a *political* conception of subjectivity – represented by Hannah Arendt, who viewed human beings as *acting* beings. What it means to be a human being has for Arendt ‘everything to do with what one *does*’ (Biesta, 2007, p. 753). What makes a human being unique is the ability to make new beginnings, ‘to do something that has not been done before’ (Biesta, 2007, p. 754). This happens all the time. The ‘uniquely new’ that enters the world is not uniquely new because no one else has said or done *the same* before but because it has never been said or done *by ‘me’*. Thus, these new beginnings, these actions are not (necessarily) astonishing or exceptional, but ‘can be very mundane’ (Biesta, 2007, p. 754). To *be* a subject means to *act* – and here Arendt’s (and Biesta’s) political perception of subjectivity challenges the dominant thinking in the field of democratic education in that it sets aside the fundamental assumption in this field; that children and young people (or ‘newcomers’) are to *become* (democratic) human beings through education.

Furthermore, the subject who *acts* is a subject in a twofold way because its action depends on how others will respond to its actions (Biesta, 2007, p. 755). The subject is therefore both a subject that acts and at the same time is being subjected to the *consequences* of the action. The way in which others will respond to our actions lies outside of our control. This is on the one hand very frustrating – it is tempting to try to control the other’s response – but it is at the same time ‘the very condition that makes our disclosure, our action and hence our subjectivity possible’ (Biesta, 2007, p. 755-756). Moreover, controlling the other’s response to our initiatives would

‘deprive them of their opportunity to act, and hence of their opportunity to *be* a subject’ (Biesta, 2007, p. 756).

This line of thinking provides a conception of democratic subjectivity in which subjectivity is understood as ‘*a quality of human action*’ rather than ‘an attribute of individuals’ (Biesta, 2007, p. 757) and thus enables a conception that overcomes the individualistic and instrumentalistic conceptions. Drawing on Arendt’s conception of subjectivity enables a different way of thinking about the democratic role of education. It enables a vision of the school which is not a ‘space of preparation’ but ‘a space where individuals can act, where they can bring their beginnings into the world, and hence can be subjects’ (Biesta, 2007, p. 759), and from this Biesta emphasizes three questions research on democratic education should ask:

- How much action is actually possible in our schools? (p. 759)
- How much action is actually possible in our society? (p. 762)
- And what can be learned from being/having been a subject? (p. 763)

This dissertation draws on Biesta’s suggestion and aspires to study the democratic role of education differently than in terms of ‘preparation’ and ‘development’. Informed by Biesta, the thesis will pay attention to 1) how schools can make democratic action possible and 2) the conditions under which such acting as a subject can take place.

But from what perspective should we consider this?

There is an important aspect here which Biesta does not touch upon. He provides an argument for problematic assumptions of the theories dominating the field of democratic education and thus ways of asking questions about democratic education. And he provides a philosophical foundation resting on another assumption which enables new types of questions. But he does not discuss different ways in which such questions could (or should?) be considered and answered. I talk here about *perspective*, and the point of view from which these questions can be grappled with. What I am talking about here is that a question about how much action is actually possible in our schools and what can be learned from being/having been a subject may be answered very differently from different perspectives.

As coined in the concept ‘intersectionality’ by professor of law, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), individual characteristics such as race, class, and gender intersect

and overlap with one another and create different systems of advantage and disadvantage, that is, they create different possibilities for ‘acting as a subject’. When considering a question about how much action is actually possible in our schools, the answer might be very different whether we consider the action possible for a brown girl or for a white boy.

It is generally accepted that it matters which kind of analytical framework scholars approach research questions with, and that they should understand the phenomena they study from diverse points of views. In this dissertation, I am particularly focused on the category of age. The action possible is very different depending on whether one’s *ontological* identity is a young child, an older child, or an adult; it has to do with the extent to which one’s identity is acknowledged as a *knower* (Fricker, 2009). To elaborate on that, I will first attend to and draw on important insights stemming from feminist, postcolonial and childist readings of Western philosophy which tell us more about the implicit assumptions in the theories that dominate the literature on democratic dannelsse and democratic education.

The racism, sexism and even straightforward misogyny imbedded in Western philosophical frameworks

As for the scholarly woman, she uses her books in the same way as her watch, for example, which she carries so that people will see that she has one, though it is usually not running or not set by the sun (Kant, 1798/1974, p. 171).

Western philosophy and the hegemonic position it has had and continues to have in research today have been extensively problematized and criticized in feminist and postcolonial scholarship (Kemi, 2020). The theories of authors who have been prized as ‘classics’ such as ancient Greece’s Plato and Aristotle and Enlightenment era’s Immanuel Kant and Jean-Jacques Rousseau have been scrutinized for inherent racists, sexists and even straightforward misogynist assumptions. For example, influential and persistent also today are ideas such as the dichotomy between understanding and emotion, associated with the masculine and the feminine respectively, and further the idea that women (identified with emotion) are a threat to knowledge is typical of Western philosophy’s systems of binary logics. These systems are characterized ‘by

an oppositional, dual and hierarchical structure' (Cavarero, 2017, p. 23) that produces a range of oppositions such as spirit/matter, mind/body, public/private, active/passive etc. where the first terms are perceived as positive and dominant and related to the masculine pole, and the second terms are perceived as negative and subordinate and related to the feminine pole (Cavarero, 2017). Such binary hierarchical systems are built into contemporary Western intellectual thinking and represents an 'enlightenment discourse' that claims to be 'truly universal' (Lettow, 2017, p. 94). However, the seemingly 'bright' and 'universal' notions of equality, reason, tolerance, progress, and human rights in the enlightenment discourse also have a 'dark' side. They also foster exclusion and prejudice, and they further support and reproduce male dominance (e.g., Lettow, 2017; Nye, 2013; Okin, 2013; Schott, 1997; Wollstonecraft, 1792/1996). For example, Carole Pateman (1988) argues that influential social contract theories of e.g., Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau draw on strong patriarchal assumptions. These theorists, she argues, ignored and perpetuated subordination of women, and thus the social contract tradition also establishes 'a sexual contract' that undermines the status of women and justifies their subordination in the political system they envision.

Immanuel Kant is often cited as the primary example of alienated masculinity. Kant argued that 'feminine traits' are weaknesses, '[We] joke about them. Fools jeer at them, but reasonable men know very well that they are precisely the rudders women use to steer men and use them for their own purposes' (Kant, 1798/1974, p. 167). Kant downgraded emotions as a component in morality and held that women were incapable of moral agency. This 'universal truth' about the 'nature' of women was shared by other philosophers although some, such as e.g., Hegel, Rousseau, and Hume 'just' held that women were *less* capable (Kemi, 2020, p. 46).

In the Scandinavian educational context, we are particularly fond of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his ideas on education from his treatise *Émile* (1762/2004). *Émile* is by many considered *the* classic in modern *pädagogical* thinking as illustrated in the title of Lars Løvlie's essay: *Rousseau in our hearts* [in Norwegian: 'Rousseau i våre hjerter'] (2013). But in *pädagogical* textbooks and reference works there are rarely any thorough discussions of Rousseau's writings on the education of Sophie, whom he introduces in chapter five as a companion to *Émile*. Whereas the ideal that steers *Émile*'s education is 'autonomy', Sophie is mainly educated to serve *Émile*. Rousseau explains that the 'crucial different nature' of women demands different treatment (Nye, 2013).

The British philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) largely respected Rousseau's political ideas (Held, 2006; Rustad, 2004) but she criticized his gender-differentiated education in her book: *A vindication for the rights of women* (Rustad, 2004; Wollstonecraft, 1792/1996). Wollstonecraft argued that Rousseau's vision of women's education was basically to educate them to be sex objects and slaves (Nye, 2013, p. 25). She argued that women were not inferior to men by nature but were made so through limited education and opportunities and by societies' norms that reduced women's roles to that of being mothers and wives (Held, 2006; Rustad, 2004). Women should get access to education and intellectual training as well as men and furthermore have opportunity for economic independence through the right to work and earn a living. The modern world, Wollstonecraft argued, should not only be free of tyranny emanating from the 'divine right of kings' but also from the tyranny emanating from the 'divine right of husbands' (Wollstonecraft, 1792/1996, p. 127). Wollstonecraft is thus a thinker in the Enlightenment period who especially stands out against the male stream (Held, 2006, p. 49) and against the history of political thought which is 'ominously dismissive of femininity and woman' (Phillips, 1991, p. 46). However, Wollstonecraft's text was largely treated with the outmost scorn (except in more at the time radical circles) and the argument was barely considered in political theory until the work of John S. Mill (1806-1873) in *The subjugation of Women* (Mill, 1869/2001). As Phillips notes, 'the entire debate on democracy has proceeded for centuries as if women were not there, or it has, as with Rousseau, only acknowledged us to show us our place' (Phillips, 1991, p. 2). As Held notes, 'Mary Wollstonecraft has rarely been considered one of the key theorists of democracy, but maybe she ought to have been' (Held, 2006, p. 50).

The reason why I emphasize Wollstonecraft's critique here is that while she criticized larger structural norms in society at the time, she specifically targeted Rousseau's educational ideas and problematized them in relation to political theory. But even though we today agree with Wollstonecraft's claim about the equal capacities of women and men, this critique of Rousseau's educational thoughts remarkably seems to be largely ignored in Scandinavian contemporary educational literature – at least in what I will characterize as the mainstream literature. Can these problematic foundational assumptions merely be considered as a sort of detachable appendage? As Penny Weiss writes in 1987: 'at the very least, it is certainly no more logical to assume at the outset that Rousseau can be understood by ignoring his

comments on female education than by ignoring his comments on male education’ (Weiss, 1987, p. 82).

Western philosophy has also been problematized as a racist and Eurocentric string of philosophy which has earned its claimed intellectual status by the systematic exclusion of non-western understandings of philosophies (Maris, 2020; Ramose, 1999). Great Western philosophers such as Aristotle, Locke, Kant, Hume and Hegel are some of those, as Ramose puts it ‘who made no small contribution to [...] philosophical racism’ (Ramose, 1999, p. 15). In *Africa, Asia, and the history of philosophy* (2013), Peter Park shows that in the time before 1780s it was assumed that intellectual origins lay in the Orient, but with attempts to produce new histories of philosophy, contributions from Asia and Africa were systematically excluded and the new claim became that the origin of philosophy was Greek. Park labels this ‘the formation of the Kantian position’ (2013, p. 69).

Likewise, other postcolonial scholarships have problematized the overwhelming desire in philosophy to see Kant as a ‘pure philosopher’ (Eze, 1995, p. 200), largely neglecting or simply ignoring Kant’s philosophical essays on race in which he formulated and defended a (pseudo)scientific concept of race (Eze, 1995; Larrimore, 2008; Sandford, 2018). Essays which includes rather stark racial stereotyping and racists remarks such as ‘no single negro has ever been found who accomplished something great in art or science or showed any other praiseworthy quality’ (Kant quoted in Park, 2013, p. 93), an observation from which Kant concludes that ‘someone black from head to toe is proof that what he said was stupid’ (Park, 2013, p. 93).

Up until the mid 1790s Kant explicitly describes the ‘Negro’, the ‘yellow’ and the ‘copper-red’ races as having serious deficits compared to the ‘whites’ and therefore incapable of governing themselves, which according critics served to legitimize white colonial rule (Kleingeld, 2022, p. 7). Some scholars find that with these essays Kant provided *intellectual* legitimation for the justification of colonialism, imperialism and systems of racial domination (Bernasconi, 2002, 2009; Larrimore, 2008). Others defend Kant – and thereby the use and value of the Kantian philosophy – e.g., by arguing that Kant changed his views in the last decade of his life¹⁷ (e.g., Kleingeld, 2007) or by arguing that his racial beliefs are inconsistent with his ideas

¹⁷ In the middle of the 1790s, Kant abandoned the idea of a racial hierarchy and white superiority and began to condemn European colonialism and slavery (Kleingeld, 2022).

on ethics (e.g., McCabe, 2007). However, critics disagree with such arguments and furthermore emphasize that regardless, the (racial) Kantian line of thinking influenced subsequent thinkers who subscribed to similar beliefs and who consequently built such beliefs into their theoretical thinking. In other words, whether Kant changed his views towards the end of his life, his racist ideas were – due to the influential status and the admiration of Kant – widely distributed and adopted and had a life of their own.

It is commonly recognized in postcolonial scholarship that main categories in the enlightenment discourse such as ‘humanity’ and ‘society’ did not extend to non-Western peoples (Allen-Paisant, 2021) or at least only did so in a ‘formal way, in the sense that such recognition had no practical effect’ (Quijano, 2007, p. 176). According to Achille Joseph Mbembe, Blackness and race have historically played ‘loaded, burdensome and unhinged’ (Mbembe, 2020, p. 1) roles in the imaginaries of European societies. Blackness and race have occupied a central place as ‘symbols of raw intensity and repulsion’ (Mbembe, 2020, p. 1) within modern knowledge and discourse about the human being and therefore within the discourse of humanism and humanity (Mbembe, 2020, p. 2).

Aimé Césaire powerfully exposes the hypocrisy in the European vision of humanism in his essay: *The discourse on colonialism* (1950/2000), where he shows how European humanism had no problem with same type of cruelty and violence embedded in Nazism e.g., carried out in concentration camps in all of the time that it was applied only to non-European people. By persecuting white Europeans, Hitler and the Second World War made visible the violence commonly reserved and largely accepted and legitimized for non-whites (Césaire, 1950/2000).

However, in fields such as *Pädagogik* and education, Western-critical views seem to be ‘tucked away’ into e.g., categories such as ‘religious studies’ (Gokhale, 2012) or under ‘post-colonial studies’ or other marginalized positions in the academic landscape (Biswas, 2022; Gokhale, 2012). Biswas notes that ‘there seems to be a deep-rooted intellectual tendency to occupy a dual position of a referee and player that continues to loop self-created epistemological restrictions, which plays out in childhood studies and intimately related fields like education’ (Biswas, 2022, p. 343).

Ignoring potentially inbuilt biases serves to mute signals and inhibit important critical philosophical scrutiny and scholarly advances

In this dissertation, I shall precisely not tuck such critical views away. The point in including them is to include a perspective that argues that the central theories of Western intellectual thinking (which includes the theories dominating the field of democratic dannelsse & democratic education) are biased. There are discussions about whether and how biases of theorists and of (problematic) world views of the past influence the theories today. In the case of Kant, for example, McCabe holds that since Kant can be shown to be inconsistent in the sense that his racist biases contradict his own philosophical principles, his view on race is ‘not worthy of our serious attention’ (McCabe, 2019, p. 7), and that it is possible to focus solely on his egalitarian theory as the only aspect that is philosophically significant. Likewise, some argue that Kant and his fellow men’s views on women are not as bad as they are made out to be in feminist critiques, and furthermore that they are inconsistent with Enlightenment’s claims about the use of reason, and therefore they can and should just ‘be bracketed off’ (Mikkola, 2011, p. 105).

Such views have led to the customary use of an inclusive language and also an exclusive use of female pronouns in contemporary discussions and literature about Kant’s political philosophy (Kleingeld, 2022) (the use of inclusive language is also used in relation to other philosophers). Critics, however, argue that presumptions about race and sex are not just some sort of ‘local accidents’ one can simply explain away as an expression of the ‘inappropriate’ worldviews of the historical period in which these theories were formulated. It is simply not possible to get past the racist, sexist and misogynist attitudes presumed to be located in the time period and in the author (the white man) himself to the man’s supposedly race- and gender-neutral universal philosophy. Rather, presumptions about race and sex are *built into* the theories themselves and thus – when just ignored – reproduce racist and sexist lines of thinking (Sandford, 2018).

Central concepts of philosophy such as ‘reason’ and ‘justice’ – characteristics that are taken to define human beings – are associated with traits historically identified with (white) masculinity (Kemi, 2020, p. 45). For example, Kant’s seemingly gender and race neutral concepts such as ‘human being’ [Mensch] and ‘humanity’ [Menschheit] cannot just be assumed to apply to women and non-white people, and in practice – e.g., in the court of law – they were certainly not interpreted that way either (Kleingeld, 2022). As Kleingeld argues, by using gender-inclusive language

and female pronouns such as ‘Kant sees every human being entitled to cast *his* and *her* vote’ first of all make such sentences downright false and even more worrying, they serve to ‘mute signals’ that would otherwise make readers attentive towards how Kant’s prejudice had a profound impact on the shape of his political and moral philosophy (Kleingeld, 2022, pp. 17-18). Put differently, ignoring the biases inhibits important critical philosophical scrutiny and scholarly advances.

Mbembe (2016) likewise argues that it is not simply a matter of cleansing Western philosophy for racist remarks. Biased Western philosophy has ‘Westernized’ higher education – by which he means ‘local instantiation of a dominant academic model based on Eurocentric epistemic canon’ (p. 32) – and as a result generated a discursive scientific framework that sets up interpretive frames that make it difficult to think outside of these frames, let alone recognize thinkings from ‘outside’ the framework (Mbembe, 2016, p. 32).

Charles Mills argues that Western philosophy have largely operated with a ‘racialized moral psychology’ (Mills, 1997/2022, p. xxi) which has distorted their theorizing and thus modern political philosophy continues to be conceptually ‘white’ and evasive about white domination. Mills argues that the social contract tradition – as exemplified by Locke, Rousseau and Kant, whose ideas have had an enormous influence on contemporary democratic and political theory – is intertwined with an unacknowledged and denied ‘racial contract’, that is, an implicit agreement among white people to maintain and reproduce a historical racial order that is beneficial for whites e.g., in terms of ‘determining who gets what’ (Mills, 1997/2022, p. 9). White supremacy, Mills states, ‘is the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today’ (Mills, 1997/2022, p. 1). According to Mills, the field of political philosophy’s – particularly the analytical tradition – continuous ‘otherworldliness’ and ignorance of basic political realities (white dominance) who present themselves as disinterested thinkers addressing timeless issues result in the (white) ignorant belief that the concepts in mainstream political philosophy are raceless and universal will continue to undermine core principles of democracy such as equality and freedom.^{18 19} We can, and we should, Mills argues, develop a political

¹⁸ In fact, Mills calls the discipline of philosophy one of the ‘whitest’ of all humanities, both demographically and conceptually.

¹⁹ It has been argued that Mills exaggerates the flaws and failures of political philosophy, but at the same time that such hyperbole and polemic strategy is needed to draw attention to the neglect of racism to invoke change and unsettle the dominant paradigm.

theory that is informed by political realities, that is, a theoretical framework that takes into consideration the lived experiences of the racial minoritized (Mills, 1997/2022, p. xxxv).

In this dissertation, I find it important to draw on the insights from the feminist and postcolonial critiques outlined above. I find it important not to ‘mute signals’ (Kleingeld, 2022, p. 17) that question the democratic potential of the theories dominating the traditionally defined field of democratic education. Taking seriously the feminist and postcolonial critiques serves as an argument for the need of detaching *dannelse* from its discriminating tendencies. That is, if we should not just disregard and retire *dannelse* as some educational scholars have suggested (although for other reasons than its sexist and racist history) but attempt to transform it into a useful concept to theorize democratic education.

But there is yet another problematic but overlooked assumption in Western philosophy. This is a much more recent critique stemming from a relatively new field of childhood studies, which emphasizes that though children are a third of all humanity, the deepest and most perplexing philosophical questions about what it means to be a human being, what societies should strive for, what is ultimately owed to one another, are questions that have usually been considered from the point of view of adulthood (Wall, 2010). As theoretical ethicist John Wall puts it:

It is time to recognize that history’s longstanding patriarchalism is not just about gender but also about age, that the traditional *pater* or father is not only male, wealthy, and typically white but also adult (Wall, 2021, p. 6).

The adultism embedded in Western philosophical frameworks

Wall argues that almost every major philosopher and theologian of different historical traditions has uncritically adopted adultist social assumptions, that is, they have grappled with questions about the nature of the human being, its purpose and responsibility, chiefly from the perspective of adulthood. Children have all too often been considered ‘undeveloped adults’, passive recipients of care, ‘naturally’ unruly in need of being ‘civilized’ and ‘cultivated’ or occupying a particular innocence in influential philosophical theories, and even though in some cases these assumptions

have advanced the position of children and thus advanced children's lives, they have also in different ways dehumanized them (Wall, 2010).

In his book: *Ethics in the light of childhood* (2010), Wall deconstructs historical Western assumptions about children that continue to ground ethical life today. He makes three distinctions regarding patterns in the ways in which questions about what it means to be human, what societies should aim for, and what human beings owe each other, have been answered – that is, questions which are also at the absolute center of democratic dannelsen. Each pattern has attempted to respond appropriately and with good intentions to childhood, but has, according to Wall, only succeeded in part as they contain adultist thinking. As it has been the case historically in relation to other groups such as women and non-white people, efforts to include children have also partly dehumanized them and hence also 'both humanized and dehumanized humanity' (Wall, 2010, p. 10).

Wall labels these three models the top-down, the bottom-up and the developmental model. The differences between the three models are not temporal. They do not succeed each other over time but have all been present in one form or the other for thousands of years. Nor is there a straight line from negative views on children to more positive ones. Various ideas have appreciated the significance of children in one way or the other. The differences between the models are rather conceptual, in that they each tell a particular story about children and the meaning thereof for the ethics of humanity, and these stories continue to inform contemporary disagreements about children and childhood that also includes discussions of education. Thus, the models do not exist in a pure form, they rather represent tendencies. Some thinkers can be 'placed' in one direction more heavily than others, and all thinkers bear elements of the other models in their thinking as well. The striking thing is, however, that these models have persisted steadily over time and thus seem to have a certain historical resiliency.

The top-down model – children are born irrational and in need of discipline from 'above'

The top-down model sees human nature starting out as unruly. Children are born irrational and in need of ethical training, and it is through education that societies can become rational and just. Such an idea is, according to Wall, most influentially articulated by ancient Greek philosopher Plato but can be found in Christianity and other religions as well (Wall, 2010, pp. 16-18). It is also articulated by Kant, who

concludes that childhood reveals that humans are first and foremost steered by desires and instincts. The Kantian view of the human is that it is 'ruled without any higher moral principle' (Wall, 2010, p. 18), and the fundamental moral task is that of 'changing animal nature into human nature' (Kant cited in Wall, 2010 p. 18). The dehumanization of children in the top-down model is illustrated in what the nature of 'moral agency' becomes. Human agency can only be 'moral' when it is detached from what is 'inborn'. Children are presumed to lack a sense of moral responsibility which then is to be imposed by those assumed to have acquired it – adults. According to Wall, the top-down model 'measures morality by an always transcending yardstick whose command is obedience' (Wall, 2010, p. 20).

The bottom-up model – children are born innocent and 'good' and must be protected from the avarice and greed of society

The bottom-up model offers a radically different vision of humanity and society. The perception is here that what is demonstrated by children is humanity's original goodness. Roots of the ideas of children as fundamentally moral beings can be traced to the Bible and is evident in various religious documents (Wall, 2010, pp. 20-22). Within education this line of thinking is often ascribed to Rousseau who holds that children begin life as wise, good and just. They are not yet perverted by the avarice and greed of society, but bring a pure and free inner capability for self-love which should be nurtured and strengthened through life.

The view offered in the bottom-up model has proven appealing to many over the past century and has sought to reclaim the value in children's distinctive voices. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child from 1989 has instituted new means for children's voices, perspectives and participation, thus the bottom-up model has been humanizing in a profound way. It avoids the adultist perception of reducing children to passive recipients, and grants children full humanity, but at the same time it contains its own dehumanizing tendencies. For example, there is an inbuilt perceived vulnerability in this perception of the child that excludes children from equality with adults. Even though children and play are highly valued, they also tend to be idealized in a way that disregards children's lived experiences (Wall, 2010 p. 35-36). Too strong emphasis on children's purity and goodness can make it much easier to ignore children's neediness and victimization. If humanity is in its essence naturally good, and if it is structures of society that corrupts, then 'these structures cannot be relied on much for solutions to human struggle. All of us must chiefly rely on ourselves'

(Wall, 2010, p. 24). This outlook is particularly critical for children who – due to an unequal power relation with adults and fewer experiences and resources than adults – nevertheless are more vulnerable to exploitation and marginalization than adults.

The developmental model – children are ‘pre-rational’ and education must aim to develop its fullest possible realization of social reason in maturity

Wall refers to the third story as a horizontal or developmental approach. It does not argue for either an imposed higher moral order or a natural inborn goodness. The child in this view is in a state of a fundamental ethical blankness or neutrality and can gradually and progressively develop and advance human relations through increasingly rational dialogue. Humanity’s unformed ethical potential can thus be realized over time. This model does not call for vertical human relations, that is, not from ‘above’ or from ‘below’, but for *horizontal* relations that are extended along a developmental axis.

This view can be found within the ideas of Aristotle, who did not have much to say directly about children, but whose ideas reflect currents in ancient Greek culture, which shaped Western thinking about children and childhood significantly (Wall, 2010, p. 25). Aristotle sees the child as ‘pre-rational’, that is, ‘as containing its own as-yet-unfulfilled rational potential’ (Wall, 2010, p. 25), but – like the woman – it has fewer rational faculties. Human beings go through a life-long process of social development, which aims for the ‘fullest possible realization of social reason in maturity’ (Wall, 2010, p. 25). Children should receive care but can only gradually learn caregiving.

The developmental story is also articulated by Enlightenment philosopher John Locke who sees in childhood a beginning of the ‘unfolding of natural reason’ (Wall, 2010, p. 27). But for Locke this is not developed through social relations but in the growth of individual liberty. Locke describes children as wax or ‘white pages’ (that is, *not* blank) ready to be molded or written on. Children do not possess the requirements necessary for entry to the political sphere. The role of education is to educate the (male) child to ‘submit to his own reason, when he is of an Age to make use of it’ (Locke cited in Wall, p. 27). The female child is viewed as a coming caregiver and as such a part of the private sphere and thereby out of direct educational or political concern.

The ‘Age of reason’ is conceptualized in *explicit opposition* to the child

Wall’s critique aligns with Biesta’s critique in that they put emphasis on two different aspects of the same (problematic) assumptions. Whereas Biesta emphasizes how the individualistic and instrumentalistic perceptions foster an unrealistic and unfair task for education, Wall stresses the adultist ‘deficit’-perceptions of the child (whether in one model or the other) which is basically a discriminating and dehumanizing perception.

Following Wall, these three competing views of the child with each of their distinctive adultist assumptions are predominantly what is available to us to ‘think with’. They underline thoughts and discussions about the nature of the human being and the nature of the child. They underline the strong matter-of-course opinion that suffrage is (and should ‘naturally’ be) restricted to adults only (see e.g., Wall, 2014) and they underline discussions about the role of education, including discussions about democratic education.

We also begin to see here that assumptions about the child embedded in Western philosophy are complexly intertwined with the Enlightenment architecture of modern democracy itself, which is grounded on a discourse of the *requirement* of a rational, autonomous subject capable of thinking freely and independently. John Locke, for example (often referred to as the father of liberalism – not the founder, but the *father*) developed his idea of natural rights into his political theory. In *Two Treatises of Government* (1669), Locke declared that all people have an inalienable right to ‘life, liberty and property’ and that their personhood should be recognized in law. However, Locke saw children as possessing a ‘weakness and imperfection of their non-age’ (Locke, 1975/1689, p. 148) which meant that these natural rights did not apply to children. Thus children were to be ‘Locked out’, so to speak, from the political theories which formed the backbone of political thought up until the 20th century (Cockburn, 2020, p. 298).

Likewise, political scientist Brook Ackerly (2008) has pointed out that the exclusionary and discriminatory logics harboured in the architecture of modern democracy have provided justification for the exclusion of different social groups based on the claim that they lacked sufficient capacity to demonstrate a ‘voice’. Ackerly calls this ‘epistemological domination’ because the criterion for exclusion is what counts as knowledge and who counts as a bearer of knowledge. Political scientist Toby Rollo (2021) points to speech rather than ‘voice’, that is, linguistic skills as the main criterion and emphasizes how every historical struggle of different social groups

defending themselves from the claim that they lack sufficient capacities to exercise ‘voice’ through the enactment of speech has taken place on the assumption that exclusion and disqualification of non-speakers is legitimate and even ‘natural’. For women and non-whites, for example, the criterion for inclusion and recognition was a requirement to prove that they were not to be understood as disabled, children, or animals. Thus, marginalized groups, Rollo argues ‘are effectively blackmailed under threat of being ignored, misrepresented, or harmed’ into ‘the very problematic position of affirming some exclusions as natural while arguing that they do not belong in the category of natural exclusion’ (Rollo, 2021, p. 318).

The figure of the child is at the centre of the colonial logic

A central agreement among many postcolonial theorists is that while we have left the period of colonialism and thus now live in what could be considered a postcolonial era, the ‘colonial project’ is an *ongoing* process with which we are still engaged (Biswas, Rollo, et al., 2023). For coloniality to operate it requires a kind of rationality and justification for its political exclusion and exploitation of certain groups of human beings. It needs a convincing ‘natural’ hierarchy that can be applied to human beings and relegate some of them to a lesser order. The most prolific and culturally powerful tropes of ‘natural’ subjugation that can be traced back as far as we have recorded history is that of the child to the adult (Duane, 2017a; Rollo, 2018a).

The point of these postcolonial theorists is that the figure of the child is not merely operating as a metaphor or rhetorical trope in processes of infantilization of groups such as non-white people and women. Rather the idea of the fully human adult and the sub-human child, and along with this hierarchy, the idea of the child as an object and without status is the ‘prototype’ of coloniality. Children have often provided the conceptual underpinning for justifying slavery (Duane, 2017b). In fact, ‘the very concepts that undergird slavery – infantilization, paternalism, and guardianship – all invoke an [...] imagined child to make their arguments’ and historically ‘power is given to those who can “prove” that they are not childlike, and are thus deserving of rights’ (Duane, 2017b, p. 5). In other words, the figure of the child is at the centre of the colonial logic (Biswas, Rollo, et al., 2023; Duane, 2017b; Rollo, 2018a, 2018b, 2020).

The *political subject* was once only an accessible position for the white, wealthy, abled male body, but over the course of history, it has become possible for it to be occupied by more and more groups such as women, slaves, non-whites, the poor, etc.

But it has not yet become possible for the political subject to be occupied as a child. In fact, for coloniality to work it needs for the figure of the child to remain in the category of ‘natural’ exclusion.

Thinking in the light of childhood to imagine a more expansive humanity

Some of the critical literature included in this conceptual framework argues that dominant theories and ostensibly universal political philosophical concepts, as well as the practical and institutional system and norms on which democratic societies are built, are so foundationally biased that they will continue to privilege the body they were initially developed for. Their most powerful argument is to point at ‘basic political realities’ (cf. Mills, 1997/2022). It is hard to counter this when taking into consideration how power, resources, access, etc. are distributed on different categories of bodies. Latest, the covid19 situation made (even more) visible how some bodies (the usual bodies) continue to be privileged over other bodies and that the pattern is (still) global (see e.g., Alwan, 2021; Blundell et al., 2022; Cui et al., 2022; Hardy & Logan, 2020; Johnston et al., 2020; Jæger & Blaabæk, 2020; Lemkow–Tovías et al., 2023; Li et al., 2021; Malisch et al., 2020; Oliveira et al., 2020; Pereira, 2021; Pillay, 2021; Rollo, 2020). Others emphasize that we have gained and hold that we still can gain great insight from Western philosophers but that it is necessary to work in order to overcome their entrenched shortcomings.

This dissertation draws from the insights of the critical literature presented in the conceptual framework, and it particularly draws from the childist critique and takes the position that it is possible to imagine a more expansive humanity, and that we can accomplish this by transforming philosophical foundations through ‘thinking in the light of childhood’ (Wall, 2010, p. 10).

Efforts to promote citizenship that fail to include a ‘childist lens’ contribute to producing the very distrust and disengagement in democracy which they seek to respond to

A relatively new community in the field of childhood studies that works with a ‘childist lens’ criticizes the increasing protectionist politics underlining the escalating interest in promoting children’s participation and active citizenship in both policy, practice and research. The political interest is partly a result of the 1989 United Nation

Convention of the Rights of the Child and has on the one hand fostered a commitment both to secure children's right to participation as well as to empower them. But on the other hand, this agenda has also largely diverted attention from the more disciplining agendas regarding children's participation (Cockburn, 2020; Hart, 2009; Sundhall, 2017; Warming, 2011).

In the last couple of decades, we have witnessed the emergence of renewed governance strategies that view children as 'the raw materials' for society's future (Warming, 2011, p. 119) and aim for securing competent, well-adjusted (future) democratic citizens capable of coping with challenges of globalization (Hart, 2009) (for examples herof see CoE, 2010; Fadel et al., 2018; OECD, 2019).

According to Hart (2009) and Warming (2011, 2013, 2019), this interest has been reflected in a large number of studies, but the majority of these tends to focus on how to design practical methodologies to *foster* children's participation and on evaluating various educational interventions from participatory projects. The criticisms of such studies are that they start from a pre-defined adult-centred normative and exclusive perception of citizenship into which children and young people – constructed as in a 'natural' state of 'not-yet' – are to be moulded (Hart, 2009; Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Sundhall, 2017).

The problem here is that because these studies (as well as the practice and policy they influence and draw upon) fail to think in the light of childhood they also 1) fail to give children and young people's responsibilities full recognition as their actions and voices are rendered invisible and denigrated merely because they are performed by children (Cockburn, 2020; Thomas, 2012), 2) they fail to acknowledge and recognize the contextual and interactional context of 'children's voices' including the power exercised over children (I'Anson, 2013; Lundy, 2007; Spyrou, 2011) (for example, children under the age of seven or children who have not yet gained sufficient linguistic skills are largely absent from citizenship discussions (Cockburn, 2020)), 3) they overlook important insights from children and young people's experiences in their actual 'lived citizenship' (Warming, 2019; Warming & Fahnøe, 2017), 4) they largely ignore children's current status as citizens (Lister, 2003), and 5) they result in the claim that children's human rights (unlike adult's) are not absolute but must be *earned* through 'proper' (mistakenly perceived by adults as democratic) behaviour (Lundy, 2021; Lundy & Martínez Sainz, 2018; Wall, 2012).



These discriminating effects of research, policy, and practice that fail to include a 'childist lens', it is argued, contribute to *produce* and reinforce political distrust and disengagement and ultimately the situation in which children and young people turn their backs on the adult society including (the adults' version of so-called) democracy. Experiences of discrimination and marginalization are powerful lessons too, and according to this research community, great insights can come from studying citizenship from the negative aspects such as experiences of discrimination, marginalization, and violation. However, the vast literature on democratic dannelsen & democratic education focuses on the positive aspect, and the negative aspect is thus a missing perspective in the field (Hart, 2009).

This dissertation is informed by this literature by 1) taking a childist lens into consideration in its research design, and 2) by also being attentive to the negative aspects such as discrimination, marginalization, and violation.

Concluding thoughts on conceptual framework part one

In part one of this discussion of my conceptual framework, I have focused on implicit assumptions about different categories of human beings and about the role of education embedded in the theories dominating the traditionally defined field of the dissertation's topic. Firstly, I presented a map of but a small selection of the enormous body of literature related to the two main concepts in the dissertation, dannelsen and democracy, which, broadly speaking can be categorized as the field of Western philosophy. I approached this field primarily from the perspective of dannelsen and I therefore presented *a brief history of dannelsen*, and I discussed how theories of dannelsen also inform the conceptual architecture of modern democracy.

Second, I included a critical analysis by educational theorist Gert Biesta of the individualistic and instrumental tendencies in these theories, and I included insights from feminist, postcolonial, and childist literature that emphasize the fact that the history of dannelsen and democracy is as much a history of sexism, imperialism, colonialism, and even straightforward misogyny, racism, domination and exploitation as well as adultism and misopedy. I did so because in this dissertation, I work from the standpoint that such aspects must be reflected upon in a study that aims to produce knowledge about democratic dannelsen & democratic education. These issues raise important questions about the potential and limitation of dannelsen as a concept that is

appropriate and useful in theorizing the democratic role of education; they serve to illuminate (some of) the weaknesses and missing perspectives in the field.

In the following section, I reflect on these weaknesses and missing perspectives and present some concluding thoughts that inform the development the dissertation's 'model of phenomena' (Maxwell, 2006, p. 30) and design.

Is the concept of dannelsen a convenient and self-comforting concept for those already in power?

Opening the door to these huge bodies of feminist and postcolonial literature and to the more recently emerging field of childist literature, which identifies the shortcomings and immanent continuous discriminating and distorted effects of (and on) Westernized thought, calls for serious reflection over the capabilities, potentials, and limitations of these theories. Such limitations may pertain to any theme, but they certainly concern themes related to democracy & democratic education. The critical literatures in question here call for serious reflections on the democratic quality, or maybe even the democratic potential, of one of the foundational concepts in these theories: the concept of dannelsen.

In the light of the feminist, postcolonial, and childist critiques, the 'richness' (which at first sounds positive) of the concept of dannelsen, which cannot be captured by any other concept, certainly seems 'rich' in problematic dehumanizing entanglements (a not-so-positive-'richness' after all).

According to Koselleck, the concept of *Bildung* had no relationship with Nazism. Rather Nazism and Nazi-ideology represented the absolute break with the semantic structure of *Bildung* (Koselleck, 2002), but how does the 'semantic structure of *Bildung*' relate to the history of European colonialism, misogyny and misopedy and the roles of Blackness, race, women and children? My reflection here is whether Koselleck ends up romanticizing the concept of *Bildung* by neglecting 'basic political realities' (Mills, 1997/2022)? Has it been half-*Bildung* all along? Or is it only half-*Bildung* when the oppressive structures target white people? Is dannelsen (and *Bildung*) a concept that enables the 'Gebildete' to legitimately preserve and keep a privileged dominant position and accept and 'shut their eyes' (Césaire, 1950/2000) to cruelty, violence, inequality and oppressive structures with a good conscience while claiming to endorse ideas of 'justice' and 'humanity'? Have dannelsen (and *Bildung*) rather served as a convenient and self-comforting and perhaps self-glorifying concept for those already in power? And importantly, do they continue to do so?

Does the modern concept of dannelsen actually have a political consciousness?

What is striking is that the feminist and postcolonial critiques are not at all new. Mary Wollstonecraft, for example, published her feminist critique of Rousseau in 1792. The critiques of biases in authors prized as ‘classics’ for modern educational thinking have been around for a very long time, and yet they are not given much attention. They are not discussed or criticized in contemporary Scandinavian textbooks and encyclopedias within *Pädagogik* and educational literature on dannelsen and/or democratic dannelsen (e.g., Bjerre & Fibæk Laursen, 2022; Korsgaard et al., 2017; Kristensen, 2016; Kristensen & Fibæk Laursen, 2016; Steinsholt & Løvlie, 2004; Straume, 2013a). In fact, educational literature drawing on ancient Greek and Enlightenment philosophers seems to predominantly use the ‘inclusive language’ as well as sometimes exclusively female pronouns – as problematized by Kleingeld (2022) and thus largely ignore the biases and ‘mute signals’. There are no in-depth discussions or reflections about in which ways these biases might have been carried forward (however perhaps unintentionally) into more recently developed theories. Where the racist history seems to be completely silenced, the sexist history is occasionally mentioned as something a bit problematic ‘in these Metoo times’. Nowhere in the educational literature have I seen any attention given to the adultist history. But this is also a relatively new focus emerging out of childhood studies and its absence is thus more understandable, yet no less problematic.

The question I wonder about is this: does this absence of engagement with feminist and postcolonial critiques mean that the Scandinavian field of *Pädagogik* generally aligns with McCabe, who holds that sexist and racist history is ‘not worthy of our serious attention’ (McCabe, 2019, p. 7)? If so, it raises questions about *in which way* the ‘modern self-reflexive concept of *Bildung*’ (Koselleck, 2002; Straume, 2020) is self-reflexive? How can we transform the concepts of *Pädagogik* to be capable of ‘responding appropriately to contemporary challenges and problems’ (Sæverot & Lomsdalen, 2023, p. 8) if it is ‘not worthy of our serious attention’ to respond to *immanent* challenges and problems in the concepts and their origin themselves? How then, does the Scandinavian literature on dannelsen encourage their readers’ critical scrutiny? If potentially inherent biases in these primary knowledge sources are widely ignored, what kind of scholarly advances are possible in the intellectual community of *Pädagogik*, the knowledge tradition of which primarily focuses on re-interpretation of historical and philosophical theories? And more importantly, who and what

benefits from scholarly advances that silence these aspects? We do not need to explicitly subscribe to sexist or racist (or adultist) norms to (unintentionally) reproduce and uphold them. It is a myth that only ‘bad’ people enact discrimination. Koselleck holds that the modern concept of *Bildung* has survived with the acknowledgement that it can no longer exist without the creation of a political consciousness [...] and without the ability to level political criticism in modern society’ and that ‘the task of *Bildung* is to continuously reflect upon its political or social function in order to attune agency and action to it’ (Koselleck, 2002, p. 206). But reflecting on Mills’ (1997/2022) argument regarding ‘basic political realities’ being completely ignored within political philosophy²⁰, I wonder, in light of the critical literature presented in this conceptual framework, whether it might be the same within the literature on dannelsen? Does the modern concept of dannelsen actually have a ‘political consciousness’?

The child is nearly impossible to perceive as a political subject

The insights from the childist critiques illuminate how extremely difficult it is to perceive the child as a political subject. For at least two and a half thousand years, the child has been considered to be in a ‘natural’ state of ‘not-yet’, ‘undeveloped’, ‘incapable’ and ‘incompetent’ albeit in various versions (cf. the top-down, the bottom-up, the developmental model). Still today in 2023 we frequently in both educational theory and in everyday language speak about how children *become* human beings through education, which at the same time involves the implicit and rather stark claim that the child is in fact *not* a (fully) human being²¹.


It is remarkable how natural it feels to make the claim that children are not (fully) human beings.

²⁰ Mills wrote this in 1997, but in the twenty-fifth anniversary edition from 2022, he – as well as Thomas Shelby who has written the foreword for this edition – make clear that it is still a relevant and urgent critique today.

²¹ I heard such a view expressed (unchallenged) as late as April 13th, 2023, on Danish national television in a debate program; ‘Debatten’. It was expressed by a middle-aged debater to a 16-year-old debater, and it functioned (effectively) to delegitimize the 16-year-old debater’s view.

Such a direct claim made about any other group, such as ‘Muslims’, ‘women’, ‘people with disability’ or even ‘men’ would appear outrageous.²² The category of ‘human being’ has been reconfigured over the course of history to ‘naturally’ encompass more and more categories of people, and following this trend it has become possible to perceive them as political subjects even though the different categories of people are still placed hierarchically in relation to each other. But to even *appear* on the ‘political-subject-hierarchy’ has yet to be possible for the third of humanity who is categorized as children. It is simply still unimaginable precisely because when all comes to all children are still not accepted into the category of (fully) human beings.

²² However, as the critical literature included in this conceptual framework illustrates, such claims are made but much more subtle.



*‘It is remarkable how
natural it feels to make the
claim that the child is not
(fully) human being’*

'Getting in the way' to explore the (perhaps radical) potential of a childist theory of democratic dannelsen

As I interpret Biesta and Wall (and the literature from childhood studies), both approaches aim for the same destination, a destination where the child can be perceived as a political subject in the same way as an adult. This is a destination where the political subject has no particular age and needs no kind of preceding qualifying development. While Biesta's emphasizes what this means for the role of education, Wall stresses what this means for the lives of children. Both are interested in what this may mean for democratic life more generally.

Following Biesta, to arrive at a political perception of the child requires leaving behind the pervasive developmental discourse that dominates educational thinking (e.g., Biesta, 2013a chapter six). The developmental discourse, he argues, precisely needs the 'not-yet-ness' of the child (Biesta, 2017b, p. 88). It involves a 'temporal construction' of the child which he suggests is 'perhaps not too far-fetched' to note as an example of 'a colonial way of thinking' (Biesta, 2017b, p. 89). Drawing on insights from the literature included in the conceptual framework of this dissertation (e.g., Duane, 2017a; Rollo, 2018a), it is indeed not 'too far-fetched'. It is on the contrary very accurately what it is, which is also why there is a need to do more than challenge the developmental discourse. The cautiousness in Biesta's suggestion ('*perhaps* not too far-fetched') tellingly illustrates the problem. To suggest that the developmental discourse in education represents 'a colonial way of thinking' is to challenge adultist norms and adult power, and that may cause discomfort (to adults).

Just as feminist scholar Sarah Ahmed (2010) coined the term a 'feminist killjoy' to emphasize how feminist critiques and exposure of oppressive structures are dismissed and marginalized by claiming that they cause misery (Ahmed, 2023), we can likewise say that childist critiques (and that is what I consider Biesta's cautious suggestion to *almost* be – but only *almost*) expose oppressive structures and 'speak back' to those with authority. As such they might be dismissed as (unnecessarily) divisive. Ahmed reports that to become a feminist is to 'kill other people's joy; to get in the way of other people's investments' (Ahmed, 2016, p. 65). Feminists are often designated as 'willful subjects: as being a problem because of our will' (Ahmed, 2016, p. 65), in other words, it is not a very pleasant designation, which is why one might be hesitant. But there is, however, as the title of Ahmed's latest book states, 'a radical potential of getting in the way' (Ahmed, 2023).

In this dissertation, I do not employ the work of Ahmed and I do not engage in depth with the killjoy concept, but Ahmed inspires and encourages me to ‘get in the way’. For example, highlighting the fact that the history of dannelsen is also a history of racism, misogyny, and misopedy may perhaps kill some joy for those who have ‘invested’ in the positive perception of ‘the richness’ of dannelsen. Ahmed encourages me to ‘get in the way’ of the powerful bedrock of historical ingrained adultism that runs conveniently beneath the radar in dannelsen theories, to explore what potential there is in moving the research field of democratic education forward by functioning more critically through the childist lens and thereby producing more age-inclusive scholarly imagination. In other words, I wish to explore the (perhaps radical) potential in a *childist theory of democratic dannelsen*.

A childist potential in Biesta’s theory of education as subjectification

I shall draw on Biesta to formulate a childist theory of democratic dannelsen because I interpret a childist potential in Biesta’s line of thought. However, there is a need to further realise that potential. For example, even if we take up Biesta’s suggestion and attempt to leave behind the developmental discourse and work with a political perception of the democratic person, the centuries-old adultist norms are still in our way. It is not possible to leave the developmental discourse and to perceive the child as a political subject, while adultism still structures what it is possible to think. I wish to suggest that it is not the developmental discourse that needs the ‘not-yet-ness’ of the child. Rather, it is adultism that needs the ‘not-yet-ness’ of the child and the developmental discourse works in the service of adultism. If we are to dismantle the developmental discourse we must also dismantle and destabilize the adultist norms and structures.

Borrowing from Mills (1997/2022) and Mbembe (2016), I am inclined to contend that the field of *Pädagogik* – and that of course includes the concept of dannelsen – is conceptually adultist and evasive about adult domination. The field is intertwined with an unacknowledged and denied ‘adultist contract’ (inspired by Mill’s ‘racial contract’ (1997/2022) and Pateman’s ‘sexual contract’ (1988)), that is, an implicit agreement among adults to maintain and reproduce a historically adultist order that is beneficial to adults. This is, however, not to say that all adults are signatories of the ‘adultist contract’ or openly subscribe to adultist norms. Following Wall (2010, 2019), it is the widely accepted belief in the ‘nature’ of the ‘not-yet-child’ that enables adultism to remain undetected. Adults are not to be condemned merely for being adults or

beneficiaries of the ‘adultist contract’ just as whites are not to be condemned for merely being white or for being beneficiaries of the racial contract, and just as men are not to be condemned merely for being men or beneficiaries of the sexual contract. Passive acceptance of these benefits does not in itself make adults blameworthy. But beyond the question of blame it is of crucial importance to bring about an awareness of the ‘adultist contract’ because such consciousness enables the choice of refusing to consent to the contract and instead to join forces with children and adults alike to cancel the contract.

Just as feminist and postcolonial scholarships argue that the concepts of Western philosophy are *not* universal, gender-less or race-less timeless issues, so are they also *not* age-less or generation-less. The insight from feminist and postcolonial scholarship informs us that ignoring the biases inhibits important critical philosophical scrutiny and scholarly advances. Informed by Wall (2010) and borrowing the formulations of Mbembe (2016), I will add that biased concepts have ‘adultized’ *Pädagogik* (and perhaps educational philosophy more broadly) and the field’s scholarly theorizing, and as a result it has generated an ‘adultist discursive scientific framework’ that sets up interpretive frames that make it difficult to think outside these frames. To make scholarly advances we need to destabilize that framework and attempt to create cracks in it, that is, we need to ‘get in the way’ and potentially ‘kill some joy’ (Ahmed, 2023). Therefore, we need a ‘childist lens’.

In this dissertation, I shall explore what I interpret as a childist potential in Biesta’s theory, and perhaps it is possible to release that potential by adding a childist lens, and thus to come closer to a *childist theory of democratic dannelse*.

Aspiring to rewrite the foundation in the concept of dannelse by bringing disciplinary knowledge and practical knowledge into some kind of relationship

In light of this part of the conceptual framework, it is difficult to see the democratic potential of the concept of dannelse. As the critical literature included in this framework argues, concepts of Western philosophy may seem disembodied and universal, but they do in fact tilt towards favouring white, male, adult (and other categories) bodies as well as behaviours and characteristics associated with masculinity, ‘Western’, and adulthood. It seems hard to reject the conclusion that a contemporary concept of dannelse – however, ambiguous it may currently be – may potentially still be somewhat implicitly contaminated.

‘Exploring the radical potential in getting in the way’

The Scandinavian narrative seems to be that while the German *Bildung* may have degenerated into the absolute breakdown of civilization in the Second World War, the Scandinavian version developed differently (implicitly better) and merged with democratic ideals (assumed to be more humane). But is it really the case that the Scandinavian *dannelse* is ‘successful’ and the German *Bildung* ‘a failure’? Denmark certainly also has its dark history of colonialism, inhumanity, and discrimination (and these faults do not only lie in the past). Thus, I am inclined to disagree with the Scandinavian proponents of *dannelse*. I am inclined to hold that the Danish concept of *dannelse* – like the concept of democracy – may rather have a ‘cumulative hypnotic effect’ (Dunn, 2018). Even though I acknowledge that the concept of *dannelse* has played a role in historical social transformation, informed by the literature included in this conceptual framework, I am inclined to hold that any version or theory of *dannelse* until this point is problematic and inappropriate for theorizing the democratic role of education.

But I also acknowledge and wish to respond to the fact that the concept is widely used in Danish educational practice as well as in the Danish language more generally. *Dannelse* enjoys vast commitment and acknowledgement from Danish practitioners, where it is positioned rather strongly as an answer to new challenges and crises, but also seems to function as a sort of concept of resistance against contemporary educational tendencies such as the learnification of education (Biesta, 2006). Thus, partly as matter of a rather pragmatic choice I will employ the Danish concept of *dannelse* and conceptualize the phenomenon under investigation as ‘democratic *dannelse*’.

Here I align myself with the ‘camp’ (Oettingen, 2018a) in the Danish educational debate that rejects the retirement of *dannelse* (let us here name this camp; camp A), but at the same time, I align with the other ‘camp’, camp B, who – as outlined by Oettingen – holds that *dannelse* is an outdated concept and in need of a redefinition or renewal. However as I believe was made clear above, I hold this view for very different reasons than those of camp B.

According to Oettingen, camp B attempts to detach *dannelse* from philosophy and connect it to more instrumental ideas about school effectiveness, and I intend to do no such thing (and I do also not see how it can even be possible, since we are always already informed by some fundamental assumptions about educational knowledge, various aspect of human existence, the ‘nature’ of the child and the good society and

the role of education, etc. ‘Detachment from philosophy’ hence means detaching *reflection* and *scrutiny* of our fundamental assumptions, which is also to say that it is an argument for ignorance). So here I align with camp A and hold that a reinterpretation of dannelse must be grounded in philosophy.

Camp A is, however, according to Oettingen, largely uninterested in empirical knowledge from the world of practice as a knowledge source for reinterpreting phenomena such as dannelse, or the interest is indirect or implicit (Oettingen, 2018a). But for at least two reasons I contend that we need such a source of knowledge in order to make significant scholarly advances. This is the case firstly because this source is excellent in illuminating both unexpected aspects of educational practice but also in illuminating the cognitive biases and the blind spots of the historical philosophical contributions. ‘The world of practice’ is where we can *see* and take into consideration basic political realities. Secondly, as was said above, informed by the feminist, postcolonial and childist critiques, I find reason to suspect that the field of *Pädagogik* and perhaps educational philosophy more broadly is ‘adultized’, that is, it is based on a powerful bedrock of adultism²³. To remedy that distortion, we need a ‘childist lens’, and since children are unlikely to hold an academic position, we need knowledge from the world of practice. This is furthermore one of the reasons why this dissertation attempts to bring disciplinary knowledge and empirical knowledge into some kind of relationship.

The choice to stick with dannelse should also be understood as a result of the fact that I find Sæverot’s claim intriguing. Sæverot holds that the concepts of *Pädagogik* are flexible concepts that continuously can and should be studied and transformed in order for them to be able to respond appropriately to contemporary challenges and problems (Sæverot & Lomsdalen, 2023). Thus, my choice to conceptualize the phenomenon to be investigated as ‘democratic dannelse’ is also a rather bold and ambitious (and therefore also a somewhat intimidating and maybe foolhardy) choice stemming from a desire to rewrite the foundation in the concept. If dannelse theories are theories about ‘*becoming* a subject in a culture’ (Straume, 2013a, p. 18 my italicisation) then one of the aims of this thesis is to rewrite this foundation by drawing on the theory of Biesta and thinking in the light of childhood (Wall, 2019) in order to create a more child-

²³ I am talking here about dominant tendencies that characterize and define the field and I do not deny that there exist exceptions.

inclusive philosophical frame, and thus move towards a *childist* dannelse theory about *acting as a subject in a world of difference*.

In short, I am not yet ready to abandon dannelse. Either the concept simply has a cumulative hypnotic effect on me too, or perhaps Sæverot is right when he claims the concepts of *Pädagogik* to be flexible and transformable. The question is, *how* flexible and transformable?

This conceptual framework makes a strong case for one thing; if dannelse is to have an actual democratic role, then we need to make an effort to detach its colonizing and adultist tendencies. If it is possible to do so, it would arguably be a democratization of democratic dannelse. I return to this topic at the end of the thesis. Now we will proceed to the second part of the conceptual framework and take a look at how research in democratic dannelse & democratic education has been conducted and consider some of the relevant findings.

*‘Ignoring potentially inbuilt
biases serves to mute signals
and inhibit important critical
philosophical scrutiny
and scholarly advances’*

Conceptual framework, part two

Conditions under which acting as a subject can take place

In this dissertation, I am interested in understanding what democratic dannelsen is or can be in terms of everyday practices and processes in schools, and furthermore, I am interested in how contemporary educational trends and logics in the Danish context produce possibilities and limitations for democratic dannelsen. I have already declared that I will pay attention to the conditions under which 'acting as a subject' can take place, thus in this second part of the conceptual framework, I direct my attention to literature that in different ways offers insights into such conditions. Informed by Hart (2018) and Maxwell (Maxwell, 2006, 2013). I here also include literature that does not specifically address themes of democracy or democratic education. Rather I attempt to make such links myself. I will propose these links here as hypotheses that informs the design of my research.

This second part of the conceptual framework will proceed in three steps followed by a concluding discussion. Firstly, I set a context for Danish education policy by briefly introducing some of the literature on global educational trends that also influence Danish educational policy, and I highlight some of the points made about the problem of these trends in relation to democratic education. Secondly, I take a closer look at the presence of particular policy trends and logics in educational practice in Denmark. I here include literature stemming from the field of early childhood education, and I discuss some of the conclusions of this literature as describing conditions under which acting as a subject can take place. Thirdly, I present four dominant characteristics of empirical research on democratic dannelsen & democratic education. These characteristics are, however, not that surprising given what we have covered in part one of the conceptual framework. But presenting these characteristics serves to highlight missing perspectives and helps position the contribution of this dissertation and explain and justify the choices made. Finally, I

highlight a few conclusions from some of the recent empirical studies of the state of political citizenship in a Danish educational context.

The influence of transnational political corporations and global education trends on the Danish state school

Most Danish children attend the state school (called ‘Folkeskolen’, which translates literally as ‘the people’s school’) from age 6 to 16 in a comprehensive unified state-funded educational system for all children. It consists of a mandatory pre-school class, compulsory grades 1 to 9, and an optional 10th grade. The Danish state school has traditionally been governed through very broad and general preambles in the school law. The governance of the Danish state school has been characterized by *guiding* curriculum and *guidance* documents for teaching (Moos, 2019). This approach left a large space for interpretation and autonomy for school administrative personnel, school leaders, and especially teachers (Moos, 2019). However, since the 1980s, Danish educational policy has been increasingly influenced by transnational scientific and education political corporations. Particularly influential in the Danish context are the transnational agencies: 1) OECD (Organization for Economic Corporation and Development), 2) EU (the European Union), 3) IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) and 4) the Bologna Process²⁴, which contribute to create ‘increasingly comprehensive discursive and managerial consensus regarding standards, benchmarks and best practices’ (Krejsler, 2021, p. 17 my translation). However, the main source of influence on European and Danish education policy stems from the American idea of ‘school effectiveness’ (Krejsler, 2021 chapter three).

The development in global education must be understood as linked to an increasingly tighter connection between the economy, the state, and educational systems (Krejsler & Moos, 2021; Whitty & Furlong, 2017; Wiseman et al., 2010). The combination of an acceleration of both the global economy and technological developments, and stronger positions of the transnational agencies, has transformed nation states into what Stephen Ball has labeled ‘competition states’ (Ball, 2009). Education is here assumed to be the core instrument to strengthen the competitiveness

²⁴ But also, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), the World bank, and the WTO (World Trade Organization) influence transnational and thus Danish educational policy (Krejsler, 2021).

of the nation state and hence secure economic growth. This trend has resulted in changes in the perception of the relationship between state and individual and hence also changes in discourses regarding the purpose of education (Pedersen, 2011), and the Danish education system has – as is the case with many other school systems in the Western world – been exposed to neo-liberal management reforms (Imsen et al., 2017) and global comparison systems (Brogger, 2019; Krejsler, 2021; Krejsler & Moos, 2021; Krejsler et al., 2014). The spread of global comparisons of national schools and education systems has led to an import and export of education policy from one context to another, a phenomenon Pasi Sahlberg (2012) has coined ‘Global Educational Reform Movement’ (GERM). The new way of governing education has been described as ‘governing by numbers’ (Grek, 2009), the ‘politics of league tables’ (Steiner-Khamsi, 2005), ‘governing by comparison’ (Martens, 2010), ‘governing through standards’ (Brogger, 2019), and ‘governing through concepts’ (Mausethagen, 2013). Two key concepts in the ‘new educational order’ (Field, 2008) are those of *learning* and *competence*, a semantic shift which – as mentioned earlier – has also been coined as the ‘learnification of education’ by Biesta (Biesta, 2005, 2006), a term that denotes the discursive shift in the educational vocabulary towards a language of *learning*.

These global education trends have been criticized as problematic for democratic education. Professor of democracy and education, Joel Westheimer, has raised concerns about how contemporary American school effectiveness policies influence children’s ability to think critically. Westheimer argues that if democracy requires citizens who think critically about society and social assumptions, then recent trends of global education policy are directly counterproductive (Westheimer, 2015, p. 13). In an American context, Westheimer argues, the focus on efficiency and accountability, and the establishment of standards and measurement systems have simply diminished time and led to fewer and fewer opportunities for in-depth critical analyses of ideas. Too often critical thinking seems to mean that students should passively accept as truth the thinking already done by someone else (Westheimer, 2015, p. 18), a tendency he polemically expresses by rephrasing the American ‘No Child Left Behind’ legislation as the ‘No Child Left Thinking’ legislation.

This is not only a tendency in general education. Even in education programs specifically aiming at strengthening democracy through citizenship education, Westheimer detects problematic tendencies. He and his colleague Joseph Kahne have studied a range of American citizenship education programmes. Their point of

departure is that the underlying assumptions embedded in such programmes about ‘good democratic citizens’ are not just arbitrary choices, but are political choices having political consequences. In their studies, they found that the most frequently pursued ideal in these programmes was what they labeled ‘the personally responsible citizen’ (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 241), an ideal characterized by acting ‘responsible in his or her community by for example, picking up litter, giving blood, recycling, obeying laws, and staying out of debt’ (p. 241). Programmes building on the idea of ‘good democratic citizen’ as the personally responsible citizens were focused on fostering ‘honesty, integrity, self-discipline, and hard work’ (p. 241) and prioritized teaching students to ‘treat others with respect, ... deal peacefully with anger, ...be considerate of the feelings of others, ...follow the Golden Rule, ...use good manners’ (p. 241). Although such traits sound desirable and worth pursuing, they can in fact, Westheimer and Kahne argue, be at odds with democratic goals. As they emphasize, leaders in totalitarian regimes would be as delighted as leaders in democracies to have citizens who help others, work hard, are polite and obey rules. However:

To the extent that that emphasis on these character traits detracts from other important democratic priorities, it may actually hinder rather than make possible democratic participation and change. For example, a focus on loyalty and obedience [...] works against the kind of critical reflection and action that many assume are essential in a democratic society (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 244).

Put differently, there is nothing inherently *democratic* about such traits, and ‘when we fail to consider personal responsibility within a broader social context, we risk advancing mere civility or docility rather than democracy’ (Westheimer, 2015, p. 45).

In alignment with Westheimer, Wubbels and Moos (2018) distinguish between two contemporary fundamentally dissimilar discourses in European education: one that emerged from the welfare state model in the post-World War vision, which they label the ‘Democratic Bildung Discourse’, and the other emerging from the idea of competitive states (Ball, 2009), which they label the ‘Outcome Discourse’ (Moos & Wubbels, 2018). They connect the latter to the dominant global homogenization of

education, which has also aroused interest in the education market, which in 2018 was estimated to be worth \$4.3 trillion (Moos & Wubbels, 2018, p. 249). Consultancies such as Price Waterhouse, McKinsey and Pearson and philanthropic foundations such as the Hewlett Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have become extremely active in developing and spreading educational and governance packages worldwide, either through philanthropy or through sales (Moos & Wubbels, 2018). There are thus also enormous economic interests and power behind the promotion of the ‘Outcome Discourse’, which according to Moos and Wubbels, is fundamentally at odds with the ‘Democratic Bildung Discourse’.

Furthermore, Moos et al. (2015) find that the ‘Outcome Discourse’ is accompanied with more social technologies than ever seen before in the history of education and educational theory. This is not only on a national policy level but also on the level of educational practice. A situation which, following Wubbels and Moos (2018), is a serious threat to democratic coexistence.

Also a European report with the aim of studying how the ‘teaching of common values’ (Veugelers et al., 2017) is addressed by the EU member states’ official curriculum for secondary education reveals that ‘democratic common values’ are only reflected to a rather limited extent in many of the member states’ school policy documents. This is also the situation in Denmark case, where the study found that ‘democratic common values’ are recognized as a general purpose in the preamble of the new Danish curriculum, but are only reflected to a limited extent within the detailed competency system that teachers are supposed to use in orienting their teaching. This system of competency is also the basis of the national testing scheme and the overall accountability system of the Danish state school. Thus, according to this study, the democratic aspect of Danish schooling is in danger of sliding out of focus in relation to the everyday practices and processes, as other priorities connected to academic skills and results have been given priority (Veugelers et al., 2017).

The presence of particular policy trends and logics in educational practice in Denmark.

The Nordic school model (which includes state school systems in Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Iceland) was developed in the decades after World War II in close connection to democratic ideals (Imsen et al., 2017). It was constructed from a social democratic project to rebuild and modernize the Scandinavian countries, guided by the thought, ‘never again Auschwitz’. Furthermore, it was strongly influenced by

ideas of progressivism (Imsen et al., 2017; Lieberkind, 2015). But as a result of transnational influence, the request for more scientific evidence as a basis for both educational policy making and concrete pedagogical practices has increased in Denmark (Krejsler, 2021; Krejsler & Moos, 2021). As mentioned above, Danish education policy has taken inspiration from ideas of ‘New Public Management’ and ‘school effectiveness’, and over the last few decades, technologies of standardization, evaluation, testing and measurement practices have been implemented in the Danish state school system (Brogger, 2019; Krejsler, 2021; Moos, 2019; Moos & Wubbels, 2018).

This development has had consequences for the position of the Continental *Pädagogik* tradition as well. *Pädagogik* entered Denmark during the 1970s as a new critical sociological concept of *pädagogical* research inspired by the German ‘kritische Erziehungswissenschaft’ and neo-marxism (Kristensen, 2022 p. 30), and was established as the primary discipline to inform Danish *Pädagogik* and education.²⁵ Over the last couple of decades, the Scandinavian countries have increasingly abandoned the Continental *Pädagogik* tradition (Sæverot & Kristensen, 2022). *Pädagogik* is not gone but is to different extents and in different ways increasingly subordinated to the concept relating to research policy: ‘educational science’ or sometimes in plural, ‘educational sciences’ (Sæverot & Kristensen, 2022). In Denmark, it is, however, not the concept of ‘educational science’ but ‘educational research’ that has currently taken the lead position.

The concept of ‘educational research’ appeared in the 1970s along with the critical-sociological turn, but as a response to the first International Large-Scale Assessments, such as Timms and later on PISA, a new and much more (OECD) politically infused version of ‘educational research’ appeared. With the OECD national reports on Danish educational research, ‘New challenges for educational research’ (OECD 2003) and ‘National review on educational research and development: Examiners’ report on Denmark’ (OECD 2004). It was a transnational and more policy-oriented concept and that served to emphasize and promote the idea that Danish *pädagogical* research should be much more empirical and quantitative, but above all practice-oriented, application-oriented, and evidence-based (Kristensen,

²⁵ I here make a distinction between *Pädagogik* and education to distinguish between the Daycare area (0-6 year) and the school system. Traditionally, the daycare area has not been considered a part of education but as a distinct *pädagogical* domain.

2022) (Krejsler, 2021). ‘Educational research 2.0’ rapidly managed to establish itself as both an OECD-embossed policy concept and a scientific and research policy concept (Kristensen, 2022 p. 38). This was possible because of a longer period of harsh criticism of existing Danish *pädagogical* research, which was particularly criticized for lacking relevance for both practitioners and policymakers. The claim was that it was ‘too weak, without substance, too theoretical, too sporadic and fragmented, too provincial and too little oriented towards international research, but above all too distant from *pädagogical* practice and from the institutions [...] that trained teachers’ and *Pädagogues*’ professional competences’ (Kristensen, 2022 p. 38 my translation). Danish *pädagogical* research was ‘diagnosed’ by professor Jens Rasmussen as in a ‘catastrophic condition’ (Rasmussen, 2000 p. 32). Thus, over the last two decades, Danish *pädagogical* research has been heavily reorganized and *Pädagogik* – as both an autonomous academic discipline, as a concept and as specific designation of a profession – has increasingly been marginalized and delegitimized in contemporary Danish research policy (Kristensen, 2022).²⁶

Sæverot and Kristensen hold that the marginalized position of *Pädagogik* has severe consequences for education, for society as well as for individual children. The development, it is claimed, will simply marginalize the focus, the articulation and thus the possibilities for the necessary exploration of important distinct *pädagogical* and educational phenomena, relations, aspects, questions etc. *Pädagogik* as an academic discipline is necessary in order to maintain and further transform and develop an educational/*pädagogical* vocabulary that allows education to be able to respond appropriately to contemporary challenges and problems (Sæverot & Kristensen, 2022; Sæverot & Lomsdalen, 2023).

In this dissertation I draw on this standpoint, which is another reason why I chose to conceptualize the dissertation’s topic in terms of the concept of democratic *dannelse*, rather than abandon and reject the concept of *dannelse* entirely. However, as mentioned in the introduction, I acknowledge and attempt to respond to the specific critique of *Pädagogik* to the effect that it has been too distant from *pädagogical* practice (or has not managed to demonstrate its practical relevance), which is why the

²⁶ Notably though, Denmark has not abandoned *Pädagogik* in the same ways as in e.g., Norway and Sweden, where *Pädagogik* has simply been replaced or subsumed by ‘educational science(s)’. In Denmark, the concept ‘educational science’ has settled for a more modest position as the name of a new education as well as department and research community at Danish School of Education, Aarhus University. (Sæverot & Lomsdalen, 2023; Sæverot & Kristensen, 2022).

dissertation seeks explore the practical dimension of disciplinary knowledge by bringing the two into some kind of relationship.

The reform of the Danish state school in 2014

In 2014, the Danish state school was reformed, and Krejsler refers to this reform as ‘the climax of the outcome-oriented school’ (2021, p. 4 my translation). The reform was publicly promoted as a ‘learning reform’ (e.g., Folkeskolen, 2015; Kulturchefforeningen, 2013), and its overall purpose was to shift focus from the *content* of teaching to its *learning outcome*: from what the children *do* to what they *learn*. The purpose was to change the ‘*pädagogical*-didactical foundation’ with ‘learning directed teaching’ (the then Minister of Education; Christine Antorini cited in Olsen, 2015 my translation). The reform entailed that several words were changed both in the school law and through a comprehensive revision of the school curriculum (Skovmand, 2016). For example, the term ‘school library’ was changed to ‘pedagogical learning centre’²⁷ with the specific purpose of ‘emphasizing and supporting teachers’ focus on learning outcomes’ (State school act, 2014, p. my translation). The general educational and *pädagogical* vocabulary was also changed (or at least an attempt to do so was made). Teachers reported being asked to articulate themselves in a new way. They were encouraged (or even told) to use the term ‘learning’ as a way to ‘think differently’ (notes from conversation with the Teachers’ Union). Various digital learning platforms that emerged in the following years were designed with the idea of putting learning outcomes at the centre. Various names and titles in the educational system were changed. For example, municipal administration departments and personnel were renamed as ‘Department of learning’, ‘Chief of learning’, ‘Unit for learning’, ‘Centre of children and learning’, and ‘Head of learning and well-being’ (my translations).

In alignment with Sæverot and Kristensen, Danish school researcher Keld Skovmand (2016) has raised a concern about this linguistic transformation. Skovmand studied the revision of the Danish state school curriculum following the reform of 2014 and emphasizes the replacement of the Danish word, ‘kundskab’ (of which the closest – but neither accurate nor sufficient – English equivalent is ‘knowledge’) with

²⁷ I do not use the German *Pädagogik* here because I interpret from the overall purpose of the reform of the state school that the idea with the ‘pedagogical learning centers’ has little if not no relation to the Continental *Pädagogik* tradition.

words such as ‘competencies’, ‘knowledge’ [in Danish: ‘viden’], and ‘skills’. This Skovmand argues, results in something being lost. Something regarding such themes as ‘responsibility, ethics, judgement, and democracy’ (2016, p. 127). The disappearance of the word ‘kundskab’, along with the strong reduction and even exclusion of the words ‘purpose’ and ‘teaching’ in favour of the word ‘learning’, promotes, according to Skovmand, a new way of thinking – as intended with the reform, a ‘learning goal-oriented thinking’ (2016, p. 119). The problem, Skovmand argues, is that this way of thinking wedges itself in between the overall purpose of the school and the school curriculum, and thus risks disregarding the democratic purpose of the state school.

Simultaneous with the reform, the A. P. Møller and Chastine Mc-Kinney Møller Foundation (A. P. Møller Fonden, n.d.) donated one billion Danish crowns (approx. 1344 million euros) to the state school. However, this donation was not simply *given* as such to the state school system, but instead resembled the ‘new philanthropy’ (Ball, 2012) where ‘rich companies and wealthy families assume socio-moral duties that were heretofore assigned to governmental entities and state agencies’ (Ball, 2012, p. 72) and thus ‘allows private actors to act in public ways’ (Peter Frumkin cited in Ball, 2012, p. 72). The purpose of the donation – also known as the ‘school billion’ – was to support ‘permanent academic and pedagogical improvements in the elementary school’ (A. P. Møller Fonden, n.d. my translation) through initiatives covering upgrading qualifications, continuing education of teachers and principals, and development of teaching methods (A. P. Møller Fonden, n.d.).²⁸

With the school reform, technologies of standardization, evaluation, testing, and measurement practices were reinforced, and municipalities got less influence on central aspects of the school, but at the same time they were saddled with the primary responsibility for the implementation of the reform (Moos, 2019). This was a responsibility, as Lejf Moos puts it; ‘which the municipalities seem to take on by purchasing ‘evidence-based’ teaching programs – social technologies – developed by Danish and foreign consultants and consultancies, and impose on schools to employ’ (Moos, 2019, p. 49 my translation).

The statistician John Hattie’s meta-analyses, and his concept of visible learning (Hattie, 2012) gained great authority in Denmark as ‘scientific knowledge about what

²⁸ Also, the Lego Foundation and the Novo Nordisk Foundation are considerable contributors of funding for project in the Danish state school.

works', and served as an influential source of inspiration for the learning reform and for many local pedagogical and educational development projects that followed. Some municipalities, for example, bought programmes built on visible learning e.g. from James Nottingham's company Challenging Learning (Challenging Learning, n.d.). Other municipalities developed their own programmes inspired by Hattie, e.g., 'Learning that is visible' and 'READY for learning' (my translations).

The 'programme invasion' and the return of the 'naughty corner'

The programmes implemented are not only targeted children's academic learning outcomes. They are also targeted children's so-called 'social-emotional learning' (SEL). This tendency in Denmark must also be understood in the context of global educational trends. According to Ben Williamson, behavioural scientists, economists and psychologists have established a remarkable position of authority, expertise, and influence in contemporary societies (Williamson, 2021). In particular, an increased political concern with the well-being, the emotions, and the behaviours of individuals and populations, as productive labour and healthy and democratic citizens, has begun directing political attention towards the development of policies, measurement instruments, management technologies, pedagogical programmes and standards to promote children and young people's 'social-emotional learning'. International organizations including the World Bank, UNESCO, OECD, and World Economic Forum are extending SEL into global policy spaces alongside philanthropic partnerships and think tanks (Williamson & Piattoeva, 2019). Moreover, SEL has also become a lucrative international market for educational technology developers (Nemorin, 2017), commercial providers (Hogan et al., 2018) and an investment opportunity for venture capital firms (Belfield et al., 2015).

In the Scandinavian countries we are witnessing a 'programme invasion' (Aabro, 2016) targeting children's behaviour and so-called personality traits. It is a relatively new phenomenon in a Scandinavian context (having emerged over the last 1.5 decade), and there is no complete list of the use of programmes in the 98 municipalities in Denmark, but it seems to be a rather fast-growing tendency (Buus, 2019; Buus & Rasmussen, 2015; Pettersvold & Østrem, 2019; Aabro, 2016). The programmes are often developed by international consultancies and bear commercial characteristics (Aabro, 2016).

The idea is that 'personality traits' have a causal connection with anything desirable from outstanding school achievements, healthy and democratic citizens and

productive labour (Pettersvold & Østrem, 2019). Moreover, many of the SEL programmes are closely related to (or directly copied from) the American ‘School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports’ (SWPBIS) (e.g., the Scandinavian version; PALS in Ogden et al., 2012), which draws strongly on ideas of behaviourism (Buus, 2019; Pettersvold & Østrem, 2019; Aabro, 2016). As one scholar notes, the ‘naughty corner’ is back as a relevant and legitimate ‘evidence-based’ procedure in modern (traditionally rather egalitarian) Danish *Pædagogik* (Buus, 2020).

The ‘concern industry’ produces a child that not only has or may get problems, but *is* the problem

A Scandinavian community of scholars within the field early childhood education have problematized the increasing use of programmes targeting children’s ‘social and emotional learning’ in the Scandinavian daycare and school system. Among other things, they show that a premise of many of the programmes is that big problems exist or can emerge and hence the programmes involve the construction of the ‘problem child’ (Prins, 2021; Seeland, 2017; Sigsgaard, 2014; Vik, 2014, 2015; Aabro, 2016). Pettersvold and Østrem have proposed the term ‘concern industry’ to describe the phenomenon; a tendency of concerns for unwanted and undesirable conditions or problems which may emerge sometime in the future, and that someone benefits from a systematic response/prevention strategy (Pettersvold & Østrem, 2019, p. 17). This community of early childhood researchers shows how it has increasingly become legitimate to talk about children *with* problems. Standardized, manual based programmes – many of which were originally developed as treatment methods for ‘behavioural problems’ – are many Danish municipalities’ preferred prevention response to the concerns. While the prevention logic comes from a good heart and the wish to do good for children (after all – no one wishes a child the status of a ‘problem child’), there is an embedded problematic aspect in the idea of prevention; it is precisely problem-oriented.

The argument for preventive work is that the child must avoid a disability or a problem. Through preventive initiatives the child will avoid behavioural problems, avoid reading and writing disabilities, avoid social and emotional difficulties. The dilemma is that the child is met, seen, and understood as a potential problem. This not only regards children at risk. All children are basically considered to be the holders

of some difficulty that can emerge sometime in the future (Vik in Pettersvold & Østrem, 2019, p. 18 my translation).

The prevention logic narrows the definition of normal and at the same fosters the idea that completely normal aspects of the human emotional range can appear to be a (problematic) deviation from normality. ‘Deviating children’ are children who for example are too introverted, too social, take too little or too much initiative, do not accept the adults as authorities, are not considerate, do not comfort other children, cannot handle losing, do not ask for help, are afraid of new situations, show little interest in aesthetic activities or in numbers and letters (Gitz-Johansen, 2012) and ‘problem behaviours’ are behaviours such as anger, aggressiveness, refusal, resistance, abusive language and violence (Juul, 2013).

According to Pettersvold and Østrem, there is a strong tendency in these programmes to psychologize completely normal human resistance and define it as a lack of social competences or lack of the ability to self-regulate. The idea that resistance might be a response to a legitimate feeling of injustice or that the child simply wants something different than the adult are completely absent in many of these programmes (Pettersvold & Østrem, 2019, p. 19). The line of thinking entailing that a child *has* problems is becoming the new normal, which easily risks leading to the interpretation that the child *is* in fact the problem (Pettersvold & Østrem, 2019, p. 17).

How much action as a subject is actually possible with the ‘concern industry’ as a condition?

What I wish to enable by including this literature in the conceptual framework of this dissertation is a discussion and reflection on this educational policy trend – the tendency to purchase and implement programmes targeting children’s ‘social and emotional learning’ in Danish daycare institutions and schools – as conditions under which acting as a subject can take place (Biesta, 2007). As was presented in part one of this description of my conceptual framework, for at least two and a half thousand years, the child has been considered as in a ‘natural’ state of ‘not-yet’, ‘undeveloped’, ‘incapable’ and ‘incompetent’ although in various versions (the top-down, the bottom-up, the developmental model) and is thus excluded from the category of (fully) human being and thus basically unimaginable as a political subject. This assumption about

the child, may be considered a (rather poor) condition under which ‘acting as a subject’ can take place.

The Norwegian scholar Solveig Østrem has discussed this in her book: *Barnet som subject. Etikk, demokrati og pedagogisk ansvar* [The child as subject. Ethics, democracy and *pädagogical* responsibility] (Østrem, 2012). Østrem draws on (among others) Biesta and understands democratic *dannelse* [in Norwegian: demokratisk danning] from the point of view of *Pädagogik* as that of perceiving the child (by nature) as a political subject and the task of *Pädagogik* thus becomes that of supporting the child as a political subject. Østrem makes a distinction between *dannelse* (which for Østrem thus *is* democratic *dannelse*) and discipline, and based on her empirical research in early childhood education, she argues that the contemporary educational trends and logics that we see in a Scandinavian context tend to draw primarily on disciplinary logics and thus marginalize and limit *dannelse* processes. Østrem e.g., argues that there is a tendency in contemporary educational trends and logics to psychologize and pathologize children’s resistance, thereby ignoring the political reality which the child is a part of and thereby also ignoring the realities which the child perhaps has very good reasons to resist. The line of thought embedded in contemporary educational trends and logics simply sees the child’s resistance to complying to rules and arrangements set by adults as an inherent problem *in* the child rather than as a resistance towards something *outside* the child.

Thus, contemporary educational trends and logics with their inclination to identify and diagnose any opposition by the child easily produce a pedagogical thinking and practice that is directly counterproductive to democratic *dannelse* (that of supporting the child as a political subject). Put differently, contemporary trends and logics – at least those aspects that target the so-called social and emotional learning of the child (e.g., the concern industry and the prevention strategy) – comprise devastatingly poor conditions for children to act as subjects.

I wish to put forward here the hypothesis that the idea of the ‘problem child’ resembles the ‘top-down model’ (the unruly child in need of discipline from above) (Wall, 2010). That is, it seems as if contemporary educational policy trends have a decisively top-down force behind them. However, this trend is not primarily driven by educational theory and research (although it exists there too). It is driven by an increasing global education political orientation towards children’s ‘social and emotional learning’ and the economic interests of edu-business which provides the putative solutions. This means that not only does the range of advisory bodies,

transnational organizations, think tanks and private corporations play a powerful role in shaping what counts as educational knowledge (Whitty & Furlong, 2017). They also play a powerful role in producing the ‘nature of the child’, and there is an enormous economy benefitting from precisely keeping the child away from a position as a political subject. We might say that the concern industry not only needs the ‘not-yet-ness’ of the child (Biesta, 2017b). It needs the ‘problem child’. In fact, it would benefit tremendously from the assumption that the child is a problem *by nature*. It needs adultism and it benefits from and perhaps openly subscribes to the adultist contract. It thus comprises a very problematic condition for the possibility of acting as a subject, a condition which is not located in schools but in societies at large and promoted and protected by economic logics and interests.

I will leave this here as a reflection and turn to my presentation of the rest of the literature included in this conceptual framework. This is a matter of publications making specific arguments about the connection between educational trends and logics and democratic education in a Danish context.

Findings from empirical studies aiming at exploring the democratic role of education

Four characteristics of the literature on democratic dannelsen and democratic education

In my search for literature on democratic dannelsen, I have worked with a range of search strings containing key words that in one way or another deal with my topic. However, as noted by Maxwell (2006), not all the literature one finds and reads in the process of demarcating, analyzing, and synthesizing the field(s) will make it directly into the literature review. Only those having important implications for the study are worth elaborating on. This means that there I have left many studies out of the conceptual framework. However, in the following I will present four characteristics I have identified in the body of literature that turns up in searches. The presentation of these characteristics explains why this part of the literature is not sufficiently relevant to be included in the conceptual framework. My presentations of these four characteristics also helps explain the choices made in this study.

Little attention is given to the humdrum, everyday lives

Many of the empirical studies on the democratic aspect of education focus on activities and arrangements typically associated with democracy, such as deliberation and debate practices, student council, the subjects covered in social science, election week. Some of the topics dealt with are controversial topics (religion and culture are often categorized as potentially controversial themes). The literature also contains case studies that provide knowledge about how a particular subject (typically history, language subjects and religion) or a particular course or theme can play a valuable role in fostering democratic attitudes, values, competences, and/or dannelsen, and there are also studies (often large scale ones) that seek to evaluate and ‘take the temperature’ of democratic dannelsen & democratic education. In other words, this body of literature pays little attention to what we could call the humdrum, everyday experiences of students and teachers in schools. It is rather the specific subjects, themes, arrangements, that is, the phenomena which first and foremost ‘belong to’ (or are associated with) education that play the leading roles and occupy the status as the primary study of phenomena (whereas students and their lived experiences are perhaps secondary to education since students are on the receiving end, so to speak). The central discussions of democratic dannelsen in this literature are therefore centred around the leading roles.

This dissertation is interested in democratic dannelsen as something in relation to, or maybe more precisely put, *constituted by* everyday lives and experiences and everyday practices and processes – what I will elaborate on later as a micro-interactional phenomenon. Not because what is officially prescribed or formally taught is not relevant, but because – drawing on Biesta – the potential positive impact of these activities and arrangements will always be mediated by what children experience in the everyday lives (Biesta, 2011).

The political subject is adult

The majority of this body of literature is oriented towards elder students, that is, typically students in lower secondary and upper secondary education (age ca. 12 – 18 years). Drawing on what I have presented in part one of the conceptual framework, this is not surprising. It illustrates the fundamental assumption and bias I have already discussed. The political subject is precisely *not* ‘age-less’. As Cockburn notes, children under the age of seven are largely absent from citizenship discussions (Cockburn, 2020). The logic illustrated in this characteristic in the literature is: the

closer to adulthood, the more relevant the theme of democratic dannelsse & democratic education is²⁹. This illustrates what Wall calls ‘the deeply engrained adultism that pervades scholarship [...] and social imagination’ (Wall, 2019, p. 1).

The political subject is ‘produced’

Furthermore, this body of literature predominantly conceptualizes democratic dannelsse & democratic education as something to be ‘developed’, ‘taught’, ‘learned’, ‘trained’ etc., that is, it approaches children through an adultist normative framework as social *becomings* rather than social *beings*, ‘as passive recipients of adult socialization’ rather than as ‘active and diverse social participants in their own right’ (Wall, 2019, p. 2). It illustrates what Biesta has labeled the instrumentalist and individualistic assumptions where the idea is that schools and education are the instrument that must ‘equip’ individuals with the skills, knowledge, and values that will ‘turn them into’ democratic citizens (Biesta, 2007, p. 742).

Democracy as an utterly positive, desirable floating signifier

In this body of literature, democracy is either defined with reference to the theories and thinkers traditionally dominating the field or it is rather vaguely defined. As for the theories traditionally dominating the field, I have already argued in part one of this conceptual framework that they involve problematic biases, but in the contemporary body of empirical literature on democratic dannelsse & democratic education there are no discussions of potential sexist, racist, or adultist assumptions entailed by conceptualizing democratic dannelsse & democratic education in these theories. Often there is a use of ‘inclusive language’ as problematized by Kleingeld (2022).

In the literature where democracy (or ‘democratic education’, ‘democratic citizenship’, ‘democratic values’, ‘democratic competences’ etc.) are more vaguely defined, democratic competences or values, for example, seem to fit with anything desirable, such as being polite, dealing with disagreements in a peaceful manner, listening to other people, etc. This is also not surprising given literature presented in part one of the conceptual framework. Democracy has come to be associated with everything desirable (Dahl, 1989; Mounk, 2018) and the term seems to have a ‘cumulative hypnotic effect’ on us (Dunn, 2018, p. xxi). This also means that the

²⁹ Fields such as early childhood education and childhood studies are however oriented towards younger children in relation to citizenship. I am here referring to literature within the field of education specifically studying democratic dannelsse & democratic education from the point of view of education.

empirical studies on democratic dannels & democratic education tend to focus exclusively on the positive aspects from a pre-defined adult norm as also emphasized by the community of childhood studies scholar, presented in part one. This illustrates the fact that the negative aspect of citizenship is a missing perspective in the field (Hart, 2009).

Despite my perhaps rather critical tone in my description of the characteristics I have identified in this body of literature, I do not mean to imply that it does not contain a range of important, relevant, and interesting findings and arguments useful for education. Rather, I mean to emphasize missing perspectives, questions that are not asked, and approaches that are not taken. I do this to explain why I do not find this literature relevant *enough* to elaborate on it in this dissertation, and I also do so as a way of positioning the contribution of this dissertation in the huge landscape of literature on democratic dannels & democratic education.

In the following, I will elaborate on a few empirical studies conducted in a Danish context, and I will make reflections on what their findings may suggest in relation to a central question in this dissertation, namely, what are the conditions under which acting as a subject can take place?

Findings from recent empirical studies conducted in a Danish state school context

There are only a few recent empirical studies aiming at exploring the democratic role of education empirically in Danish schools. The first I want to present is an older comparative study of schools in five countries (Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, the US, and the UK) conducted in 1998 by professor of citizenship education Carole Hahn (1998). This study is interesting for this dissertation because Hahn did not only focus on what is officially prescribed or formally taught regarding democratic citizenship. She was also interested in experiences of everyday school culture. Hahn worked from the starting point that political interest and self-confidence derive from the school culture in which the students live their lives. Furthermore, the study is interesting because Hahn's 1998 findings different from those of more recent studies of young Danish students' political self-confidence.

Hahn specifically highlights the fact that the Danish students in the study expressed much more interest in political questions than students in the other countries (the difference being most significant between Denmark and the US and UK). Danish

students had a stronger belief that it was possible to influence political decisions, and hence they found it worthwhile to participate actively in politics. Hahn emphasized what she referred to as a particular Danish school culture with class meetings, student council, and discussions of controversial topics, but also, a school culture including discussions regarding small everyday topics such as the need for a refrigerator to keep the lunch milk cool, or whether the student council should spend money on repairing the school's bike shed that had been vandalized (Hahn, 1998) (at the time, it was common practice in Denmark that the student council have a part of the school budget at their disposal). It is relevant to this thesis that Hahn also raised a concern regarding the at the time increasing focus on academic achievements (particularly in the US). She advocated the need to make sure that this focus would not diminish time for, or simply phase out the important debate and deliberation practices regarding little everyday issues.

In the International Civic and Citizenship Study (ICCS) 2009 and 2016 (Bruun et al., 2017; Bruun et al., 2018; Bruun & Lieberkind, 2012), Danish students are among the best-performing students when it comes to the cognitive test that measures students' knowledge of economic, social, political, and democratic issues as well as their ability to consider complicated societal scenarios critically. In the areas in the study that measure the extent to which students deliberate over social and political issues with friends and family, and the extent to which they experience an open classroom environment that stimulates debate, Danish students score the highest in the international comparison. However, when it comes to their attitudes towards being involved in social-movement-related activities (such as activities to promote human rights and protect the environment or participate in peaceful protests), Danish students have the lowest score in study (Lieberkind, 2021b). These results, Danish citizenship researcher Jonas Lieberkind argues, suggest that Danish students prefer 'conventional political participation' (Lieberkind, 2021b, p. 86) directed at the formalized democratic system, which entails support and acceptance – at least to some extent – of the prevailing political logic and conventional system. This makes the current young generation's attitude contrast with the rebellious and counter-cultural attitudes of earlier generations. Drawing on the results of ICCS combined with 51 interviews with young Danes, Lieberkind characterizes young Danes as 'strategic and reserved' (2021b, p. 91). Their main concerns are 'education, formation, and the realisation of their individual capacities' (p. 91), and their engagement is 'characterized by a more



or less systematic planning, tactics, and desire to navigate wisely in a complex society’ (p. 93). Thus they essentially accept the current system as it is.

In contrast to Hahn’s conclusion in 1998, Lieberkind’s conclusion is that the Danish state school’s significant tradition for creating a democratic context of experience – influenced by reform pedagogy and progressive pedagogical movements – seems to be challenged (Lieberkind, 2015). While the level of Danish students’ knowledge and understanding of democratic, social, and political issues is high, the context of experience apparently does not support students’ political *participation*. In other words, students’ self-confidence and self-belief are rather low, which suggests that schools have a ‘great but untapped potential concerning the development of students’ internal political and external citizenship efficacy’ (Lieberkind, 2015, p. 727). According to Lieberkind, the democratic context of experience in the Danish state school is characterized by an asymmetry; on the one hand Danish classrooms are an open and dialogical environment that promotes critical and independent thinking, but on the other hand, students express an extensive lack of contributory influence and (actual) participation.

With reference to transnational trends in education policy, with its new and radical focus on students’ knowledge and skills performance, Lieberkind characterises this trend as a movement that challenges the dialogue-based and reform pedagogical traditions of the Danish state school. Lieberkind emphasizes that the Danish governments’ proposal for the 2014 reform of the state school (Government, 2012) was illustrative for the contemporary educational focus. Here ‘democracy’ was only mentioned three times, whereas ‘subject knowledge’ was mentioned approximately one hundred times. However, Lieberkind does not study more specifically *how* this movement challenges the traditions of the Danish state school, but concludes that as such this trend constitutes a new perspective on what it may mean to be a citizen in today’s society (in Bruun & Lieberkind, 2014).

Here we may reflect on the two very different conclusions of Hahn in 1998 and Lieberkind in 2020/2021 in relation to the questions suggested by Gert Biesta;

- How much action is actually possible in our schools? (Biesta, 2007, p. 759)
- How much action is actually possible in our society? (Biesta, 2007, p. 762)
- And what can be learnt from being/having been a subject? (Biesta, 2007, p. 763).

I find reason to advance the hypothesis that between 1998 and today, ‘acting as a subject’ (Biesta, 2007) may have become more difficult in Danish schools. Hahn specifically raised her concern about the increasing focus on academic achievements, and she emphasized the importance of not allowing this focus to diminish or even consume the time for deliberation regarding little everyday issues. This, however, perhaps resembles what Westheimer (2015) argues has happened in the American context. Westheimer contends that the focus on efficiency and accountability has simply diminished time for opportunities for in-depth critical analysis of ideas.

Assuming that the increased focus on academic achievements and efficiency can be interpreted as conditions that diminish opportunities for ‘acting as a subject’ (Biesta, 2007), we might furthermore interpret Hahn and Lieberkind’s different conclusions to suggest that what can be learnt or gained from being/having been a subject are, for example, a strong belief in one’s own political influence and the idea that participating in political life is worthwhile (Hahn, 1998). In other words, what can be learned from being/acting as a subject may be the belief that one *is* a subject.

Concluding the conceptual framework

Informed by Hart (2018), Randolph (2009) and Maxwell (2006), I have steered the creation of this conceptual framework with reference to a focus, a goal, and specific questions. The aim of the conceptual framework was to inform the dissertation, that is, to create a focus, design, and justification for the study (Maxwell, 2006). The creation of the conceptual framework was guided by criteria of relevance rather than criteria such as comprehensiveness or thoroughness. As it is perhaps evident by now, I have found it relevant to put an emphasis on some of the problematic aspects or what we might call the ugly side of the story. This approach must be understood partly in light of the theme of the dissertation, democracy. Although it is very difficult to define this notion, democracy nevertheless has something to do with such ideas as equality, freedom, and solidarity. I am inspired by insight from the community of researchers within childhood studies who demonstrate how we overlook important aspects when exclusively focusing on the positive side of the story. Great insights can come from studying democratic dannelsse from the negative side, such as experiences of discrimination, marginalization, and violation. This is a task I have begun to take up in the articulation of this conceptual framework.

The focus of my conceptual framework was to examine dominant theories used in the traditionally defined field of democratic dannelsse & democratic education, and to look for potentially relevant perspectives outside this field. According to Hart (2018), one's research either makes a contribution to the existing research or it challenges some aspects of it. The goal of this conceptual framework is to challenge existing research by critically analyzing the literature and possibly uncovering weaknesses or missing perspectives. In sum, the questions guiding the framework were:

- What are the central theories that have been used to conceptualize, study, and explain democratic dannelsse and democratic education?
- What are the implicit assumptions about the human being, the child/student, the adult/teacher, and the role of education in these theories?

- Which questions or perspectives are not asked or pursued?
- How has research in democratic dannelsen and democratic education been conducted?
- What has previous research in democratic education concluded in relation to the research questions of this thesis?

Furthermore, I raised the rather broad question: ‘What else may be relevant and/or interesting and puzzling?’ The point of that question was first of all to encourage me to be open to perspectives outside the traditionally defined field of the thesis topic, but also to allow my own and other’s ‘speculative thinking’ (Maxwell, 2006, 2013) as well as my ‘own personal experiences’ and ‘observational or informal hunches’ (Grady & Wallston, 1988, pp. 40-42) to influence my findings. Here I will conclude the conceptual framework by briefly summing up some of the most important points and reflections.

Dannelsen – a problematic concept

I began this project with the aim of studying *democratic dannelsen*. Dannelsen has roots in, and functions as a fundamental concept of the continental *Pädagogik* tradition. In choosing to conceptualize the phenomena under investigation, in terms of this concept, I also step right into a field with a long intellectual tradition dominated by a distinct set of theories. It is furthermore an academic tradition that is not primarily concerned with influencing education in any direct way, but contributes with ideas to ‘think with’. It functions as a relatively closed intellectual community that focuses on re-interpretation of historical and philosophical theories, that is, it is primarily academic in nature and speaks primarily to philosophers and theoreticians (Oettingen, 2018a; Schriewer, 2017; Whitty & Furlong, 2017) (the position and legitimacy of this tradition is, however, challenged by some contemporary accounts of what counts as relevant educational knowledge (Krejsler, 2021; Krejsler & Moos, 2021; Schriewer, 2017; Sæverot & Kristensen, 2022; Whitty & Furlong, 2017)).

By drawing on postcolonial, feminist, and childist philosophy I have problematized assumptions embedded in the theories and ideas with which dannelsen has been thought, and I have thus also touched upon how these assumptions are complexly intertwined with the historical – primarily Enlightenment – conceptual architecture of modern democracy. Dannelsen has a history of colonizing tendencies

and it can be said to be closely intertwined with ‘the sexual contract’ (Pateman, 1988), ‘the racial contract’ (Mills, 1997/2022) and what I have labeled ‘the adultist contract’. Since these sexist, racist, and adultist histories seem to be ‘tucked away’ in more marginalized positions in contemporary literature on dannelsen, important questions are raised about the potential (or lack thereof) of the concept of dannelsen as an appropriate and useful notion with which to think about the democratic role of education. Yet I have chosen to stick with it. I have decided to take the standpoint that dannelsen can still play a valuable role. Although I use the word, I am, however, inclined to question the *democratic quality* of the role dannelsen has played so far.

The choice to stick with dannelsen is partly pragmatic since the concept is very much used in the Danish *pædagogisk* and educational language as well as in everyday Danish (suffering, however, from a normative and semantic overload). Not only is it used, but it is also utterly beloved, cherished, and fiercely protected from attacks. In other words, little or nothing would be accomplished by rejecting the term in this thesis. Rather, the strategy must be to attempt to transform it and detach it from its colonizing tendencies. To *democratize* it, so to speak. Is this bold and ambitious, or simply foolhardy? We must return to that question later.

A political perception and a ‘childist lens’

I have presented Biesta’s critique of the individualism and instrumentalism that characterized democratic education in both theory and practice. Biesta suggests a political perception of the democratic subject, in which being a subject means to *act*. This dissertation takes up Biesta’s suggestion and works with a political perception of the democratic subject. The questions guiding my research are furthermore inspired by the attention that Biesta proposes, which is an attention to how much action is actually possible in our schools and in our society, and an attention to the conditions under which acting as a subject can take place.

However, informed by the childist critique (Wall, 2010) and the studies from the relatively new community in the field of childhood studies, it is clear that such questions can be answered very differently, depending on the perspective adopted and the interpretive frames set up by the dominant discursive scientific framework (cf. Mbembe, 2016). I have in mind here the perspectives of adulthood and childhood. Failing to take into consideration a ‘childist lens’ carries the risk of distorting the results of the dissertation, as, according to the critique from childhood studies, has

been the case in many other citizenship studies (Biswas & Wall, 2023; Cockburn, 2020; Hart, 2009; Lister, 2003; Lundy, 2021; Lundy & Martínez Sainz, 2018; Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Spyrou, 2011; Sundhall, 2017; Wall, 2019; Warming, 2011; Warming & Fahnøe, 2017).

In the following chapter, I present the theoretical framework of the dissertation, conjoins a Foucauldian discursive approach, Gert Biesta's theory of education as subjectification, and the perspective of childism. This theoretical framework enables me to provide answers to the research questions of the dissertation:

How can we understand the phenomenon of democratic dannelse as a practice? How do contemporary educational trends and logics in the Danish context produce conditions of possibility for democratic dannelse?



3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this thesis is based on a Foucauldian discursive approach, which places the dissertation within a post-structuralist framework. Democratic dannelsen is theorized with educational theorist Gert Biesta's idea of education as subjectification. Although it can be said that Biesta draws on a range of theoretical perspectives and may thus not be rightly 'captured' as a post-structuralist theorist, I read his work as both engaging and resonating well with post-structuralist ideas. Finally, the theoretical framework employs the perspective of childism. The key theorists of childism that I engage with stem from the discipline of philosophy. These are theoretical ethicist John Wall and philosopher of education Tanu Biswas.

Thinking with theory

Informed by the conceptual framework, the main challenge for the dissertation is a historical philosophical foundation that depicts the child as 'less-than-adult'. Drawing on the childist critiques, I argued that historically ingrained adultism has 'adultized' the field of *Pädagogik* in both theory and practice, and as a result has set up a biased 'discursive scientific framework' (cf. Mbembe, 2016) which it is difficult to think outside of. This dissertation aspires to move towards a childist theory of democratic dannelsen which implies 'thinking outside' the adultized interpretive frame. Therefore the dissertation works with a research approach which can be described with what Jackson and Mazzei call 'thinking with theory' (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012).

Thinking with theory takes as its starting point the idea that research should be guided by philosophy, and it assumes that one does not ‘pick’ which philosophical theories or concepts should guide one’s research. Rather one reads, and some theories and concepts simply resonate more with one than others. ‘Thinking with theory’ will have it that the theories pick us (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013). I once heard somebody say that to read Foucault is to ‘inject Foucault in your veins’. This seems like an accurate analogy of the role – or maybe it is more precise to say the *engagement, relationship* or *entanglement* I have with the theories and concepts guiding this dissertation. It is fair to say these concepts and theories may ‘run in my veins’. ‘Thinking with theory’ is a sort of embodied philosophy (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012), thus the thesis is constructed from *my* thinking with theory, which means that one not only thinks with theory about one’s research question and about the enterprise of conducting research. One’s thinking is one’s thinking and cannot be separated into one’s professional thinking and one’s private thinking. There is only *one* thinking. The thinking with theory is not fundamentally different from any ‘other thinking’. One never just thinks but always thinks with something, whether that something may be categorized as theory, experience, assumptions, emotions, ideology, religion, or maybe even fake news, conspiracy theory, or something else. An ‘injection’ merely *adds* certain ideas to the thinking already going on. An ‘injection’ may result in a thinking altered from the thinking before the ‘injection’, and this ‘new’ version of the thinking may enable one to think something that one had not been able to think before.

The main aspiration of this dissertation is thus to present a line of thought that challenges the adultistized discursive scientific framework by thinking with Foucault, Biesta’s idea of education as subjectification and by intersecting with this a childist lens. These are the main ‘injections’, so to speak. Thinking with theory enables a more nuanced conceptual engagement with the empirical material where theory is not simply ‘applied’ but where the aim is to enable the empirical material to speak *through* the concepts.

An (artificial) distinction between disciplinary knowledge and practical knowledge

I have contended that the dissertation attempts to bring disciplinary knowledge from theoretical concepts and empirical knowledge from the world of practice into some kind of relationship. Within the post-structuralist framework, this should however not be perceived as two essentially distinct types of knowledge. Rather it is an artificial

distinction I construct for explanatory and analytical reasons. As was mentioned previously, the choice of bringing these two ‘types’ of knowledge into a relationship results from an aspiration to explore the practical dimension of Biesta’s theory and furthermore the choice should also be understood as a response to the current educational political climate, in which philosophy of education is put into question by policymakers but also by practitioners (and some educationalists) as largely irrelevant for educational practice (Kristensen, 2022a; Oettingen, 2018a; Whitty & Furlong, 2017). I recognize why some philosophical and theoretical contributions can be experienced as irrelevant for the design and practice of education. It sometimes seems as if there is a great distance between the philosophical theories and discussions in books or scientific journals and the very real and practical everyday work of policymakers and educators.

But educational practice is not ‘free’ of philosophical ideas. It is not merely practical. It is always already informed by certain assumptions (perhaps implicit ones) about the human being, the child, society and the role of education, as was discussed in the conceptual framework. Such assumptions are among the kind of questions philosophy of education grapples with which helps us to see that no perception or assumption is inevitable or neutral. They affect and have real consequences for children, educators, education, and for society in a broader sense. The distinction I draw with the terms ‘disciplinary knowledge’ and ‘practical knowledge’ is a distinction between *two different knowledge producing discourses*: the theorized literature and the practices of the profession.

With its ‘thinking with theory’ approach, this dissertation aspires to make a contribution that illustrates how philosophical assumptions *always already* inform education as a practice, and thereby show *how* philosophical and theoretical contributions are thus in fact of practical relevance. It aspires to comprise a sort of *link between* (some) disciplinary knowledge from the field of educational philosophy and (some) empirical knowledge from the world of educational practice. It aspires to position itself in and fill out an *experienced* gap between the two domains which sometimes (and maybe especially in these times) appear to be very distant from one another. This means that I on the one hand affirm the two different knowledge producing discourses by drawing on a distinction between disciplinary knowledge and practical knowledge, but on the other hand I attempt to dissolve the idea that these are two different types of knowledge. Thus, the dissertation seeks to find ways of linking disciplinary knowledge to the practical world by comprising an intellectual and

practical framework at the same time, where philosophical theories and concepts engage directly in the world of practice. The aim is to possibly revise (some of) the disciplinary foundations – e.g., by employing a sensitivity to (more child-inclusive) empirical knowledge – and to reinterpret educational practice through a (more child-inclusive) philosophical frame.

As I stated above, the ‘thinking with theory’ is not fundamentally different than any ‘other thinking’. Policymakers, practitioners, and everybody else already think and think *with* something. We all think with a theory and a philosophical foundation of some kind. This contribution merely adds an alternative way of thinking to the thinking already going on. It offers a dimension which seems to be difficult to recognize because it currently lies ‘outside’ the dominant ‘discursive scientific framework’ (cf. Mbembe, 2016). The hope and expectation are that educational theory and practice concerned with the democratic role of schools can benefit from the articulation and demonstration of this dimension.

Thinking with a Foucauldian discursive approach

Thinking with Foucault is thinking differently

As I stated above, the dissertation draws on a Foucauldian discursive approach which thus places the dissertation within a post-structuralist framework. To think with Foucault is broadly speaking about thinking *differently* (Christensen & Hamre, 2018). With Foucault the aim becomes to denaturalize and problematize what appears as natural and true knowledge with the purpose of enabling other understandings to become possible. The perspective offered by Foucault is a perspective that challenges what *is*, what *appears to be* and what *feels* natural. The Foucauldian perspective illuminates that it could have been different, and to think differently about it may open paths to something new.

Foucault shows through his work that the truth value of a statement is always conditioned by how it is positioned in relation to what is already considered to be true knowledge. Not everything can be said or done at any given time or context. Foucault showed that the articulations of a phenomenon always follow a certain regularity (Foucault, 1972, p. 145), that is, certain rules of appearance, formation, or transformation that function to include some things and exclude other things. Thus a statement will always be judged and perceived as either correct or incorrect, plausible

or implausible, true or false on the basis of how it sits (or not) within the regularity (Christensen & Hamre, 2018). “‘Truths’ are to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements’ (Foucault, 2000, p. 132). This system, which I in this dissertation will refer to as a ‘system of thought’, provides rationalities and logics that serve to create certain conditions of possibility (Foucault, 1981).

In the system of thought available to us, it is considered as true knowledge that the child is a ‘not-yet’, which results in a thinking about the child as a ‘less-than-adult’-human. Thus, to take as a starting point that the child is in fact a political subject equal to the adult therefore *feels* implausible because it is a statement fundamentally inconsistent with the dominant regularity with which the concepts, child and adult, and their relation, are articulated. With the Foucauldian approach, the dissertation aspires to unearth and challenge adultist norms in disciplinary foundations and in practice.

Discourses systematically form the object of which they speak

As I have stated elsewhere, one of the things this dissertation will pay attention to is the conditions under which acting as a subject can take place (Biesta, 2007), and one of the conditions I will pay attention to is the way(s) in which democracy and democratic education are articulated. To scrutinize this, I will draw on Foucault’s concept of discourse.

Foucault defines a discourse (also referred to as ‘discursive formation’) as a collection of interrelated practices and texts which ‘systematically form the object of which they speak’ (Foucault, 1972/2013, p. 54) These interrelated practices and texts do not only describe the world, they also play part in producing it. They produce both meanings and effects by providing a language for talking about a phenomenon or topic and by providing specific knowledge about it. Language, in other words, ‘helps to bring ‘reality’ into being’ (Hardy, 2022, p. 3).

Discourses are not only spoken words and sentences, but involve a collection of ideas, concepts and categorisations, which Foucault sums up as the ‘discourse’s archive’(Foucault, 1972/2013, p. 145). ‘The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events’ (Foucault, 1972/2013, p. 145). The statements in the archive are not fixed and invariable, but are rather produced, reproduced and transformed in particular sets of practices through which meaning and ‘truth’ is given to physical and social realities.

Discourses comprise the patterns, rules, and norms for what can be said and done and not said and done. This also means that discourses are bound up with limitations and possibilities, that is, they are bound up with power (Foucault, 2000). Power, Foucault argues, circulates through discourses and functions to establish conditions of possibility regarding what can be claimed, and which social practices can be invoked from what position and importantly by whom. Not everybody is entitled or is considered qualified to say (or do) certain things (Foucault, 1972/2013, p. 55).

Discourses thus act powerfully to produce what democratic dannelsen is and can be, which intertwines with how dominant discourses produces truth about what the child is and what it is not and what it needs or does not need in relation to democratic dannelsen, including what the child can or cannot say or do on the basis of that fact that it is not an adult, but a child – that is, a ‘less-than-adult’, a ‘not-yet’ political subject (Wall, 2010).

Subjects are produced through mechanisms of power

Foucault challenged the idea of a stable, essential, unitary subject. In Foucault’s work, the concept subject or subject position or the process of subjectivation means to denote that our ‘personalities’, our ‘identities’ or the way in which we recognize and construct ourselves and are recognized by others are produced by the mechanisms of power. One is not born as a certain subject – rather one is *made* a certain subject through mechanisms of power (Foucault, 1982). Not in a repressive way, or at least not merely in a repressive way. Power also incites, induces and seduces. It makes something emerge in the world. Power – running through discourses – is productive in creating subjects both as an individual’s ‘identity’ and experience of ‘being’ that identity (Heyes, 2014). However, this can be both an opportunity as well as a constrain. Not all individuals can legitimately and successfully perform certain subjects positions. Only certain subject positions make sense within a discourse, and only some subject positions have the right to speak.

As emphasized in the conceptual framework, children cannot (in the current system of thought) be made to conform to the subject position as a political subject. The child does not have ‘the right’ to speak as a political subject. This denial, along with the sanctions the child is subjected to if it transgresses the ‘natural’ law of who can speak in which ways, can be labeled ‘epistemic injustice’, a term coined by philosopher Miranda Fricker (2009) to denote a kind of injustice inflicted on a person in its capacity (or lack thereof) as a *knower*. This is an injustice done on the basis of

structural prejudices regarding one's (naturalized) *ontological* identity. Epistemic injustice is particularly hard to detect because it operates 'beneath the radar of our ordinary doxastic self-scrutiny' (Fricker, 2009, p. 40). Fricker does not use this term in relation to children, but to other marginalized groups based on categories such as class, race, and gender. However, in this dissertation, I shall illustrate ways in which epistemic injustice is inflicted on children and how damaging it is, not least in relation to democratic dannelsen.

Foucault's concept of Subject (now with a capital S to distinguish it from Biesta's subject) is thus different from the one in Biesta's theory of 'acting as a subject' and the concept of 'subjectification'. I shall elaborate on how I interpret the relation between the two shortly.

The Foucauldian discursive approach allows us to go beyond what appears as conventional wisdom and to challenge what is taken for granted. As Hardy puts it: 'Studies that interrogate dominant discourses help to disabuse readers of the idea that they are inevitable or natural' (Hardy, 2022, p. 7). Thus, power relations circulating through discourses produce bodies of knowledge about democratic dannelsen and about subjects, including democratic subjects.

Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth – that is, the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true: the mechanism and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; and the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (Foucault, 2000, p. 131).

The relation between knowledge and power thus produces certain 'known' objects or phenomena (whether material or ideational) with particular meanings (Christensen & Hamre, 2018). Furthermore, discourses discipline subjects both in terms of how individuals are known and recognized and how they know and recognize themselves (Hardy, 2022). What counts as 'normal' and 'other' or 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' is produced by the logics, language and techniques available and already accepted as truths. These Foucault refers to as 'dividing practices' which function to separate the sane from the mad, the healthy from the sick and the 'good boys' from the criminals

(Foucault, 1982, pp. 777-778). What can be considered normal – or in relation to this dissertation, what can be considered democratic, is a product of historical, social and political conditions. The democratic subject is thus known and recognized (and knows and recognizes itself) in a particular way through dominant discourses about democracy and the democratic subject, which of course also intertwines with a range of other discourses, some of which produce ‘identity prejudices’ and position some people as what Karin Murris has labeled ‘ontological, colonized others’ (Murris, 2021, p. 74). This, as we shall see in coming chapters, involves acting, saying, and being (and visually appearing) in particular ways that are considered as ‘truly democratic’ in the dominant democracy discourse, that is, in the dominant systems of thought available to us.

It is not only power that circulates in discourses. So does *resistance*. Discourse is also ‘a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power: it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it’ (Foucault, 1978, p. 101). As truths are only truths when they are already considered as true knowledge or plausible statements in the dominant discourse, so are mistakes only mistakes when they are acknowledged as mistakes (Christensen & Hamre, 2018, p. 22). The situation is not that we become wiser and wiser throughout history, but rather that the discourses in which something previously appeared as truth have been destabilized or dislodged so that new understandings are possible and old understandings may now appear as mistakes.

Foucault’s Subject and Biesta’s subject

I shall here address how I interpret the relation between Foucault’s concept of Subject (with upper case ‘S’) and Biesta’s concept of subject (with a lower case ‘s’).

In this dissertation, I interpret Biesta’s emphasis on ‘acting as a subject’ and the argument for paying attention to the conditions under which acting as a subject can take place as an argument for ‘allowing’ *all* categories to conform to the Subject position as a ‘political subject’. ‘Thinking with’ Foucault we could say that through his work, Biesta produces discourse which ‘systematically form[s] the object of which [he] speak[s]’ (Foucault, 1972/2013, p. 54). The ‘object’ Biesta’s text speaks about is a human being (of any category and any age) *allowed* to and *recognized* – by others as well as by itself – as ‘by nature’ speaking and acting as a political subject. The power running in the discourse Biesta produces (which we should perhaps call

resistance given that this discourse goes against dominant discourses) aims at making the Subject position; ‘political subject’ an available and ‘natural’ ‘true’ Subject position for any human being. Biesta’s theory disabuses readers of the idea that the developmental and instrumental discourse dominating democratic education in theory and practice are inevitable or natural. With the words of Foucault, we can interpret Biesta’s work as comprising ‘a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy (Foucault, 1978, p. 101) to that of which is produced in dominant discourses. I interpret Biesta’s work as aiming at destabilizing and dislodging what appears as ‘truths’ in dominant discourses about education and about the democratic person. In this sense, Biesta’s theory has a childist potential.

This dissertation aims at producing discourse to destabilize and dislodge the currently dominant ‘truth’ of the child as a ‘not yet political subject’. That is, it aims at challenging what is currently restricting the child from plausibly and ‘naturally’ conforming to the Subject position of political subject. It aims at creating as ‘truth’ that the child *is* a political subject in no existentially different way than the adult. It does so by both drawing on the discourse and ‘truth’ produced by Biesta’s theory (which helped enable the imagination of the study in the first place) and furthermore by adding to the discourse already produced by Biesta, a practical dimension and a childist lens.

From this interpretation of the relation between Foucault’s Subject and Biesta’s subject, we can say (simply put) that Biesta’s subject is a *particular* Subject position and his work centers around what can appear as ‘truth’ about this Subject position, and who and what are allowed to be recognized as capable – by others as well as by itself – of legitimately and successfully performing this Subject’s position.

No claimed knowledge of democracy is either neutral or inevitable

Thinking with Foucault thus also implies the assumption that no understanding of democracy, of democratic dannelsen, or of a democratic citizen is either neutral or inevitable, and an important task for a society that claims and seeks to function in a democratic way – and in relation to this project, the task for education in such a society – is to continuously ask whether its current (conditioned) understandings of democracy, democratic dannelsen, and the democratic citizen are in fact the most desirable (and most democratic) understandings. According to Foucault, it is potentially dangerous to fail to question what appears natural and self-evident. Following this, we can add that the society that holds democracy as its ideal has at the

same time put the obligation on itself, to continuously scrutinize the power relation that constitutes it, and failing to do so is potentially dangerous to the democratic life the society claims to endorse.

Moreover, as Foucault continuously emphasizes, there exists no final definitive ‘reality’, ‘truth’ or ‘essence’ in, behind or beneath things. Ontological and epistemological assumptions in the Foucauldian thinking comprise an anti-essentialism, a sort of ‘constructed realism’ (Fogh Jensen, 2005, p. 67), which thus implies that nor is what I present in this dissertation a ‘truth’. What I offer is one possible representation of what can be thought, perceived and in the end done. A representation we can then discuss whether is better or not according to our supposedly democratic ideal.

Thinking with childism – the child is a knower

The emergence of a childist lens

Before I present the concept of childism, I wish to make a few remarks about what led me to childism. It is important to clarify this point because I did not begin with childism. I did not initially interpret Biesta’s theory as having a ‘childist potential’. Rather it was the other way around. Biesta’s theory resonated with me ‘just because’ (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) and later – as I discovered and further engaged more and more with childism – it appeared to me that what more specifically resonated with me was the *childist potential* in Biesta’s theory.

Biesta’s work draws on – amongst others – the ideas of French philosopher Jacques Rancière, and it has particularly been the parts of Biesta’s theorizing with the ideas of Rancière that have resonated with me and which further led me to engage with Rancière’s idea of an ‘equality of intelligences’ (Rancière, 1991, 2016). Rancière’s theory is generally very attentive to the oppression of different categories of people, and though it largely neglects the category of children it is not without reference to the oppression of children. For example, Rancière refers to schooling as ‘stultifying education’ (Rancière, 1991) where the child encounters the claim that it is *in need of* explanation and hence education plays an important role in convincing the child about its inferior – to the adult – intelligence. The equality of children may be somewhat neglected in Rancière’s thought, as it is pushed aside by the other kinds of categories

of excluded (adult) people, but his thought still lays the foundation for thinking of children as fully equal to adults (see e.g., Snir, 2023).

Thus the ‘childist lens’ of this dissertation emerged (partly) from Rancière’s work and Biesta’s theorizing with Rancière. However, throughout the project, the concept of childism has pushed Rancière into the background, so to speak, as it can unearth adultist norms and open new philosophical pathways that enable the reimagination of scholarly norms. This includes – as I shall argue in the concluding chapter of the dissertation – opening pathways on how to revise Biesta’s theory in order to release what I interpret as its childist potential. Later in this chapter, I shall elaborate on Rancière again, but mainly because Biesta theorizes with Rancière to articulate an idea of democracy as sporadic. The point here is that Rancière’s theory plays a significant role in this dissertation and should thus be mentioned. However, Rancière’s ideas and concepts have moved into the background and now play what we might refer to as a supporting role. On that note, let us move to what has ‘injected itself’ as the leading role, childism.

If we understand the child in a non-adultist way, we will understand the democratic role of education better

The childist lens or childism(s) is a perspective. Generally, ‘ism’ terms refer to belief systems or ideas and assert their significance as philosophical or political projects. As educational philosopher Tanu Biswas puts it: ‘it is a way of seeing that determines what, how, and why one would theorize’ (Biswas, Wall, et al., 2023, p. 8). It is a ‘pluralist way of seeing’ (p. 8) because it rests on the central premise that there is no such thing as a single or universal childhood.

Childism is analogous to philosophical perspectives such as anti-racism, decolonialism and feminism. However, unlike these terms, childism has not yet generally entered the philosophical lexicon. Like feminism, childism can be understood as a core idea having multiple possibilities and multiple and contested interpretations (Biswas, Wall, et al., 2023). Childism places children’s perspectives and experiences at the centre of inquiry in order to deconstruct the historical marginalization of children and scrutinize, challenge, and transform larger social structures and norms (Biswas & Wall, 2023).

Childism assumes that children are complex beings, and that like any other group they are diverse beings (Wall, 2019). It assumes that children are agents in their worlds in which they act and speak, and about which they have opinions and ideas.

Just like adults. Childism holds that children are not separate from the world. They are not in the 'private sphere' apart from the 'political sphere', and any policies made about anything affects them just as they affect adults.

Childism resembles third wave feminism, which differs from second wave feminism by not merely aiming for equality to men (because such equality would be defined entirely on men's grounds). Rather, third wave feminism focuses on transforming societal norms and structures according to women's own distinctive experiences, just as childism does according to children's own distinctive experiences (Wall, 2019). One of the aims of childism is to transform the assumptions that produce the child as 'lesser-than-adults'. It does so by not just defining children in relation to adults or defining children's agency and voices in relation to those of adults. Rather, it focuses on transforming such concepts (agency, voice, rights, politics, etc.) themselves. Thus, childism is not only about critiquing but is also about formulating new and better norms. It is a deconstruction and a reconstruction at the same time (Wall, 2019). It is a revelation of adultist norms and assumptions and a transformation of those norms and assumptions. Childism not only generates knowledge about children's perspectives and experiences, but it also transforms adult-child relations and intergenerational orders so that, for example, children can be authors and originators of knowledge. The child can be a 'knower'. According to Warming (in Biswas, Wall, et al., 2023) this can potentially shed light on human life and society more broadly and thereby potentially help to revise existing theories.

Following this line of argumentation, a new or revised theory of democratic education needs childism not simply to understand or listen to children better. Rather, a new theory of democratic education needs childism so that it can overcome its own normative historical limitations and thus more critically understand human conditions and inform educational and pedagogical practice in more child-inclusive ways. Drawing on Wall (2019) and Biswas et. al. (2023) the central claim I put forward with childism is that if we understand the child in a non-adultist way, we will understand the democratic task of education better.

*‘If we understand the child
in a non-adultist way, we will
understand the democratic
role of education better’*

An important difference between childism and feminism/postcolonialism is the argument that while most adult women and non-whites are perfectly able to speak for themselves, not all children can in fact speak. However, childism holds that this is not a problem with the children but with the adultist idea of what it means to speak. Furthermore, it is only half the truth. Even well-articulated and well-resourced adults need *listeners*. They need a responsive environment for their speech to be heard and responded to. Children's voices are silenced *through* the normative framework that adults bring — a normative framework that claims that children are not capable of speaking their minds. It is thus not just about removing barriers for children to be 'heard', for example by teaching them to speak in proper ways and/or waiting for the barriers to 'naturally' disappear, that is, waiting for them to be old enough to be (assumed) capable of speaking their minds. It is about making sure that marginalized perspectives are actively welcomed and responded to.

Thinking with Biesta – subjectification as democratic dannelse

Interpreting democratic dannelse through the concept of subjectification

In the presentation of my conceptual framework, I discussed Biesta's problematization of the dominant way of thinking about the democratic role of education as that of *producing* democratic subjects. This I also interpreted as a problematization of the concept of dannelse (or *Bildung*), precisely because dannelse theories are theories about *becoming* a subject in a culture (cf. Straume, 2013a). From my reading of Biesta's work, it seems that over time he has left the concept of *Bildung* behind and is more interested in the possibilities of the concept of subjectification. Informed by my conceptual framework, I argued that it is difficult to see the democratic potential of dannelse, and the only way that dannelse can perhaps come to play a democratic role is if we can detach it from its colonizing tendencies. Since I decided to stick with dannelse – which largely is a matter of a pragmatic choice related to the immense endorsement and support the concept enjoys in a Danish context in both theory and practice (I simply need to engage in the discussion about dannelse) – the aspiration thus is to dismantle the naturalized foundation in dannelse theories regarding the idea that students must '*become* a subject in a culture'. Therefore, I will

interpret democratic dannelsen through Biesta's theory of education as subjectification and add to it a childist lens.

In this section, I present different aspects of Biesta's theorizing that I draw upon in the dissertation. Most central is the idea of education as subjectification, but I also present an idea of *Bildung* as the educational answer to a political problem, which inspires me to think of democratic dannelsen as the educational answer to what is considered to be a democratic crisis. Finally, I present an idea of democracy as sporadic, which draws on Jacques Rancière's concepts of politics and police order.

Democratic dannelsen as an educational answer to a democratic problem

The concept of *Bildung* brings together the aspirations of all those who acknowledge – or hope – that education is more than the simple acquisition of knowledge and skills, that it is more than simply getting things “right”, but that it also has to do with nurturing the human person, that it has to do with individuality, subjectivity, in short, with “becoming and being somebody” (Biesta, 2002, p. 343).

Informed by Biesta's thoughts on *Bildung*, I work with the idea that democratic dannelsen is an answer to a question. More specifically, democratic dannelsen is ‘an educational answer to a political question’ (Biesta, 2002, p. 346). This implies that democratic dannelsen does not only refer to the individual but that it also involves a social and political dimension (p. 345.). The questions about what democratic dannelsen may be, and what role it should play, also ask ‘what kind of educational response would be appropriate in our time’ (p. 343). Thus, democratic dannelsen is not a static and objective thing. It always relates to the ‘diagnosis’ of contemporary society (p. 343).

What is the ‘diagnosis’ of today? What kind of challenges do we face? While there is a sizeable agreement (in Western countries) about a diagnosis that we could call a democratic crisis, the details of this crisis are not only tremendously complicated and difficult to outline, but also depend on the position from which it is given (Biesta, 2002, p. 346). I have in mind here such key issues as what causes this crisis of democracy, what are its roots and symptoms, what are the structures and complexity that constitute it, and how might one respond to it. Political pundits as well as politicians and policymakers offer different diagnoses of the ‘state of democracy’, and

they offer different suggestions about how to respond. What they all seem to agree on is that education plays a main part in the response. However, as Biesta reminds us, this implies that education *can* be part of the solution (p. 349). But what if education itself has become part of the ‘democratic problem’?

In a characterization of ‘our’ time, which can be said to be a plural world, Biesta draws a distinction between diversity and difference (Biesta, 2002). Looking at the plurality of the world in terms of diversity involves the assumption that we are ‘variations that have similar ground of origin’ (Biesta, 2002, p. 346) and what distinguishes us are ‘merely cultural’ differences. When we on the other hand look at plurality in terms of difference ‘we take the fact that we differ or that there is difference as just we encounter and experience it – which more often than not will mean: as it confronts us. We take plurality, in other words, as it “comes”’ (Biesta, 2002, p. 347). What distinguishes thinking plurality in terms of diversity from thinking plurality in terms of difference is that in the latter it is recognized that any positioning of a difference in the overall framework can only be done from another position in this framework. Thus, there can never be a position from which it is possible to tell the ‘whole’ story. Thinking of the plurality of the world in terms of difference helps us not to mistake the part for the whole. It helps us avoid doing injustice to the other position. ‘It is a way not to totalize’ (Biesta, 2002, p. 347).

If the ‘democratic crisis’ is understood as a failure to co-exist in a plural world in a way without totalizing or isolating ourselves, which given that we face the same global problems is no sustainable solution either (Biesta, 2002, p. 348), then the role of democratic dannelsse may be to ‘create awareness, or better, perhaps, an *experience* that the only way in which we can live our lives is with others’ (Biesta, 2002, p. 348). The role of democratic dannelsse becomes that of making possible encounters with what is other and different from ourselves. The encounters that Biesta has in mind are encounters that may be characterized as what Hannah Arendt has referred to as ‘visiting’ (Hannah Arendt in Biesta, 2002 p. 348).

Visiting is not trying to think the thoughts of someone else, but “being and thinking in one’s own identity where actually one is not” [...], and thereby permitting oneself the disorientation that is necessary to understand how the world can look different to someone else. Rather than making the strange familiar, therefore, we could say that visiting is an approach to *Bildung* that aims at making the familiar, that what we thought we knew and understood, strange (Biesta, 2002, p. 349).

Furthermore, Biesta emphasizes the importance of the idea that these encounters must be *experienced*. Thus, it is not about being with what and who is other and different in our *imagination*, but in *reality*. ‘Being in such a situation can put a challenge to our own “certainties,” which in turn can lead us to reconsider our own “position”’ (Biesta, 2002, p. 349). In this line of thinking, education’s role in relation to democratic dannelsse becomes that of enabling ‘disorientating’ encounters (p. 350).

I draw from this idea to suggest that a theory of democratic dannelsse should not be about ‘becoming a subject in a culture’ but rather about ‘acting as a subject in a world of difference’.

Education as subjectification

Biesta has problematized what he calls the ‘learnification’ of education, by which he means the tendency to reduce a varied educational vocabulary to a language of learning (Biesta, 2006). Biesta argues that even though certain aspects of education have become easier to articulate with the language of learning, other aspects have become far more difficult to grapple with. The primary problem is that the learning language facilitates an economic understanding of the process of education, in which students (and parents) are positioned as customers, while teachers and educational institutions are positioned as providers oriented towards satisfying the customer in terms of what ‘the customer’ or ‘market forces’ want (Biesta, 2006). This fosters a situation in which the only questions that can meaningfully be asked are technical questions regarding the efficiency and effectiveness of the educational process, while the much more important questions of *purpose*, *content*, and *relationships* become almost impossible to raise. These aspects become invisible, or it is assumed that the answers are already clear and decided upon.

It is to bring forward these questions – and here the question of purpose is the first – that Biesta suggests a framework of three domains of education. The framework starts from the observation that educational practices and processes generally seem to work in three different areas and can thus be said to serve three kinds of purposes (Biesta, 2013c). Biesta refers to these three functions as *qualification*, *socialization*, and *subjectification*.

The domain of qualification has to do with the ways in which education qualifies students, that is, the ways in which students acquire knowledge, skills, and dispositions to do certain things. This qualification covers a wide field and ranges from solving concrete mathematical questions to navigating successfully in a complex

multicultural society (Biesta, 2020a, p. 34). The domain of socialization concerns the ways in which students are inserted into existing orders, traditions, cultures, and ways of doing and being. This regards both deliberate socialization where we wish students to become part of and continue our traditions and culture, etc., but it also regards indirect socialization. This has also been coined ‘the hidden curriculum’ (Jackson, 1968) to denote the idea that students often learn more from what we do and from how education actually operates than from what we say and officially teach (Biesta, 2020a).

In addition to qualification and socialization, schools also effect students personally. Biesta calls this domain ‘subjectification’. As was presented in the conceptual framework, Biesta draws on the work of Hannah Arendt to develop his concept of subjectification. Subjectification is oriented towards freedom; it is about ways in which the individual can exist independently from the existing world, and it can maybe best be understood as the opposite of socialization.

Put simply, what is at stake in the idea of subjectification is our freedom as human beings and, more specifically, our freedom to act or to refrain from action (Biesta, 2020b, p. 93).

and

Freedom viewed in this way is fundamentally an existential matter; it is about how we exist, how we lead our own lives, which of course no one else can do for us. Put differently, freedom is a first-person matter. It is about how I exist as the subject of my own life, not as the object of what other people want from me (Biesta, 2020b, p. 93).

Biesta argues that schools worthy of the claim to educate (rather than indoctrinate) should ultimately be engaged in promoting possibilities for students to exist as subjects of actions and responsibilities as opposed to objects of intervention and of control by others (Biesta, 2017a, p. 19). Subjectification is democratic by nature, and Biesta argues that education becomes uneducational if it only seeks to insert students into the existing world. This is in danger of happening at the critical tipping point in which students can no longer appear as subjects of initiative and responsibility but merely as objects of educational intervention (Biesta, 2020a, p. 41).

But even though education should be oriented towards the subjectification of the students, educators cannot *tell* students or *teach* them, let alone *force* them to lead

their lives in a certain way. But education and educators can encourage, support, and provide time and possibilities for students' encounters with their freedom. The question we must ask according to Biesta is what *quality* of subjectification do our educational configurations and endeavours condition?

Education is not oriented towards just one purpose. The purpose is three-dimensional and hence requires three-dimensional thinking. We cannot simply focus on effects within one domain and then 'pause' the effects in the other two domains, until we decide to focus on them. The domains can be distinguished but never separated. There are effects within all three domains simultaneously. Moreover, there is no complete synergy between desirable purposes within each of the three domains; rather there is scope for tension and conflict (Biesta, 2020a, p. 34). Being involved in education – whether it is designing or enacting, whether as policymaker or teacher – calls for considerations regarding the desirable and undesirable purposes and effects of our efforts in all three domains. This consideration concerns the 'trade-offs' between the three domains; it is about 'what [...] are we willing to give up temporarily in one or two of the domains in order to make something possible in another domain' (Biesta, 2017a, p. 20). Having to do with education requires considerations about which balance between purposes of the three domains are desirable and justifiable.

While qualification and socialization are oriented towards qualifying individuals to operate in the existing order, subjectification is about ways to exist independently of the existing order. Subjectification is about our freedom – 'our freedom to act or to refrain from action' (Biesta, 2020b p. 93). It is not freedom to do whatever we want. Rather subjectification is about a 'qualified' freedom 'connected to our existence' (Biesta, 2020b p. 95).

This is never an existence just with and for ourselves, but always an existence in and with the world. An existence with human beings and other living creatures and 'in' a physical environment that is not a simple backdrop, a context in which we act, but rather a complex network through which we act; a network, moreover, that sustains and nurtures us. This world is real and puts real limits on our actions, albeit that one important aspect of trying to exist as a subject is to try to figure out what these limits are, which limits should be taken into consideration, which limits are real, and which limits are the effect of arbitrary (ab)use of power (Biesta, 2020b, pp. 95-96).

These limits, including figuring out what they are (and maybe what they should be) have, Biesta argues, everything to do with the question of democracy (Biesta, 2020b p. 96).

Ego-logical and non-ego-logical ways of being in the world

We exist in a world that is not of our making, that is, a *real* world that sometimes meets us with resistance. There is first of all, a real material world (which includes our bodies), in which not all we desire to do is possible, and there is a social world with other human beings, from which our initiatives sometimes meet resistance (Biesta, 2020b, p. 96). The resistance from ‘reality’ can generate a degree of frustration. The question is what we do with this resistance and our frustration. We can attempt to ‘push harder to overcome the resistance we encounter’ (p. 96), which may be important and necessary ‘for our initiatives to arrive in the world’ (p. 97). But pushing also comes at the risk that if we push too hard, we might ‘destroy the very world in which we seek to arrive’ (p. 97). ‘If then, at one end of the spectrum we encounter the risk of world-destruction, at the other end we find the existential risk of self-destruction: when confronted with this double-bind, out of frustration, we step back and withdraw ourselves from the situation’ (Biesta, 2020, p. 97). This means that our lifelong existential challenge – if we wish not to destroy either the world or ourselves – is to try to stay in the difficult ‘middle ground’ (Biesta, 2020, p. 97). ‘This is the place – physically and metaphorically’ (Biesta, 2021, p. 49) – where we try to ‘be at home in the world,’ where we try to ‘reconcile ourselves with reality’ (Hannah Arendt in Biesta, 2021, p. 49).

Biesta draws a distinction between a ‘grown-up way’ of living one’s life – encountering the real, and an ‘infantile way’ of living one’s life – living in a fantasy (p. 97).

If the infantile way of living one’s life is characterized by a disregard for what is real – just pursuing one’s own desires, just doing what one wants to do – the grown-up way of trying to lead one’s life is characterized by the desire to give one’s desires a “reality check”, so to speak, so as to come into a relationship with what and who is other, not simply overrule it (Biesta, 2020b p. 97).

According to Biesta, the terms ‘grown-up’ and ‘infantile’ should not give the impression that adults by definition live their lives in a grown-up way and children in

an infantile way. It can very well be the other way around, he emphasizes. Many children manage to stay in the difficult ‘middle ground’ where one continuously tries to give oneself ‘reality checks’, whereas many adults pursue fantasies. Nor does it mean that once we have reached a certain age or level of maturity, or when we have undergone a certain developmental process, we automatically live in the world in a grown-up way for the rest of our lives. Rather, staying in the ‘middle ground’, or attempting to go back there over and over again, is a lifelong existential challenge (Biesta, 2020b, p. 97).

By the adultist logic, Biesta’s argument falls short

I want to take a short detour here and address myself to the use of the terms ‘grown-up’ and ‘infantile’ and the logic that these terms enable. Biesta acknowledges that these terms are rather stark and risk giving us the wrong impression because of these terms’ references to ‘processes of growth’ (Biesta, 2017c, p. 16). He suggests what he calls ‘slightly better terms, inspired by Emmanuel Levinas’ (Biesta, 2020b, p. 97): ego-logical and non-ego-logical, where the way of existing ego-logically is understood as following the logic of the ego rather than the logic of the other (Biesta, 2017c, p. 16), following ‘ego-centred’ desires ‘without asking (...) whether, how, or to what extent such desires are desirable, both for the ego’s existence in and with the world and for the world in and with which the ego seeks to exist’ (Biesta, 2017c, p. 16). Although Biesta suggests these terms are ‘slightly better’ alternatives, he continues to use the terms ‘grown-up’ and ‘infantile’ in his writings. From a childist perspective, this is quite problematic.

They resemble typical Western philosophy’s systems of binary logics which are characterized ‘by an oppositional, dual and hierarchical structure’ (Cavarero, 2017, p. 23). They each have a value connotation through which they strongly denote the hierarchy between a ‘problematic’ (living in a fantasy) and an ‘ideal’ (encountering the real) way of living one’s life. However, as the literature included in the conceptual framework demonstrates, it is not innocent or neutral to divide up ways of living one’s life into a (hierarchical) duality and ascribe a positive and desirable connotation to the one and a negative and subordinate connotation to the other (cf. e.g., Allen-Paisant, 2021; Cavarero, 2017; Lettow, 2017; Mbembe, 2016; Nye, 2013; Okin, 2013; Park, 2013). It is not merely operating as a metaphor or rhetorical trope (cf. Duane, 2017a; Rollo, 2018a).

The terms ‘grown-up’ and ‘infantile’ are each connected to a set of meanings and associations that assign a dominant and a prominently advantaged position to whatever is grown-up, clearly disadvantaging and subduing what is infantile, and as such they are much more powerful and easier to grasp, understand, and remember than the not so idiomatic terms ‘ego-logical’ and ‘non-ego-logical’. However, they derive their power from the adultist discourse which we are so used to. In the adultist discourse, calling someone ‘childish’ or characterizing someone’s actions or way of living one’s life as child-like or infantile can only function as a critique or problematization because the category of the child is subordinated and perceived as inferior to the category of the adult. We can *feel* the denigrating and patronizing tone in adultist (recognizable) sentences such as: ‘Don’t be such a baby’, ‘Grow up’ and ‘You are acting like a child’.

Such explicit references to adulthood and childhood are often used for disciplinary purposes. However, it is not first denigrating towards those to whom we say them but towards those who fit into the inferior category, that is, children. The reason why we barely recognize or feel the problem of the degrading in them, let alone question it, is that we interpret them *through* our adultist interpretive frame. It functions in such a naturalizing way that one no longer realizes that they are constructed or that the function is subordinating. In other words, there is a wall of incomprehension and resistance to break through. We hit this wall when we try to analyze our own prejudice. We cannot see the prejudice because we are looking at it through the lenses of our prejudice. However, we immediately recognize the denigrating tone in sentences such as: ‘you are acting like a woman’ or ‘don’t be such a girl’ because we have become aware of sexism³⁰. Prejudices are inherently self-justifying, which is why they are worthy of examining for the sake of scientific progress.

The problem here is that by using the terms infantile and grown-up, Biesta’s theory draws on and invites adultist logic. These speech acts thus confirm the normality and superiority of adulthood, that is, they confirm the ‘adultist contract’; the largely unacknowledged and denied implicit agreement among adults to maintain and reproduce a historically adultist order that is beneficial for adults (cf. the ‘racial contract’ Mills 1997/2022).

³⁰ See e.g., Run like a girl: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qtDMYGiYIMg> from 2014.

Biesta's theory argues for a *political* perception of the subject with emphasis on *acting*, and thus offers a line of thinking that challenges the developmental discourse that pervades education in theory and practice, but by using terms with 'references to growth', Biesta rather affirms than challenges the developmental discourse and adultism and thus affirms the dominant interpretive frame that, cf. Mbembe (2016) makes it difficult to think outside of this frame, let alone recognize thinkings from outside the framework. In other words, the problem is that by the adultist logic Biesta's argument falls short.

The 'adult' way of trying to live one's life

I will add that this is even further problematic in the Danish translation of Biesta's books. The Danish language does not have two words like grown-up and adult, but only one word: 'voksen' which literally translated is much closer (if not identical) to adult than to grown-up. The term grown-up has therefore been translated into 'voksen', which not 'merely' has references to growth but precisely designates the human being *in the period of adulthood* and the *adult body*. Thus, the literal translation in the Danish version would be: the *adult* way of trying to lead one's life (see e.g., Biesta, 2022, p. 101). A term which even more so than grown-up invites the adultist logic.

Consequently, I argue the need to take the reference to age and generation out of the picture, and I will take up Biesta's own suggestion and use the terms 'ego-logical' and 'non-ego-logical' from here on. Children and adults alike are capable of acting in both ego-logical and non-ego-logical ways. In the concluding chapter, I shall further discuss how adultist norms may have shaped the theory and what this mean for our theorizing with it.

Education with an interest in democratic dannelsen is oriented towards non-ego-logical ways of existing

Education as subjectification, that is, education with an interest in democratic dannelsen, is oriented towards non-ego-logical ways of existing. It is about pursuing our freedom to 'say yes or to say no, to stay or to walk away, to go with the flow or to resist' (Biesta, 2020b p. 93). Not freedom in the sense of simply doing whatever we want (that would be an ego-logical way of living one's life), but a *qualified* freedom, where we try to give our desires, that is, our freedom to say yes or no, to stay or walk away, to go with the flow or to resist, a 'reality check'. This is a life where

we with our freedom try to come into relation with what is real, where we try to exist as subjects, which only we ourselves can do, and not as objects of other's control. Freedom hence, is a first-person matter (Biesta, 2020b p. 93).

From the perspective of education, we might say that orientation towards the domain of subjectification is 'trickier' than orientations towards the domains of qualification and socialization. While it is possible, and maybe even rather easy to 'produce' qualified students who are perfectly aware of and can operate within existing acceptable ways of doing and being, we cannot in the same way ensure or produce individuals who want to try to live in the world as subjects, that is, democratically (Biesta, 2013a). Education cannot merely *tell* students how to do this – let alone *force* them. Nor can we go about this with the moralizing and more subtle disciplining approach. Were we to approach democratic dannelsen in such a way, we would end up in the paradoxical situation that we would have constructed our students as objects of intervention. Rather, education must try to 'encourage an appetite' (Biesta, 2020b, p. 97) and 'arouse a desire' (p. 98) in the student for wanting to try to live in the world 'without thinking oneself in the center of the world' (p. 98) and without withdrawing in self-destructive ways from the world.

Interruption, suspension, and sustenance

Although purposes within the domain of subjectification might be less easy to deal with for educators than purposes within the two other domains, there are, Biesta argues, a rather concrete set of educational components to take as starting points required for education that takes the subjectification of the students seriously. Firstly, education interested in the subjectification of the students must make 'an encounter with the real possible – an encounter that allows a 'reality check'' (Biesta, 2020b p. 98). Education can therefore not only remain conceptual, but requires that there be 'something real at stake' (Biesta, 2020b p. 98). The encounter with the real 'manifests itself in most cases as an *interruption*' (p. 98), and hence education as subjectification has an interruptive quality. Secondly, confronting one's desires with what is real requires time; it is not something that can be rushed. Education as subjectification therefore 'needs to work with the principle of "*suspension*" – of slowing down, of giving time, so that students can meet the world, meet themselves in relation to the world, and "work through" all this' (p. 98). Thirdly, trying to stay in the 'middle ground', or trying to live one's life in a non-ego-logical way, is difficult. Education

must not only encourage the student to go back to the ‘middle ground’, but also provide them with support and *sustenance* to do this.

A distinction between the work of the self and the work of education because it involves two different time frames

My understanding of democratic dannelsen is constructed through Biesta’s education as subjectification as outlined above. However, so far, I have mainly focused on democratic dannelsen from the point of view of education. But as Biesta emphasizes there are two aspects in this. He distinguishes between the work of the self and the work of education (Biesta, 2021 chapter 3), which he frames as *Bildung* and *Erziehung* respectively (Biesta, 2021, p. 35).

In this thesis, I will leave out the word *Erziehung* and instead refer to this distinction as dannelsen from the point of view of the self and dannelsen from the point of view of education. This choice mainly has to do with the fact that I find the Danish translation of ‘*Erziehung*’ – ‘opdragelse’ – to have overly imprecise connotations compared to what Biesta expresses in his distinction. Furthermore, though I find the distinction important, I mainly focus on the role of education in this thesis, thus I will stick to the term ‘dannelsen’ but give it two aspects the few times I shall refer to it.

Democratic dannelsen from the point of view of the self can be understood as the work only the self can do. While education may make encounters with reality possible and can attempt to refer the self to the difficult middle ground and attempt to encourage a desire in the self for wanting to try to exist in a non-ego-logical way, only the self, the ‘I’ can *live* its own life. Only the self can ‘visit’ (Arendt in Biesta, 2002) what and who is other and different in reality and think ‘in one’s own identity where one is actually not’ (Arendt in Biesta, 2002, p. 349) and thus permit oneself a ‘*disorientation* that is necessary to understand how the world can look different to someone else’ (Biesta, 2002, p. 349). Only the self can give one’s own desires a ‘reality check’.

The distinction is important because it involves two different time frames. The work of the self is a lifelong, existential matter, while the work of education ends at some point, which we might say is when the child or young person no longer needs (or is *expected* no longer to be needing) the support and encouragement for this self-work.

Democracy as sporadic – police order and politics

The last idea I shall present in this theoretical chapter is the idea of thinking of democracy as an event that occurs sporadically. This is yet another aspect of Biesta's theorizing that emphasizes *acting*. Biesta draws on the work of Rancière, and as I mentioned above it has particularly been these Rancièrian parts of Biesta's work that have resonated with me and which have, I believe, inspired the emerging childist lens. In *Sporadic democracy: Education, Democracy and the Question of Inclusion* (Biesta, 2009), Biesta problematizes the thesis that the question of inclusion is at the core of prevailing discourses about democracy (Biesta, 2009). In this line of thought democratization is a question about *how* to include more and more people in the sphere of democracy, and although this comes from a well-intentioned position, it also relies on certain assumptions about democracy (Biesta, 2009). Firstly, it relies on the assumption that democracy *can* and *should be* a normal political reality. There are different views on what this reality might look like and hence when and how it is reached, but the assumption remains that the best democracy is the most inclusive one (Biesta, 2009 p. 107). The idea that an 'all-inclusive' democracy is in fact a reachable situation relates to the second assumption, which is the assumption that democratization can be understood as the *process* of inclusion. This is a process in which those 'outside' the sphere of democracy are brought to the 'inside'. It is therefore a process that happens 'from the inside out' (Biesta, 2009, p. 6), that is, a process that '...emanates from the position of those who are already considered to be democratic' (Biesta, 2009 p. 107) which implies '...that someone is setting the terms for inclusion and that it is for those who wish to be included to meet those terms' (Biesta, 2009, p. 6). This is, as Biesta points out, is 'basically a colonial way to understand democratisation' (Biesta, 2009, p. 9).

Drawing on Rancière, Biesta suggests a fundamentally different way of understanding democracy. For Rancière there cannot be any sphere that can be rightly perceived as 'the democratic' in which some are included and some are not. There is an order, which he calls the *police* order. Everyone is included in the order, everyone has a role and a position in the order although not everyone is included in 'running the order' (Biesta, 2009 p. 108). Children, for example, *have* a position in the order but as we have seen in the conceptual framework, the child has historically occupied a 'naturalized' position as some often without (or with little) influence in running the order.

Rancière defines the police order as: ‘an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and that sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task (Rancière, 1999, p. 29). The police order is made up by ‘the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible, and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise’ (p. 29).

Politics is to be understood as a disruption of the police order – however, not just any kind of disruption, but a disruption in the name of equality, which for Rancière makes politics democratic. Politics can be understood as actions that reconfigure the police order and hence ‘shifts a body from the place assigned to it’ (Rancière, 1999, p. 30), and ‘makes visible what had no business being seen and makes heard [and understood] as discourse where once there was only place for noise’ (Rancière in Biesta, 2009, p. 7 with Biesta's addition). Politics is a claim for equality, a claim made from the ‘outside’, ‘based on the perception of injustice’ (Biesta, 2009, p. 8). Those who make the claim do not simply want ‘a seat at the table’. They wish to *reconfigure* the police order. They ‘want to redefine the order in such a way that new identities, new ways of doing and being become possible and can be ‘counted’.’ (Biesta, 2009, p. 8). Democracy then is not a state, it ‘is not a regime or a social way of life’ (Rancière, 1999, p. 101), but an *event* that occurs in situations where ‘two ‘heterogeneous processes’ meet: the police process and the process of *equality*’ (Biesta, 2009, p. 7). (Democratic) politics is something that someone ‘performs’ (Biesta, 2009, p. 8):

[P]olitical actors or subjects – do not exist before the ‘act’ of democracy, or to be more precise: their political identity, their identity as democratic subjects only come into being in and through the act of disruption of the police order. This is why Rancière argues that politics is itself a process of subjectification. It is a process in and through which political subjects are constituted (Biesta, 2009, p. 8).

Importantly, however, even though the claim is made in the name of equality upon a perception of injustice, it does not mean that the police order is necessarily bad. A police order ‘can produce all sorts of good, and one kind of police may be preferable to another’ (Rancière, 1999, p. 31), but ‘whether the police order is “sweet and kind” does not make it any less the opposite of politics’ (Biesta, 2009, p. 9).

The second research question of this dissertation is, how do contemporary educational trends and logics in the Danish context produce conditions of possibility for democratic dannelsen? This research question is informed by Biesta's argument for paying attention to the conditions under which acting as a subject can take place (Biesta, 2007). Rancière's concepts of the police order and politics and the idea of democracy as sporadic play a part in my attempt to produce answer to this. In the dissertation, I pay attention to the conditions under which acting as a subject can take place by paying attention to ways in which logics and technologies uphold and reproduce the existing police order. This is important in the light of some of the elements which in the Danish context are regarded as deeply fundamental for democratic dannelsen. I am speaking of elements such as 'critical thinking', 'the democratic conversation' and 'democratic lifeform' (influenced by Koch, 1991/1945), 'active participation', 'self-independence' and the like. The questions here are, what are the conditions of possibility for what can plausibly be perceived as 'critical thinking', and so on, and what are the conditions of possibility for making a claim for equality and for a re-configuration of the police in the name of equality?

Concluding the theoretical chapter

The theoretical framework of the dissertation is comprised of a Foucauldian discursive approach, Gert Biesta's theory of education as subjectification, and childism as a perspective that determines what, how, and why one should theorize (Biswas, Wall, et al., 2023). The contribution of the dissertation is not either empirical or theoretical. It aspires to be *'both and'*.

Theoretically the ambition is comprised of two things. Firstly, the theoretical aspiration is to contribute to Biesta's theoretical concept of education as subjectification – which the thesis takes as education interested in and oriented towards democratic dannelsen – with empirical knowledge from the world of educational practice. The aspiration is to bring the disciplinary knowledge in Biesta's concept and the empirical knowledge from the world of practice into some kind of relationship and hence explore the practical dimension of Biesta's theory, which then in turn can be potentially revised or expanded. Secondly, the theoretical aspiration is to explore the potentially (and democratically) fruitful expansion of Biesta's theory

by adding a childist lens so as to release what I interpret to be the childist potential of the theory.

The practically oriented contribution of the dissertation is to contribute to educational practice by reinterpreting this practice through a (philosophically more child-inclusive) theoretical frame. More specifically, the dissertation aspires to get very close to concrete everyday educational practice, to get close to living pedagogical relationships, that is, to doings, beings and sayings in everyday life at school, and to interpret these through the theoretical concepts. The aim is to give the reader a ‘real sense’ of what and how we who are involved in education can or should do (or refrain from doing) in order to enhance democratic co-existence.

That said, I will emphasize that the distinction I draw between theoretical and practical is a distinction constructed for explanatory reasons. Educational practice is always (perhaps implicitly) informed by theoretical and philosophical ideas, just as theory and philosophy always (perhaps implicitly) have practical implications.



4

METHODOLOGY, DATA PRODUCTION, AND ANALYSIS

In this chapter I present how the conceptual framework and the theoretical framework inform methodological considerations and the choices made regarding the research design. The chapter furthermore outlines a reconstruction of the most important moments of the research process.

Methodological considerations in the post-structuralist framework

The discursive approach

The dissertation is based on a Foucauldian discursive approach (Hardy, 2022), and I thus place it within a post-structuralist framework. The ontological and epistemological assumptions of a poststructuralist framework comprise an anti-essentialism, and that means for methodology that it rejects the idea of a ‘truth’ or of fixed essential identities ‘out there’ just waiting to be detected and presented by and through research. Post-structuralist theorizing understands knowledge as situated (Haraway, 1988) and thus as infiltrated with societal, social-material, and discursive conditions (Søndergaard, 2018). ‘Reality’ is therefore not stable but rather constantly negotiated and transformed, which also implies that no version of democracy or democratic dannelselse (or any scientific knowledge about democracy or democratic

dannelse) is neither definitive nor neutral. Post-structuralist theorizing in social science research thus acknowledges that ‘much of the world is vague, diffuse or unspecific, slippery, emotional, ephemeral, elusive or indistinct, changes like a kaleidoscope, or doesn’t really have much of a pattern at all’ (Law, 2004, p. 2). Instead of identifying a pre-existing phenomenon such as democratic dannelse, the discursive approach explores practices, texts, and meanings that enable us to talk about democratic dannelse as *if* it existed naturally (Hardy, 2022).

With its discursive approach the dissertation is oriented towards investigating how a particular meaning of democratic dannelse came about, how it is reproduced, what kind of identities it produces, what its possibilities and limitations are, and what might ensue if an alternative meaning were to arise. There is not a ‘field of knowledge arranging itself around a pre-existing object of analysis’ (Hardy, 2022, p. 4). Rather ‘the objects in question are constituted by relevant bodies of knowledge as components of their own conditions of possibility’ (Hook, 2007, p. 148). The discursive approach is thus flexible and accommodates diverse settings and can be used to investigate different ‘levels’ of analysis. The exploration of the phenomenon of democratic dannelse can thus, for example, be exploring institutional system of ideas or closely reading individual texts or combining elements of both. Since discourses weave continuous threads that connect practices, texts, and institutions, the discursive approach rejects any arbitrary distinctions within the social world and provides more holistic understandings. The research design and analysis can and should be customized with an eye to ensuring that it is both ‘empirically ‘fit for purpose’ and theoretically robust’ (Hardy, 2022, p. 7) .

Though the research interest of the dissertation places emphasis on democratic dannelse as a micro-interactional phenomenon, as living pedagogical relationships, as doings, beings and sayings in everyday life at school, it aims at exploring ‘the practice’ of democratic dannelse as always *situated within* and *conditioned by* meso-institutional and macro-social aspects, that is, *within* domain and *across* domain characterizations (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2014; Grant & Marshak, 2011; Kuhn & Putnam, 2014; Phillips & Oswick, 2012; Plotnikof & Pedersen, 2019).

To access the phenomenon of democratic dannelse as everyday lives I prioritize a qualitative research design to enable everyday life to become ‘available’. The qualitative methods enable production of rich data with which to explore (some) empirically embedded complexities, that is, everyday life practices and processes,

details and aspects, in order to theorize and discuss them in *relation to* and/or as a *part of* and/or as a *condition for* democratic dannelsen.

In the post-structuralist framework, I position the thesis in a tension; on the one hand, I see everyday practices and processes as empirical reality constructions that are crucial qualities to access through fieldwork. On the other hand, I acknowledge that the research design, data production, analyses and *I* co-produce the phenomenon of study (Buchanan & Dawson, 2007; Dille & Plotnikof, 2020; Plotnikof & Zandee, 2016). This means that democratic dannelsen is not represented and accounted for unmediated as something that is “out there” as an already existing stock of knowledge, ready to be collected’ (Mason, 2011, p. 51). The way I go about approaching the phenomenon of democratic dannelsen is part of producing it, and I therefore include myself as co-producer prior to, during and after data-production. Therefore, it also makes articulating the design choices and method development even more important in order for the reader to be able to gain insight into how these produce data and how they are used analytically.

A contextual condition of the dissertation in Denmark 2018-2023

Since the subject in the post-structuralist framework is not a stable identity but a subject constantly regulated and regulating itself in accordance with dominant discourses (Foucault, 1982), this of course also implies that the researcher, that is *me* in this case, and the researcher’s relationship with the project and the empirical data are continuously transformed and negotiated (Benozzo & Gherardi, 2020). I therefore want to provide a brief account here of a contextual condition under which this dissertation and its knowledge has come into existence. This is a context that has arguably influenced and shaped the ongoing constantly transformed relationship I have had (and continue to have) with the empirical data, and thus also shaped the aspects highlighted and the knowledge produced. I am here particularly speaking about how the attention to the childist perspective has emerged. But first some context. The project began in January 2018 and finished in the autumn of 2023 and has thus been in process for a period of almost six years (however, paused by among other things a pregnancy and parental leave in 2018/19 and interrupted and delayed by Covid19 lockdowns and various subsequent challenges throughout 2020/21). This period of time, 2018-2023, has been characterized by an increasing public attention and debate in Denmark regarding issues of structural discrimination. The #MeToo wave that spread from the Hollywood film industry in 2017 throughout the world also

became a (cautious) theme of debate in Denmark – mostly focused on single incidents of sexual harassment and abuse as the actions of some amoral individuals. In the late summer of 2020, a second MeToo wave was kickstarted in Denmark when the popular Danish tv host Sofie Linde surprised everybody by going off the scripts in her role as host at a live comedy award show airing during prime time and delivering a powerful and choking speech addressing sexism and gender inequality in the media industry. This wave took off at a whole other level as large number of Danish women as well as some men of many different industries spoke up about experiences of sexism and gender inequality. The wave managed to shift the attention in the debate and to reformulate the problem. What had previously been understood as a problem of wrongful actions of (few) individuals, that is, ‘unfortunate’ exceptions from the norm, was now appearing as a problem with ways in which sexism and gender inequality are built into norms and structures of society (see e.g., Einersen et al., 2021; Muhr & Plotnikof, 2018; Reinicke, 2022; Savigny, 2020). The debate has furthermore shifted towards discussions of diversity with an emphasis on how various oppressive structures discriminate different social categories.

It is in the context of these new prevailing discourses which shapes what can be thought, said and realized, that this dissertation has come into existence. The researcher; *I* too inevitably am regulated by and regulate myself in accordance with dominant discourses (Foucault, 1982) and therefore the relationship I have with the empirical material is constantly negotiated and transformed. New angles must be tested, new insights emerge and new stories about democratic *dannelse* can be told. The point I wish emphasize here, because it is of importance for the reader to understand the reconstruction of the research process in this chapter, is that *I did not begin with childism*. The childist lens emerged over time. It was there as embodied and emotional awareness early on. The initial idea for the project was informed by my reading of Biesta, and as I elaborated in the previous chapter, retrospectively I consider the childist potential in Biesta’s work as the aspect which particularly resonated with me (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). However, I did not recognize this as a *childist* potential at first since I did not initially ‘think with’ the lens of childism.

Taking the societal and discursive conditions (Søndergaard, 2018) of the time into consideration (the MeToo debate and the focus on structural marginalization and discrimination as described above), it is perhaps not odd that I one day found myself noticing that the category of child was not part of the public debate, and I wondered whether there was also a concept to denote discrimination against children. I

remember the exact moment when I thought of typing the word ‘childism’ into Google search, which led me to Elisabeth Young-Bruehl’s book *Childism: Confronting Prejudice Against Children* (2012), a book I had read through within a couple of hours and that illuminated to me the uttermost relevance of such a perspective for the research interest of the dissertation. This was the beginning of my discovery of work by the community of childist researchers as well as my discovery of the childist potential of Biesta’s theory.

The second MeToo wave in Denmark made visible to the larger public the discriminatory sexist norms and structures underlying Danish society, and as a result had produced a general commitment to making changes – a commitment which, despite resistance, will hardly go away. So was my discovery of adultist norms and structures at the same time a discovery of the blindness towards these norms and structures in both research and society at large, and it produced in me a commitment to attempt to initiate change. Thus the concept of childism had already chosen me (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013). It had ‘injected itself in my veins’ as an important and urgent matter and altered my thinking. In other words, there was no turning back. As Wall puts it: ‘childism asks researchers to interpret hegemonically suppressed lived experiences into more expansive social understandings for all’ (Wall, 2019, p. 11).

This means for method that the ‘more child-inclusive lens’ with which this dissertation seeks to study democratic dannelsen manifests itself primarily in the analysis strategy and the engagement with the data rather than in the early methodical choices and considerations. It is therefore also with this in mind that the following reconstruction of the research process should be read.

Research design

A qualitative research design based on ethnographic approaches

In the presentation of my conceptual framework, I presented critiques of the ‘otherworldliness’ and ignorance of basic political realities in the field of political philosophy. I characterized the central discussions of democratic dannelsen in this literature as something that is often remarkably remote from these commonplaces, as if schools are not embodied and inhabited by real human beings (children and adult alike) who have real life experiences. I argued for the need to take into consideration basic political realities, which includes the humdrum everyday lives in a theory of democratic dannelsen. The dissertation thus aspires to bring disciplinary knowledge

and practical knowledge into some kind of relationship. (As I described in chapter three, in the post-structuralist framework such a distinction is understood as constructed; I use it for here explanatory and analytical reasons).

Furthermore, as far as empirical studies have taken an interest in micro-interactive aspects of democratic dannelsen they have tended to do so with the aim of evaluating 'the state' of democratic dannelsen, or with the aim of developing prescriptions for education and educators ('how to do' democratic dannelsen), primarily by focusing on positive aspects (A, B and C desirable results are achieved or not, and X, Y and Z will foster democratic values and attitudes).

The insights from childhood studies are that such studies tend to start from a pre-defined adult-centered normative and exclusive perception of citizenship. Empirical research in democratic dannelsen & democratic education has, in other words, largely uncritically adopted adultist assumptions and has failed to recognize this partly as a result of ignoring the negative aspects (Hart, 2009; Warming, 2019; Warming & Fahnøe, 2017). Experiences of discrimination, marginalization, and violation are powerful lessons too, and great insights can come from studying *negative* aspects of democratic dannelsen. Focusing on negative aspects from the point of view of those considered to be on 'the receiving end' of democratic dannelsen is therefore a way I attempt to employ a more 'child-inclusive perspective'. Informed by this I therefore made three choices for the research design.

Firstly, to explore democratic dannelsen primarily (but not exclusively) as a micro-interactive phenomenon, I create a qualitative research design based on ethnographic approaches. As a discipline and research method, ethnography is interested in and appreciates the complexities of everyday settings and everyday lived experiences of people. The everyday may on the one hand be mundane and characterized by the fact that occurrences appear plain to the eye, and thus one may argue that the everyday is rather uncomplicated, self-evident, and unremarkable. Thus, where is the complexity in that? However, as Ybema et al. put it,

[The] clarity of everyday commonplaces often comes only with hindsight. The very 'ordinariness' of normality often prevents us from seeing it: we tend to have a blind spot for what is usual, ordinary, routine. Moreover, immersion in the particular setting of our daily lives often lead to a rather poor awareness of the social processes that contextualize them' (Ybema et al., 2009, p. 1).

The qualitative approaches and methods I shall present in more detail in this chapter are:

- Multi-sited ethnography and thick description
- Variations of participatory observation
- Semi-structured interviews and informal conversations
- Document analysis
- Rhizomatic analysis
- From a systematic literature review strategy to a ‘rhizomatic ad hoc’-strategy


Secondly, since the dissertation aspires to bring disciplinary knowledge and empirical practical knowledge into some kind of relationship with the aim of revising or expanding (some of) the disciplinary foundations and to reinterpret educational practice through a theoretical frame, the implication for my method is that I will employ a sort of double sensitivity which I seek to carry out in a simultaneous process. Put differently, because the aim of the dissertation is to comprise an intellectual and practical contribution at the same time – that is, it aims at producing knowledge relevant for both the theorized literature and the practical profession (which also serves to challenge the current dominant distinction between these two domains) – the research design must also comprise both an intellectual and practical framework.

The data production is not only a result of the specific methods chosen. *I* am also a ‘research instrument’, that is, my eyes, ears, emotions, body, experiences, and thinking are also ‘tools’ I use to gather information (Maxwell, 2013, p. 88). I therefore also need to ‘tune’, so to speak, to the best of my ability, my ‘tools’ in to this double sensitivity. More specifically, I will attempt to attune the attention of my eyes, ears, emotions, thinking, etc. towards, on the one hand, what the disciplinary knowledge of theoretical concepts might express, argue, and enable or lead me to think, and on the other hand, what the empirical knowledge from the world of practice expresses, argues, and enables or leads me to think. What in other words do they ‘tell me’ to pay attention to? I cannot settle for either of them alone because they each lack the attention of the other. Put differently, these different knowledge producing discourses produce two different ‘truths’ regarding what counts as relevant knowledge and knowledge sources. The dissertation thus attempts to respond to the two varying perceptions of what counts as relevant knowledge sources by integrating both sources

in the research design. Hence, I have attempted to employ simultaneously sensitivity towards the theory on the one hand and empirical knowledge on the other hand.

Thirdly, although I too have a desire to pay attention to the positively connoted aspects of the ideals of democratic dannelsen, informed by the insights from childhood studies (as well as from the feminist and postcolonial perspectives presented in the conceptual framework), I have a curiosity regarding the problematic, rupturing, and disharmonic aspects of democratic dannelsen. This is an exploration that, we could say, I have already begun with the conceptual framework. I will pay attention to the negative aspects of the ‘basic political realities’ (Mills, 1997/2022). This I do to evade the adultist interpretive framework. The expectation is that we can learn about important aspects of democratic dannelsen from the ‘ugly’ side of the story. These are aspects or perspectives that we may otherwise overlook. I take the opposite position of McCabe (2019) in this dissertation and hold that oppressive, marginalizing, and discriminating views and/or processes – or ‘basic realities’ – are indeed ‘worthy of our serious attention’.

Furthermore, informed by Wall and colleagues who argue that children’s voices are silenced *through* the normative interpretive framework that adults bring – e.g., through the adultist conception of the concept of ‘voice’ and the adultist assumption about children’s inability to speak their minds – I attempt to employ a ‘more child-inclusive’ analytical lens (Wall, 2010). Methodically, I do this by drawing on Law, who suggests that in order to ‘know’ some of the complex and messy phenomena of the world, ‘we’re going to teach ourselves to think, to practice, to relate, and to know in new ways’ (Law, 2004, p. 2), which might be through ‘forms of knowing through embodiment’ (p. 2) such as e.g., ‘discomforts, or pains of our bodies’ (p. 2), or through ‘forms of knowing as emotionality or apprehension’ (p. 3), such as ‘“private” emotions that open us up to the worlds of sensibilities, passions, intuitions, fears and betrayals’ (p. 3). Put differently, I attempt to attune my research tools (ears, eyes, body, emotions, thinking etc.) to be ‘more child-inclusive’ (presuming that I cannot escape my adult body and my adult perspective) by taking as a starting point the equality of intelligences (Rancière, 1991) and the assumption that that children are agents in their worlds in which they act and speak, and about which they have opinions and ideas (Biswas, Wall, et al., 2023; Wall, 2019), and hence by ‘listening’ and paying attention to ‘embodied and emotional knowledge’ and ‘embodied and emotional expressions’ (Law, 2004) – my own as well as those of the child and adult participants in the study.



*‘Children are agents in
their worlds in which
they act and speak, and
about which they have
opinions and ideas’*

Discursive case construction and data sources

Multi-sited fieldwork

To accompany the discursive approach I have chosen to conduct multi-sited fieldwork (Marcus, 1995). Multi-sited fieldwork ‘emphasizes a link-up with the more pluralistically sensitive systems perspectives’ (Marcus, 1998, p. 34). It is a perspective that allows one to widen ‘the range of kinds of stories’ (Marcus, 1998, p. 33) which can be told about democratic dannelsen. The multi-sited ethnographic method is about moving around, following along, continuously re-focusing and adjusting. Sites are not constant or clearly pre-defined, nor are data sources, data material or the methods used or employed to produce data (Falzon, 2009). The research process is full of ‘not-yet’ data or ‘shadow data’ and ‘messy, unclear, indeterminate situations’ (Benozzo & Gherardi, 2020, p. 145). The research process of this dissertation is an ongoing and constantly moving process. In the following I describe data-sources and the methods with which I have produced data, and I reconstruct parts of the research process that were among the most influential in leading to the choices made.

Two Danish state schools as the social context of democratic dannelsen as a practice

Since the aspiration of the dissertation is to explore democratic dannelsen as a practice I chose to conduct fieldwork at two Danish state schools. This would be a site where my ‘research tools’ could experience, see, hear and/or feel the messiness of everyday school life and to explore democratic dannelsen in living pedagogical relationships. And just as important, it would be a site where I could perhaps discover ‘basic realities’ which could inform and challenge the potential ‘otherworldliness’ (Mills, 1997/2022) and ‘adultist ignorance’ of the relevant theoretical concepts (and of myself for that matter). Evidently, schools were a site empirically ‘fit for purpose’ (Hardy, 2022, p. 7).

I sat out with a tentative plan which involved ‘immersing’ myself for three weeks in the social context of two Danish elementary schools. The aim was to produce detailed ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz, 1973) of classroom and school life, and thus included complementary methods of conducting formal recorded semi-structured interviews with teachers and school principals and vice principals and various kinds

of observations. By combining the three methods, I wished to gather contextually nuanced and rich data regarding the everyday lives in the schools.

Setting criteria for participant schools, and getting access

I had several reflections regarding criteria for the selection of participant classes and schools. One reflection was the age of the children. Which year-group should I prioritize? Drawing on my theoretical framework, the age should not matter – the political subject is any age. But the age of the children would presumably ask for different methodical approaches and pose different methodical challenges. Furthermore, should the age of the children of the two different schools be the same (or similar)? Or could I visit 6-year-old children at one school and 15-year-old children at another? What would that mean for method, data, and for analysis? 15-year olds would presumably be capable of expressing themselves in a more advanced vocabulary. Would that make it easier for me to produce data regarding their perspectives? Or would it on the contrary align too much with my unconscious habit of communicating through (and privileging?) speech (as adults tend to do; cf. Wall) and would that thus steal my attention, so to speak, with the risk that I might overlook other forms of expression and knowing and thereby overlook basic realities?

In the light of the dissertation's topic, democratic dannelsen, I noticed distinct expectations 'around me' for choosing older students rather than younger ones. Democratic dannelsen is very much associated as something of relevance for 'youth' rather than for 'childhood' (as illustrated in the literature on democratic dannelsen & democratic education, which – as summed up by Cockburn (2020) – illustrates that children under the age of seven are largely absent from citizenship discussions in both theory and practice). Therefore, I regarded it as more interesting and intriguing – and perhaps both more relevant as well as powerful regarding emphasizing the idea of the age-less political subject – to choose fieldwork among young children.

Another reflection I had concerned the so-called socio-economic context of the school. I have in mind here categories such as class, the parents' educational background, economy/wealth, religion, minoritized/majoritized, and rural or city. I considered criteria regarding, for example, the extent to which and the way in which municipalities have met contemporary educational political demands of being 'evidence-based' (Moos, 2019), which could include, for example, (publicly official) investments in contemporary educational trends and logics or the purchase of various

manual-based programs regarding ‘evidence-based’ teaching practices, such as Visible Learning (Hattie, 2012), SOLO-taxonomy (John Biggs, n.d.), Goal Directed Learning (Heckmann, 2016; Ministry of Children and Education, 2014), ‘PALS’ (School Wide Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support), (Arnesen et al., 2008; Danish National Board of Health and Welfare, 2020) just to mention a few.

However, it should turn out that getting access to schools or even getting in contact with them was much more difficult than I had anticipated. I first wrote emails to school managements, but I got no response (I heard that it is not unusual for Danish principals to receive up to 50 emails per day – many of them from interested parties outside the school (many commercial)). Then I phoned schools, but it was difficult to get past the school secretaries. Principals, it seems, are extremely busy. The few principals I did get in touch with were likewise protective of the staff. As one principal told me ‘they are stressed and exhausted. I simply cannot suggest more things for them to consider’ (notes from telephone conversation).

Hence, I learned fast that I was in no position to set criteria for participant schools. I also realized that I had to get directly in touch with individual teachers who might be interested in having me visit, and who might even have the surplus energy required. So, I used my personal network.

Thus, the one criterion I ended up setting was that the participant teachers should be at least two, and preferably more, links out in my network. This was a criterion meant to secure anonymity for participant teachers and to keep the relationship an arm’s length away from myself, close friends, and family. This provision was made in case I should experience something precarious or perhaps transgressive or unacceptable, but also with research ethics and integrity in mind.

I got in contact with some teachers through posts on social media which my network helpfully distributed in their networks. In the post, I requested teachers teaching at the intermediate stage in elementary schools (year-group 4-7, children aged 10-13). One important reason for this was that I decided to conduct a study involving younger children than those who are typically associated with democratic dannelsen. Likewise, I suspected that I myself might easily be drawn to and focused on those activities typically associated with democratic dannelsen, e.g., the subject of social science which is a subject in grade 8 and 9. Furthermore, there was also a matter of a practical and strategic choice related to getting access. I anticipated teachers working with this year-

group to have a bit more time and surplus energy, that is, not yet stressed with exams and preparation for youth education, and over the first couple of (more) busy and demanding years with the youngest children.

Several teachers responded positively, and I ended with two schools that lived up to my one criterion. All teachers (as well as students and parents) were three links or more out in my network.

Fieldwork is a ‘body-contact’ sport

Moeran (2009) speaks of the importance of getting access through the ‘right’ connections, not only to actually *get* access but also because this connection is the person who presents you and your purpose to the fieldwork group or community. Maxwell (2013) likewise emphasizes how the relationship the researcher creates with participants in the study are an essential part of the methods. How one initiates and negotiates these relationships is ‘a key *design* decision’ (Maxwell, 2013, p. 90).

Fieldwork is a “body-contact” sport; with few exceptions, you need to actually interact with other people (...) to collect your data, and your research relationships create and structure this interaction. Conversely, your ongoing contact with participants, including data collection, continually restructures these relationships (Maxwell, 2013, p. 90).

To influence the way in which my relationship with the persons at these participant schools started off, I wrote two versions of information letters that the contact teacher distributed for me. One for teachers and principals, and one for students and parents. One of the important reflections I had in relation to this was to express an (implicit) respect for the hierarchy of the (official) decision-making power at the schools. Danish teachers traditionally enjoy quite a lot of autonomy to decide how to do their work, thus in principle they are the ones with the power to allow me into their classrooms. The letters to the principals and teachers were written with an eye to any potential concerns of principals. Perhaps principals would not agree that participation in the project was the right priority for the teachers. I wished to respect any concerns of principals and to increase the possibility of conducting interviews with the principals and school management too. This letter involved 1) informing recipients about the project more generally, 2) informing them about data-management (in alignment with the GDPR), 3) emphasizing a respect for teachers’ and principals’ time

as well as for the lessons and teaching, 4) offering to pay for the cost of potential substitute teachers (neither of the schools needed this, they told me).

My letter to students and parents was written with an eye to stressing the right to decline my invitation to participate. I emphasized some of the ways in which I would handle conducting fieldwork in the class and protect those children who did not wish to participate – or whose parents did not want them to participate. I emphasized that I my interest was not in any individual child or teacher but in teaching practice and ordinary school life. Thus, what they accepted would be that I wrote fieldnotes and produced data on *situations* in which the students were involved.

I wrote my email address and phone number and invited them to contact me for further information. One parent did. We had an interesting conversation lasting more than an hour. By the end of the conversation, the parent told me that she endorsed the project and wished me luck and that as such she was convinced that I would handle data in an appropriate and ethically correct way. However, out of principle, she had to decline her child's participation in the study. Hence, I did not write notes about any situation in which this child was a part.

The two participants schools are:

Vesterborg elementary school (VES) which is a school with approximately 1000 students. It is placed in a city district and as I shall elaborate in chapter six, when I present the case schools in more detail, it is a school which has invested extensively in 'evidence-based practice'. At VES, I visited year group four (children aged 10) and conducted two interviews lasting approximately 40 minutes. The first was a semi-structured group interview with two representatives from the school management. I have not directly included excerpts from this interview in the thesis, but it has, however, contributed to my thinking and to the directions the dissertation has taken. The other interview was a group interview with two primary teachers, Lola and Peter. This interview was conducted three weeks after my fieldwork, due to illness.

Greenhill elementary school (GES) is a school with approximately 800 students placed in a rural district. At GES I visited year group six (children aged 12), and conducted three semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 40 minutes each. The first was a group interview with two primary teachers Betty and Adam. The second was with two other teachers in the team. Material from this interview is, however, not included directly in the dissertation but has informed my thinking and some of the directions the dissertation has taken. Finally, I interviewed the school

principal, Catherine. The table below illustrates the timeline of the fieldwork during the fall of 2019.

	Sep.2019	Oct. 2019	Nov. 2019	Dec. 2019	Jan. 2020	Feb. 2020
Preparing for fieldwork						
3 weeks at VES						
Interviews VES						
3 weeks at GES						
Interviews GES						
Processing field notes						
Transcribing						

At both schools I participated in the majority of the weekly lessons (approximately 33 lessons). I left the classroom when there was a substitute teacher because they did not have enough time to consider whether they wanted to agree to participate in the project.

At VES I also paid an interest in a weekly so-called ‘Agent team’ meeting where selected teachers in their roles as ‘impact coaches’ met with the school management to do ‘learning walks’³¹ with the aim of collecting data on the implementation of a municipal behaviour program³². I also had the opportunity to attend a staff meeting and a municipal workshop with the theme SOLO-taxonomy (John Biggs, n.d.) and

³¹ ‘Learning Walks’ is an originally Australian evaluation tool, which is described by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School leadership (a public company based in Melbourne and funded by the Australian Government) as ‘a group of teachers visiting multiple classrooms at their own school with the aim of fostering conversation about teaching and learning in order to develop a shared vision of high quality teaching that impacts on student learning’ (<https://www.aitsl.edu.au/tools-resources/resource/learning-walks>).

³² This was the program PALS, a Scandinavian version of the American School-Wide Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support (SW_PBIS).

Goal Directed Learning (Heckmann, 2016; Ministry of Children and Education, 2014). I furthermore got the opportunity to speak to the municipal head of schools about current school development strategy and future prospects in the municipality. I accompanied the principal to a meeting with the municipal administration personnel. I had not planned on participating in these activities during my fieldwork. I did not know in advance that they were scheduled. Hence these were unexpected opportunities seized upon in the moment (one was on a day the teacher was ill and the class had a substitute teacher all day, so I was wondering what to do instead of classroom observation). Participation in these activities provided me with a lot of contextual information. I shall not present excerpts from this body of fieldnotes as data in the dissertation, but as parts of my ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973), these notes have informed my attention, my interpretation, and further insight into the everyday life at these two schools; they thus function as a sort of contextualizing ‘shadow data’ (Benozzo & Gherardi, 2020).

At both schools I played with and talked to children during breaks and playtimes, and on a few occasions I accompanied groups of children in their afternoon activity clubs. I also spent breaks in the staff room where I had conversations with a lot of other teachers. Finally, I had some brief conversations with parents.

Variations of participant observations and writing fieldnotes

Atkinson & Hammersley argue that ‘all social research is a form of participant observation, because we cannot study the social world without being part of it. From this point of view participant observation is not a particular research technique but a mode of being-in-the-world characteristic of researchers’ (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994, p. 249). Drawing on this insight, participatory observation is the notion I use to label the many variations of modes and methods I have employed and developed during my visits to the two participant schools.

The observations changed between being very quiet and passive or participating actively, writing notes on my computer or writing handwritten fieldnotes in my notebook (sometimes while walking), placing myself at a distance, close to or in the middle of what was going on and in responding to what participants invited me to do (for example, playing in the school yard, helping with practical tasks, joining meetings, seeing different locations at the school, accessing a learning platform, visiting the afternoon club).

I wrote as many concrete and detailed notes as possible about a wide range of issues (Moeran, 2009), regarding what I saw and what was said, and also regarding things I wondered about, things I did not understand or that appeared odd to me, or about feelings I felt (Gherardi, 2019; Law, 2004).

Some of my notes were very detailed, while others were brief jottings. I wrote all fieldnotes out in more detail and elaborated on them while the situations and experiences were still fresh in my memory (e.g. the same afternoon or evening) (Emerson et al., 2006).

Coping with uncertainty in an enormous amount of ‘messy’ not-yet data

This means that I have written pages and pages of notes. I have prioritized trying to be as explorative and open as possible, including being responsive to whatever ‘informal data-gathering strategies’ were feasible (Maxwell, 2013, p. 88), which turned out to include ‘hanging out’, corridor talks, incidental observations or conversations and whatever the children or adults might bring up, suggest to me or draw my attention to. I also considered it relevant that they brought precisely this or that up or made such a suggestion. I worked with a principle of ‘dwelling’, that is, I attempted to ‘cope with the not-yet of situations without discarding what is not fully understood or what is not comprehensible at that particular moment’ (Benozzo & Gherardi, 2020, p. 146). I attempted to wait and slow down ‘to find ways of approaching the complex and uncertain objects that fascinate because they literally hit us or exert a pull on us’ (Stewart, 2020, p. 4).

Balancing the ongoing negotiated relationship with the participants

Informed by Maxwell, I had many reflections about how to balance the ongoing relationship with the participants in the study wisely and ethically. For example, in informal conversations, I started off with talking about subjects deemed ‘safe’ by the participants (Moeran, 2009, p. 144). Given the theoretical framework of the dissertation, my starting point is rather critical of what goes on in contemporary education (e.g., Biesta, 2019, 2021). This critical lens is of course not directed at what individual teachers or individual schools do or do not do, but rather towards the rationales and logics which condition what can be thought, said, and done (Hardy, 2022). Nevertheless, I could potentially – and that also happened – experience or observe ways of thinking, saying and doing of which I would be critical, and furthermore simply – without being in control of it – experience embodied and

emotional reactions that the participants might notice and interpret as a criticism, which could perhaps jeopardize our relationship. Whereas I in the beginning almost instinctively stayed within ‘safe’ subjects, I later began pursuing topics or questions that I wanted to pursue rather than keeping to only those that the participants seemed to want me to pursue (Moeran, 2009, p. 145).

For example, one of my participant schools had implemented PALS³³ – a Scandinavian version of the American School Wide Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support, which implied that teachers rewarded students with Good cards when they had ‘lived up to expected behaviour’ (field notes). Several times during my fieldwork, I asked about the behaviouristic character of this practice (ideas of behaviourism do not sit well within Danish *pædagogical* convictions and so this was a somewhat unpleasant question). The answer was the same every time. It was not about controlling children’s behaviour. Rather, the teachers explained, it was about directing the *teachers’* attention towards all the good things the students do’ (fieldnotes). This response annoyed me, and one day as I stood with a group of three teachers it simply just came out of my mouth, that if it was *really* about directing *teachers’* attention then why not instead let the school management rewards teachers with Good cards when they were attentive to all the good things the children did. The moment I had said it, I realized that my question aimed to illustrate that their narrative was illogical, that is, my response was a provocation. However, to my surprise, the teachers burst into laughter as if I had made a hilarious joke, and one of the teachers replied, ‘that wouldn’t exactly be well received’ (this situation is published in Holloway & Hedegaard, 2021). Out of a consideration regarding maintaining a good relationship with these teachers, I did not reply.

Situations like this surprised me. What was my logic and how was it different from these teachers’? It made me curious. Situations like this resembled what Benozzo and Gherardi (2020) categorize as ‘illegible data’, which they describe as a ‘situation of not knowing how to interpret what is in front of us’ (p. 147). At some point, I came to interpret the ‘shadow data’ of this situation and similar situations as a pattern. Concurrently with my engagement with the theoretical literature, the data came out of the shadows, so to speak, and I began to interpret it as demonstrating that we tend to think of it as *obviously* legitimate to do to children what we find unthinkable to accept

³³ ‘Positiv Adfærd i Læring og Samspil’

being done to us (adults). But it is not obvious *on what grounds* this is so obvious. This sort of emerging data played a part in the dissertation's growing childist lens.

Taking into consideration the theories held by the participants

As stated earlier, one aspiration of this dissertation is to bring disciplinary knowledge and practical knowledge into some kind of relationship. Informed by Maxwell (2013, p. 52-53), I consider the theories held by the participants in the study an important *source of theory*. These theories inform the participant's actions and as such they are the logics I which to investigate. The theories can be produced by contemporary trends and logics within education, but they can also be informed by the embodied and emotional knowledge the participants have about what goes on in everyday life at school. The participants have far more experience than I do with the everyday school life, so paying attention to this knowledge and taking seriously the theories of the participants may provide important insights into what is going on. In other words, I have attempted to equalize the level of authority and 'truth' value of both the disciplinary knowledge and the practical knowledge. This of course does not imply that the participant's theories are beyond criticism (nor is the disciplinary knowledge), but it *does* mean that I have taken the theories seriously, and thus also pursued them in my fieldwork.

The personal journal

Surely there are theories that it is easier and more comfortable for me to 'believe' than others. There are theories that align more with my personal assumptions than others. By employing strategies in which they were made very explicit to me, I have attempted to take into consideration the ways in which my personal assumptions play a role – both while conducting fieldwork at these schools but also in the process of selecting, analyzing, and writing. For example, throughout the project, I have kept a personal journal. In this journal I have allowed myself – or to put it more precisely – I have forced myself to write all my uncensored beliefs, attitudes, and interpretations. In this journal, I allow myself to include interpretations or judgements such as 'ridiculous' and 'stupid' without providing any arguments. This has served to make it apparent to me what I *felt* about this or that, and I could then pursue the reasons (or perhaps the lack of reasons) behind the feeling. This method particularly helped me during my fieldwork at the schools. It helped me take seriously the theories held by the participants, when such theories were hard for me to believe or when I felt

uncomfortable with them – as was the case, for example, with the theory held by the participants regarding the Good card practice as described above. Keeping my personal journal helped me stay attuned to the logics and discourses producing the theories as ‘truths’ rather than dismissing them too quickly.

Ethical dilemmas – signing the ‘adultist contract’ or not?

It is of crucial relevance that participation in research is not harmful to the participants, and I have an important responsibility towards the participants in the project. But what if one cannot maintain a good relationship with participant A without (indirectly) harming participant B?

Before I went on fieldwork at VES and GES, I had begun fieldwork at another school. Let us here name this school ABC. At ABC I quickly realized that the contact teacher was practicing a pedagogy that I experienced as transgressively unethical and unacceptable. The teacher frequently humiliated some of the children – mainly the boys. In one of the situations I witnessed, the teacher harshly (yet also eloquently and calmly, in a pseudo-friendly tone of voice) blamed a boy for being ‘grumpy’ and ‘peeved’. At first the boy rejected this characterisation, but the teacher kept going at him (still in an eloquent and ‘friendly’ manner). Then the boy began to apologize, but the teacher kept going at him. Eventually the boy broke down and cried. Then the teacher stopped. Everybody in the classroom – including myself – was quiet. Bodies were still. The teacher resumed the lesson. After the lesson the teacher spoke to me as if we as *adults* were aligned on this matter (this is the logic of the ‘adultist contract’). The teacher legitimized what had happened. I said nothing (a reaction I am not proud of, and which still haunts me today).

The boy was not harmed as such by my research, however, being an adult sitting passively in the room in front of all the children and not objecting to what was going on was (however passively) approving and legitimizing it. That is, I signed in on the adultist contract in that very moment. This is what adults are expected to do with regard to matters like this, and *that* was a harmful ‘message’, not only to the boy but to all the children in the class. I protected the teacher, that is, the adult, but first of all I protected myself from the discomfort of refusing to sign in on the adultist contract. Thus, even though I proclaimed in chapter two that I am encouraged by Sarah Ahmed (2023) to explore the radical potential in ‘getting in the way’ of adultist logics it is much easier behind the computer than ‘face to face’ with adultism.

My solution was to interrupt my fieldwork at this school and search for another participant school. However, it has not made this dilemma go away. Adultism is everywhere. At VES and GES, I did not experience any teacher acting transgressively towards children as the teacher at ABC did. However, I witnessed many situations in which children and their perspectives were in more subtle and ‘acceptable’ ways dismissed, marginalized, subordinated, etc. I only recognized many of these situations as adultist long after the fieldwork, during my reading of the empirical material. I was slowly beginning to discover adultism, which at the same time is discovering the blindness to adultism, and this discovery gave rise to a new dimension of the question of research ethics and what it means to ‘harm’ participants.

Semi-structured interviews

I conducted a total of five semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018) with in total ten adults during my fieldwork at the two schools. Interviewing the teachers during my fieldwork enabled me to ask about what was ‘behind’ what I had seen or heard or sensed, and it likewise comprised a focused setting in which the teachers (having knowledge from the world of practice) could draw my attention to something I had perhaps not noticed or thought of.

Talking about democratic dannelsen, or perhaps not?

My initial preparation for the semi-structured interviews was carried out before my fieldwork. I had prepared a handful of variations on an interview guide, putting more or less emphasis on the theme of the dissertation, democratic dannelsen. However, as I began the fieldwork, I became more and more aware of a pattern I had slowly begun to notice. Whenever I brought up democratic dannelsen the conversations were likely to be directed towards the activities or narratives typically associated with democratic dannelsen, which – as I have argued in the conceptual framework – rests upon assumptions that I wish to challenge in this dissertation. Hence, I was not particularly interested in these ‘typical’ democracy themes. I realized that in the interviews we should then in fact *not* talk that much about ‘democratic dannelsen’ as such. At least we should not start there.

The final interview guide was therefore developed with the aim of skirting the typical democracy themes that were the interviewees’ presumed expectations about the theme of the interview. With Foucault, we might say that I attempted to offer another system of thought than what was (currently) offered by the notion of

democratic dannelsen. Concretely, this meant that at the beginning of all the interviews, I specifically emphasized that even though the dissertation's main topic was democratic dannelsen, I wanted to start somewhere else.

Inviting and legitimizing embodied and emotional knowledge

Furthermore, I wished to 'invite' 'forms of knowing through embodiment' (Law, 2004, p. 2) and 'forms of knowing as emotionality' (Law, 2004, p. 3) such as "'private' emotions that open us up to the worlds of sensibilities, passions, intuitions, fears and betrayals' (Law, 2004, p. 3). I do not here mean that I expected this knowledge to manifest itself as embodied and emotional expressions. Rather, I wished to enable articulations of what is perhaps difficult in the current educational landscape and vocabulary to consider as important and legitimate educational knowledge. To make these invitations I posed questions at the beginning of our interviews such as:

- Can you go back and talk about why you decided to become teachers?
- What attracted you to becoming teachers?
- What makes you go to work every day?
- What do you hope these children will remember in the future about their time here at Greenhill elementary school?
- When do you go home from work with a great feeling about the day?
- Do you have a favorite example of a successful situation with a student?
- If we put aside for a moment the obviously important aspects of schooling – that the students must learn to write and read and all the other stuff – then what is the most important thing you would like them to take with them when they leave this school?
- What is to you the larger purpose of all this?
- If you had the power to design schooling what would be some of your priorities?

I here favoured questions that would enable all positive stories. Though I have stated above that I will pay attention to the negative sides of the story, I did not do so in any way that could jeopardize my relationship with the participants in the study (cf. the above-mentioned reflections regarding my relationship with participants). Thus, in the interview situation – where there is furthermore a recorder on the table – I did not ask very critical questions. I wished to keep the interviewees as comfortable as possible

and enable them to co-steer the direction and themes of the conversation. They did, however, themselves bring up some negative aspects, as we shall see later in the analysis. Put differently, they ‘authorized’ our speaking about this.

These types of questions were furthermore informed by my reading of Biesta, who has argued how the contemporary educational discourse, the ‘learning language’, has occluded important themes such as *purpose*, *content*, and *relationships*. Thus, the interview guide was designed with the specific aim of creating possibilities for these themes. As we shall see in the later analysis, these themes are in no way invisible to the interviewees in this study, and some of the interviewees had rich, fascinating, and touching ways of talking about relationality.

I was attentive to analogies and stories that the teachers and principals used to describe and explain their thoughts about what goes on and what needs special attention in the everyday life of school. I did this with the specific purpose of inviting and ‘legitimizing’ the embodied and emotional knowledge from the world of practice. One of my key goals was to position this knowledge as of equal importance and as having equal right as disciplinary knowledge to claim to be knowledge of the ‘truth’ regarding education and educational practice.

For example, one of the teachers describes an aspect of his teaching practice by using the phrase that he ‘humanizes himself’. To elaborate on this, he provides several little examples and stories about what he means. These stories and examples were very fruitful in my attempt to capture the sense of this ‘humanization’.

In my interview technique, I was inspired by what James Spradley labels ‘discovery principles’ (Spradley, 2013) – a way of asking questions with the purpose of enabling an elaboration and exemplification of diffuse phenomena. This can be done, for example, by asking,

- How the concept is used (the use principle) e.g., ‘how do you humanize yourself?’
 - How it differs from other concepts (the contrast principle), e.g., ‘how is that different from what you described before?’
 - How it relates to other concepts (the similarity principle) e.g., ‘is that then also what you would describe as a ‘humanization’?’
- (Spradley, 2013, pp. 156-157).

It was – I believe – not so difficult to invite and be allowed to hear the embodied and emotional knowledge of the teachers. I struggled more with this in my interviews with the principals and school management. Drawing on one of the key assumptions in ethnography this can (at least partly) have something to do with the fact that at the time of the interview I had spent many hours with teachers, and not only as an observer in a classroom in which they were teachers, but also in many both friendly and humorous everyday conversations where we had talked about this and that, including personal things. In fact, at one of the schools they invited me to stay for a Friday afternoon drink with their colleagues. Thus, our relation was already somewhat personal. ‘Acceptance’ by ‘the local community’ is of great significance in terms of gaining ‘insider’ perspectives (Geertz, 1972).

I had only met the principals and school management a few times and furthermore, they are (to a much greater extent than the teachers) official representatives of the school. In their professional role there are certain requirements, such as municipal strategies and accountability systems, that they must meet. The principal Catherine speaks of a dilemma in our interview between what *she* wishes for the children at the school and what she as principal is required to do by the law and municipal policy. I shall present that in a later analysis.

Memorizing the interview guide

I chose to memorize the interview guide. Not in terms of concrete questions or a list of questions. I did not want to sound instrumental. I memorized the points I had decided to pay attention to (as described above) (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). I memorized it to avoid having a paper lying in front of me for two reasons. Firstly, I wished to avoid having an interview guide on the table that might signal to the interviewees that I had a range of questions to go through. I anticipated that having such a list might prevent the interviewees from influencing the topics we should talk about. I wanted to create fruitful conditions for the expression of knowledge from the world of practice. Secondly, I also wanted to free myself from having an agenda on paper. I feared that I too would perhaps be inclined to look down at the paper and follow ‘the script’ and thus overlook important ‘signals’ or interesting themes.

The interviews were conducted at the schools, in meeting rooms and at the principals’ offices. The interviews proceeded in Danish, and I transcribed them in Danish. I sent the transcriptions to the participants with the purpose of allowing them to nuance, withdraw, or comment on utterances – however, they all accepted the texts

without comments. The excerpts I use in the thesis have been translated with an eye to maintaining the meaning.

Discovering other ‘relevant’ data sources

The above-described fieldwork at two Danish elementary schools was a relatively easy choice to make regarding the research design due to the fact that schools were empirically ‘fit for purpose’ (Hardy, 2022, p. 7). It was also ‘easy’ to consider education policy documents as relevant data sources at the meso-institutional level (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2014; Kuhn & Putnam, 2014; Phillips & Oswick, 2012). However, it was much more difficult to decide *which* documents (national and/or transnational) would be relevant and to what, and which other data sources could be relevant. The strategy I decided on was to cope with the discomfort of staying ‘at least temporarily lost and uncertain’ (Benozzo & Gherardi, 2020, p. 148) and relying on a ‘flexibility’ to respond to emergent insights and to avoid ‘methodological tunnel vision’ (Maxwell, 2013, p. 88) in making sense of moving data emanating from various potential emerging data sources (Benozzo & Gherardi, 2020; Buchanan & Dawson, 2007; Dille & Plotnikof, 2020; Gherardi, 2019; Plotnikof & Zandee, 2016). Regarding policy documents, I employed a strategy similar to that of the conceptual framework of the dissertation and steered the process of searching for, reading, demarcating, analyzing, and synthesizing national as well as transnational education policy documents in terms of the criterion of *relevance*. For a long time, scanning various education policy documents was indeed interesting and insightful but it remained difficult – if not impossible – for me to judge what was relevant. Or put differently, there were many aspects that could have been relevant. The reason was that I had yet to discover and establish *what* more precisely it should be relevant *for*.

According to Maxwell and Grady & Wallston, a really good source – but one that is often overlooked – of ideas for research questions is ‘observing the world’. Great insights and fruitful ideas can come from one’s own and others’ ‘speculative thinking’, ‘observational or informal hunches’ as well as one’s ‘own personal experiences’ (Grady & Wallston, 1988, pp. 40-42; Maxwell, 2013, p. 88). It was such sources that contributed to establishing the answer to the question of *to what* the selected policy documents should be relevant. This leads me to elaborate on the production of data from public discourses. I return to these ‘observing the world’ sources below.

How ‘thinking with theory’ intertwines with the emergence of data sources

Initially, it had not crossed my mind to produce data from public discourses of democracy. I became attentive to and interested in such discourses because they were constantly in my way. As I emphasized in my discussion of the conceptual framework – and as we shall see in more detail in a later analysis – notions such as democracy, democratic values, democratic education, democratic dannelsen, that is, basically any phenomenon or word attached to ‘democratic’, lay out a very distinct set of systems of thought (Foucault, 1981). The way in which I attempted to theorize democratic dannelsen in this dissertation, the way I wished to conceptualize it and articulate it, simply felt impossible in this system of thought.

Following Foucault, the truth value of a statement is always conditioned by how it is positioned in relation to what is already considered to be true knowledge. The way I – informed by the theory – attempted to speak about the dissertation’s topic, democratic dannelsen, was constantly perceived as incorrect, implausible, and false precisely because it did not sit well (perhaps it did not sit at all) within the (current) regularity followed by articulations of the phenomenon of democracy (Foucault, 1972, p. 145). “‘Truths’ is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements’ (Foucault, 2000, p. 132), and I did not speak the ‘truth’. I do not mean that people directly perceived what I said as incorrect or false. I felt misunderstood and incapable of articulating the phenomenon to be studied. Somehow it was always changed into something other than what I intended.

At some point, I began to think differently about my feeling of frustration about this. A colleague suggested that this feeling of mine was perhaps important ‘data’. Following Benozzo and Gherardi, ‘what is illegible produces emotions: fears and anxiety, bewilderment and a feeling of guilt’ (2020, p. 149). ‘A wonder is an untapped potential’ (MacLure, 2013, p. 228). Maybe my own body and emotions were relevant data sources. As Law argues, ‘we’re going to teach ourselves to [...] know in new ways’ (2004, p. 2), which e.g., can be through ‘forms of knowing through embodiment’ (p. 2) such as e.g., ‘discomforts, or pains of our bodies’ or ‘forms of knowing as emotionality or apprehension’ (p. 3), such as “‘private’ emotions that open us up to the worlds of sensibilities, passions, intuitions, fears and betrayals’ (p. 3).

I began to pay attention to my ‘private’ feeling of frustration and inability on this matter and I ‘thought with’ Foucault. Not as a deliberate choice, that is, I did not

deliberately decide that *today I will 'think with' Foucault about precisely this*, but as I have argued in the theoretical chapter the thinking thinks about whatever it thinks about. 'Thinking is not something "we" do; thinking happens to us, from without' (Colebrook, 2006, p. 38).

This thinking enabled me to interpret my 'private' feeling as a regulative feeling. The subject is always regulated by and regulates itself in accordance with dominant discourses (Foucault, 1982). What counts as right and wrong is produced by the logics, language and techniques available and already accepted as truths. My feeling was produced by these 'dividing practices' which function to separate the sane from the mad (Foucault, 1982, pp. 777-778). My idea about democratic dannelsen was implausible. It was 'mad'.

I recognized that my feeling of discomfort is a way of 'knowing' (Law, 2004) how powerfully dominant democracy discourses play a role in conditioning what can be thought, said and in the end done regarding democratic dannelsen. 'What is illegible also produces actions' (Benozzo & Gherardi, 2020, p. 150). It gave me the idea to interrogate and scrutinize these discourses, to explore and show what is included and what is not, to denaturalize or 'untrue', so to speak, the 'truths' about democracy and democratic dannelsen. The purpose was to enable discussion and to demonstrate that what currently is, is but *one* possible way of thinking about democracy and democratic dannelsen and that it *can* be different. Perhaps such analysis could open paths to something new regarding the democratic role of education.

In continuation of these reflections, 'relevant' policy documents became those specifically addressing the democratic role of education, where I could interrogate democracy discourses. Paradoxically, such documents were among those to which I had given the least attention so far. They had not interested me much since they comprised a logic about democracy and democratic dannelsen which was very far from the way this dissertation set out to study democratic dannelsen. These were the types of logics I had attempted so hard to 'get around' so as to make myself and my conceptualization of democratic dannelsen intelligible. But as Hardy argues, there is no standing 'outside' of discourses to 'amount attacks on it' (Hardy, 2022, p. 5). In other words, there is no 'getting around'.

When I came to consider dominant democracy discourses to be of interest for study, the site of potentially relevant data sources drastically widened. Data become,

data happen, ‘data are here and there, and in this space they catch fire, they light up, they become inflamed with desire’ (Benozzo et al., 2013, p. 311).

Selecting relevant education policy documents and conducting fieldwork in the ‘world’

Since the dissertation studies a Danish context, I was interested in Danish local and national policy documents. Drawing on Foucault, I here also include practices and initiatives such as e.g., national campaigns, the appointment of advisory bodies, distribution of the national public budget, investments, etc. as policy ‘text’ (Anderson & Holloway, 2020). Furthermore, informed by the literature presented in the conceptual framework from education policy research (e.g., Brogger, 2019; Field, 2008; Grek, 2009; Krejsler, 2021; Krejsler & Moos, 2021; Martens, 2010; Mausethagen, 2013; Sahlberg, 2012; Steiner-Khamsi, 2005, 2012; Wiseman et al., 2010), I was also interested in policy documents from some of the influential transnational agencies. There exist many such potentially interesting and relevant documents. However, the Danish Ministry of Children and Education legitimizes and authorizes the Danish approach and initiatives with reference to *particular* transnational documents, that is, these are evidently influential on Danish education policy, and they are thus what I selected to produce data from. The documents and policy ‘texts’ included as data in this dissertation are listed in the table of **‘the total data set’** in **appendix A**.

As for other potentially relevant data sources for a discursive approach to the study of democratic dannelsen, the phenomenon of democracy is articulated *all over*. As was emphasized in the discussion of my conceptual framework, it is *the* word in the history of human languages which, as Dunn puts it, has won a ‘smashing victory’ in ‘the verbal competition for ultimate political commendation around the globe’ (Dunn, 2018, p. xix). Dunn notes as well that this is the case despite the fact that the word ‘democracy’ appears in ‘several distinct and rationally incompatible ways’ (Dunn, 2018, p. xii). I have thus produced data from all kinds of different sources, or in the words of Maxwell, I have employed ‘any informal data-gathering strategies feasible’ (Maxwell, 2013, p. 88). This means, that besides the data produced from my fieldwork at the two participant schools and from selected education policy documents, I have produced data from incidental conversations with various people in various formal as well as informal settings (including my memory of conversations I had before the

official beginning of this project), from the media, municipal investments, private communication agencies, from something my child said, the Danish parliamentary election, and experiences at PhD courses. I have also included as data that something is absent. For example, I found myself noticing that certain questions were not asked in relation to the reform of the Danish school in 2014. These were questions which seemed to me to be relevant questions. I therefore felt surprised and somewhat disorientated by this ‘uncanny reality’ (Benozzo & Gherardi, 2020, p. 145).

In that sense, I have conducted participatory observation in the (Danish) ‘world’ as ‘a mode of being-in-the-world characteristic of researchers’ (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994, p. 249). It is the ‘thinking with theory’ (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) which acknowledges something as empirical data (St. Pierre, 2011). As Taguchi & St. Pierre argue ‘No one can predict in advance how/when/why/where a philosophical concept or the world itself might interrupt and reorient our thinking’ (Taguchi & St. Pierre, 2017, p. 644). An estimated list of data produced from ‘the world’ can be found in **‘the total data set’ in appendix A.**

Data management, analytical strategy and shifting relationship with the data material

The data management was influenced by the Covid19 situation, which was a period with shifting working locations as well as varying work intensity (see e.g., Boncori, 2020; Cui et al., 2022; Malisch et al., 2020; Pereira, 2021). I shall not go to detail regarding the Covid19 challenges I personally experienced, but it should be kept in mind in the following account of the data management, which in some ways ended up being an ad hoc process. I therefore reconstruct this part of the research process by describing some of the most important elements, and I shall put emphasis of how the boundaries between fieldwork, data management, shifting relationship with the empirical material, and analysis are blurred.

I printed a double set of all the transcribed interviews and hung them up on the wall in my office and in the basement of my house (where I worked during lockdowns). I printed one set of fieldnotes (the ones I had written out on computer) but these I kept in a folder. The policy documents were online except for on ‘Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (CoE, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c) which I had in book form. I had two notebooks – one which I had used for handwritten fieldnotes before and during my fieldwork at the schools, and one in which I wrote sudden

impulses, something that puzzled me, something I heard which reminded me of something else, something I just remembered etc. On top of that I had several ‘data’ in my memory. However, I did not know they were there or that they were relevant data until they appeared in processes of reading and writing (Benozzo et al., 2013). For example, in the process of producing the analysis of democratic discourses, I remembered something from my own grant application. This was now suddenly relevant as data (I shall elaborate on this in chapter five).

The printed interviews were almost always visible right in front of me, and my eyes often wandered over them even when I was in the middle of something completely different. I had to actively take the notes out when I wanted to go over them (of course some events and situations occasionally appeared in my memory). This circumstance paved the way for placing the interviews at the centre of my attention. It was not a deliberate choice. The fieldnotes was ‘scheduled’ to go on the wall as well. But in the confusion of Covid19 and related circumstances they never got up there. Thus, the final version of one of the dissertation’s analyses – which we shall see in chapter seven – is structured from excerpts from the interviews, whereas vignettes produced from fieldnotes play the supporting role in producing more in-depth detailed understanding of phenomenon of study.

Rhizomatic analytical strategy

I have applied a rhizomatic analytical strategy which – informed by Deleuze & Guattari’s (2000) metaphor – break with the idea of a clear beginning or end (Khawaja, 2018). To make sense of the welter of data material, the analytical curiosity, the theories held by the participants in the study and spontaneous thoughts and impulses, I have read and reread my material over and over again. Each reading aims to produce some kind of order or system in the material and with each reading new and more detailed connections, themes or patterns appear (Khawaja, 2018, p. 167).

In between or along with readings of the material, I have read texts of the theorist with whom I think in this dissertation, and the reading of the data material becomes characterized by a specific conceptual focus, such as e.g., ‘the difficult middle ground’ (Biesta, 2020b) or ‘addressing the you’ (Biesta, 2021). In that sense, the concepts function like a ‘coat closet’ (Maxwell, 2013, p. 49). The concepts provide a framework for making (one kind of) sense of the data. They function as ‘coat hooks’

and provide places to ‘hang’ data as well as illustrating their relationship with other data.

Other readings of the material have been characterized by my attention to the theories held by the participants in the study. Such theories have functioned as ‘theory as spotlight’ (Maxwell, 2013, p. 49). For example, the day after my interview with the teachers Adam and Betty, Adam tells me that he has been thinking about what he said during our interview. He is puzzled about the fact that he used the word ‘humanize’ to describe an aspect of his teaching practice. He tells me that he has never used this term before in talking about what he does, but that he thinks that it ‘actually makes quite good sense’ (fieldnotes). This reflection of Adam in the aftermath of the interview functioned as a ‘spotlight’. Adam’s reflection made me attentive to this phenomenon of ‘humanization’. That same day I listened to the part of the interview where Adam speaks about ‘humanization’. Adam’s ‘humanization theory’ furthermore drew my attention to particular events in the material.

It is through such readings that I have attempted to bring the disciplinary knowledge and the practical knowledge into some kind of relationship. I have attempted to bring e.g., the theory of Biesta and the theory of Adam into a relationship.

But not all theories will accommodate all the data equally well, and no one theory will accommodate them all. Some data remains disheveled and ‘place-less’. This has largely been ok. Surely, other data could have been interesting and relevant to dig into too, but one can never deal with everything all at once. Not every aspect, question or curiosity can be pursued. However, throughout a long period of rhizomatic reading of the material and writing and producing drafts of analyses, I have had the feeling that something was missing. What began as ‘speculative thinking’ and as an ‘observational or informal hunch’ (Benozzo & Gherardi, 2020; Gherardi, 2019; Grady & Wallston, 1988; Maxwell, 2013) grew stronger over time along with repeated readings. Something important in the data remained unplaced and unnamed in these readings. The theory of Biesta did not allow for it to be hung on ‘coat hooks’. It remained silenced and yet it ‘asked’ me not to leave it out.

Thinking with Foucault, one of the things I attempted in order to explore this ‘hunch’ was to examine and analyze what appeared as ‘truth’ in my data material through ‘another perspective than its own’ (Christensen & Hamre, 2018, p. 23). I have already touched upon it elsewhere, hence I will not write about it in detail here. But what I eventually recognized as catching fire, lighting up, and ‘becoming inflamed

with desire’ (Benozzo et al., 2013, p. 311) in the data material was unidentified adultism. The theory of Rancière (1991) was theoretically appropriate, but when I encountered childism it seemed much more ‘theoretically robust’ (Hardy, 2022, p. 7) for the purpose of the dissertation. Childism ‘determines what, how, and why one would theorize’ (Biswas, Wall, et al., 2023, p. 8) and thus the empirical data and Biesta’s theory as well as my relationship with them changed again.

With childism I saw new patterns in the material. I produced even more data from the ‘participatory observation in the world’, which led me to rewrite the conceptual framework highlighting the sexism, racism, and adultism embedded in Western philosophy. Childism furthermore put a spotlight on adultist elements in Biesta’s theory. I have already touched briefly on the problem of the adultist logics employed by the terms ‘grown-up’ and ‘infantile’ in the theoretical chapter. But my engagement with childism eventually made more ‘data’ in Biesta’s theory light up. I shall elaborate more on that in the concluding chapter.

Literature review *for* research – a ‘rhizomatic ad hoc strategy’

This leads me to write a few words about the creation of the conceptual framework. I have already presented the conceptual framework of the dissertation as a literature review *for* research as opposed to a literature review *of* research. The goal of the conceptual framework is not to educate the reader but to inform an imaginative research programme and to support and explain the choices made *for this study* (Maxwell, 2006, 2013). I have presented the goal, the focus, and the questions steering the creation of the conceptual framework. Thus, here I shall present a brief account of the process that led to this goal, this focus, and these questions.

Hart’s (2018) advice about doing a literature review is to document carefully every step taken. The point is to make clear the literature that supports the findings, where the literature can be found and how it was interpreted.

The aim of the literature review in the beginning of the project was to find out what is already known about the phenomenon under investigation and to gain an overview of the field in order to determine how this study fit into that field. The method I began with was a systematic literature review, and I carefully documented the steps in an audit trail. I had help from the expertise of librarians to create a range of search strings involving different key words related to the dissertation’s topic, such as ‘democratic education’, ‘democratic dannelsen’, ‘democratic formation’,

‘citizenship education’, ‘citizenship teaching’, ‘civic education’ etc. (both in the Scandinavian languages and in English) and Boolean operators such as AND, OR and NOT. This led to enormous bodies of literature from many different fields. I read abstracts to evaluate whether the literature was relevant or not and I scanned the bibliographic sources to find other potentially relevant literature. The aim was to gain an overview of the field(s) and to look for trends, patterns and results.

However, some of what seemed relevant in the beginning of the project and which I dug more into, later appeared less relevant *or* relevant for other reasons than I had initially thought. As Maxwell argues, it can be very productive to bring in ideas from outside the traditionally defined field of one’s topic, or to integrate approaches or theories that no one had previously associated with the field. The goal is thus to develop ‘an integrated set of theoretical concepts and empirical findings, a model of the phenomena’ (Maxwell, 2006, p. 30) one is studying that supports and informs the research. Concurrently with the project progressing and new insights or questions emerged from the empirical data, I likewise began to search for new literature, especially literature that at first did not appear to be linked to the dissertation’s topic. Rather, I attempted to make such links myself (Hart, 2018, p. 20).

The conceptual framework of this dissertation took a new turn during the creation of one of the analyses in the dissertation, an analysis which – as we shall see later – demonstrates discriminatory aspects of dominant democracy discourses. This was a new insight for me, and it made me curious. I began wondering about how the field of *Pädagogik* – in particular *dannelses* theories – dealt with the theme of discrimination. I found fragments here and there that occasionally briefly mentioned the fact that women and non-whites originally were not included in the influential theories of ancient Greek and Enlightenment philosophers, but I found no literature that discussed in more detail any potential consequences of this for the theories and concepts themselves. Thus, I turned to look for potentially relevant literature in the fields of feminist and postcolonial philosophy, which – as it is evident from the conceptual framework of the dissertation – burst with critiques of theories highly influential for *Pädagogical* and educational theory and practice.

Thus, concurrently with a rhizomatic reading of the empirical data and the theory with which I think in this dissertation, I also made a sort of ‘rhizomatic re-review’ of the literature that comprises the traditionally defined field of the dissertation’s topic. The search strategy for potentially relevant literature became more ad hoc and it was no longer possible to document every step taken in the search. I used new search

strings including key words such as ‘feminist’ and ‘postcolonial’, but I also responded to sudden impulses and simply ‘googled’ things such as ‘feminist interpretations of Immanuel Kant’, which then led me to further literature.

I contacted scholars with expertise on various subjects and fields that had caught my interest and they all suggested names of authors they thought I should look into. For example, I contacted John Wall (2010). He mentioned Tanu Biswas (2022) who mentioned Toby Rollo (2021). I contacted the Danish researcher Mira Chandhok Skadegård (2021) whose area of expertise is structural discrimination. She suggested Mbembe (2020) and Césaire (1950/2000) (and many others).

I scanned the bibliographies in all this new literature, which I had come across through various means, and the bibliographies led me to discover additional interesting literature. Thus, the search strategy developed into a more ‘rhizomatic ad hoc strategy’. It is not a linear process with a clear beginning or end. It is not systematic. It is not a literature review *of* research but *for* research.

Reading some part of these huge fields outside of the traditionally defined field of the dissertation’s topic enabled new questions and new research ideas. For example, it enabled me to pose new questions regarding the relation between the ‘semantic structure of *Bildung* (Koselleck, 2002) and the history of European colonialism, misogyny and misopedia and the roles of Blackness, race, children and women; thus the conceptual framework developed and changed in new ways.

As Maxwell argues, it can be very productive to bring in ideas from outside the traditionally defined field of one’s topic, or to integrate approaches or theories that no one had previously associated with the field (Maxwell, 2006, p. 30). I agree with that. I did not anticipate the direction this dissertation has ended up taking.

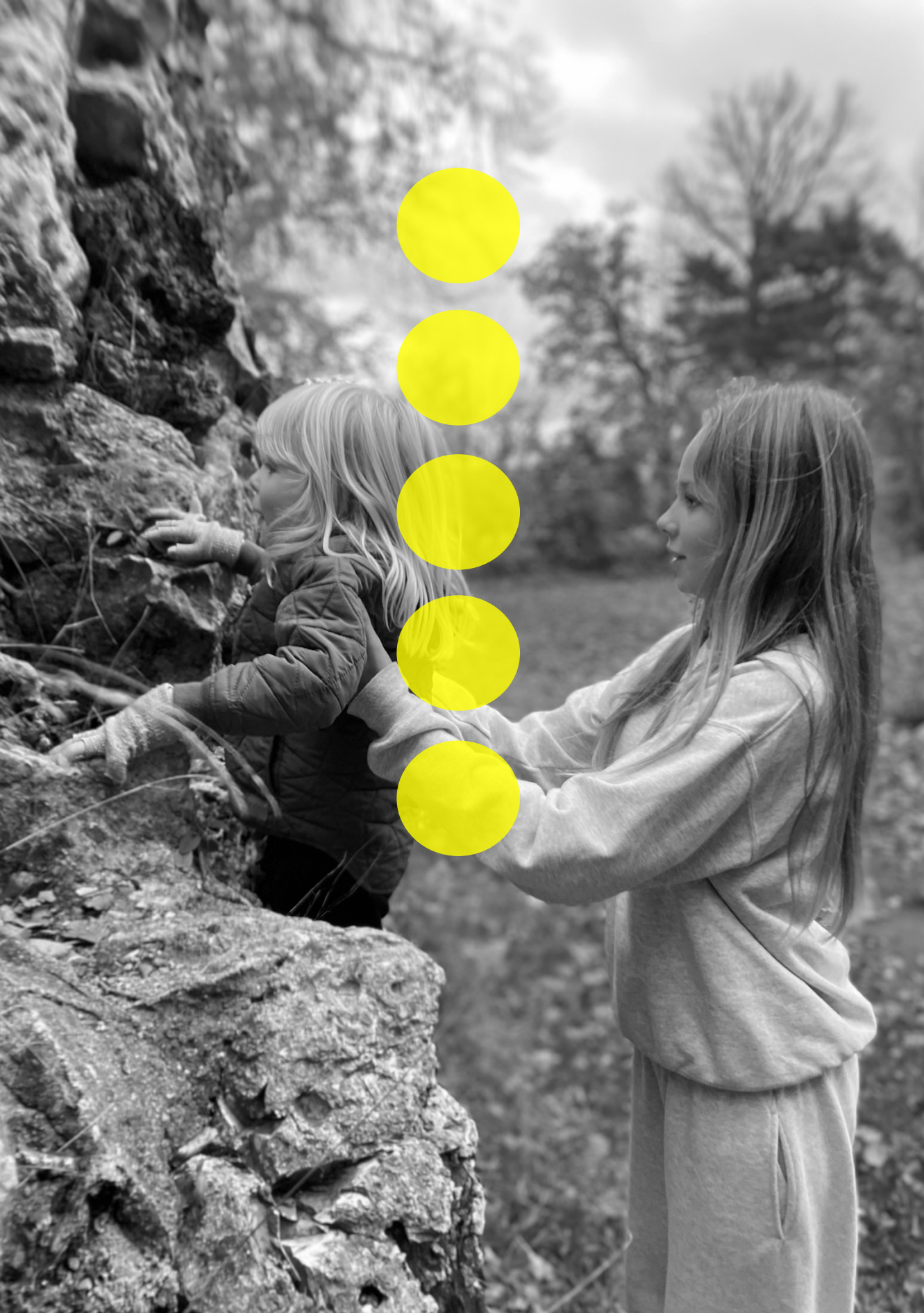
Concluding the methodological chapter

In this chapter, I have presented how the conceptual framework and the theoretical framework inform methodological considerations and the choices made regarding the research design. I have placed the dissertation in a post-structuralist framework, which means that I acknowledge that the research design, the data production, the analyses and *I* co-produce the phenomenon under study. This furthermore makes articulating design and methodological choices important in order to enable the reader to gain

insights into how these have produced data and are used analytically, and therefore, I have also reconstructed the most influential parts of the research process.

With this account of the most important elements of the research process, I have attempted to illustrate how boundaries between different aspects of the research process are blurred. Although the dissertation is constructed as ‘chapters’ that each present a distinct part of the project; the ‘conceptual framework’, the ‘theoretical framework’, the ‘methodological framework’ and later ‘analyses’, ‘discussions’ and ‘concluding chapter’, they are all related and complexly intertwined. As I have written elsewhere, there is only *one* thinking and it thinks with all its various ‘injections’ and it attempts to discover and create links between them. Thus, it is rather the *relations* between these ‘distinct’ domains (theory, methodology, analyses etc.) and how they influence and produce each other that is the interesting part.

The research process of this dissertation is as rhizomatic and complex as the world itself. To cite Law once again, ‘much of the world is vague, diffuse or unspecific, slippery, emotional, ephemeral, elusive or indistinct, changes like a kaleidoscope, or doesn’t really have much of a pattern at all [...] at least some of the time we’re going to have to give up on simplicities’ (Law, 2004, p. 2).



5

THREE DOMINANT DEMOCRACY DISCOURSES

As elaborated in chapter four, it had initially not crossed my mind to scrutinize dominant democracy discourses. Rather I attempted to avoid or ‘get around’ such discourses because the way in which I wanted to conceptualize and study democratic dannelse was very different than what dominant discourses of democracy encompass. But I began to recognize my difficulties as encounters with the ‘dividing practices’ of dominant democracy discourses. I began to recognize my frustration as a regulative feeling (Foucault, 1982, pp. 777-778) disciplining me to speak the ‘truth’ rather than this ‘nonsense’. I recognized that there is not standing outside of discourses (Hardy, 2022), and that my feeling of discomfort is a way of ‘knowing’ (Law, 2004) how powerfully dominant democracy discourses play a role in conditioning what can be thought, said, and in the end, done regarding democratic dannelse, which is precisely why scrutinizing them can provide important and relevant answers to the research interest of this dissertation, which, following Biesta, is to pay attention to the conditions under which acting as a subject can take place (Biesta, 2007).

Paying attention to the conditions for democratic dannelse

In this analytic chapter, my aim is to interrogate dominant democracy discourses. The questions in focus are: how do we tend to think about the democratic task of

schooling? What are the rules, the patterns, the ‘truths’ about democracy and democratic dannelsen? What can be said, what can be done, and just as importantly, if not more importantly from both an explanatory and political viewpoint (cf. Fairclough, 1992), what *cannot* be said or done? What is marginalized, excluded, and perhaps appears unnatural?

What can be thought, said and in the end done regarding democratic dannelsen is an important and influential condition under which acting as a subject can take place. The analysis thus in particular provides an answer to the second research question of the dissertation: *how do contemporary educational trends and logics in the Danish context produce conditions of possibility for democratic dannelsen?* The questions I shall therefore also discuss in this chapter are how much acting is actually possible under such conditions? And for whom? What *quality* of subjectification is possible and for whom?

I pursue these queries from a Foucauldian-based approach to discourses, which means that I take the discourses as a starting point and investigate how interpretations of the world and how identities are constructed and changed in discourses. The Foucauldian discursive approach enables us to go beyond what appears as conventional wisdom and challenge what is taken for granted (Hardy, 2022).

One of the analytical methods I use to do this, is to look at the ‘truths’ about democracy and democratic dannelsen from ‘another perspective’ than their own (Christensen & Hamre, 2018, p. 23). I attempt to ‘crack the discursive monolith’ (Hardy, 2022, p. 13), so to speak, to produce *resistance* to dominant ‘truths’ about democracy, with the intention of undermining, exposing and making these ‘truths’ fragile (Foucault, 1978, p. 101), to dislodge them in order to enable new (and perhaps better?) ways of thinking about democracy and democratic dannelsen possible.

The sources from which I collect and construct the patterns I introduce as a discourse are quite varied. For example, I include excerpts from my field notes and from my interviews, and I include informal conversations I have had, things I have written myself, and information on webpages I have come across. I include transnational and national policy documents specifically aiming at promoting democracy, and I include Danish national and local initiatives deriving from or inspired by such policies. I include all these different examples of discourse to illustrate how the patterns in the discourses are widespread and general. In this vein, field notes, conversations, writings, doings and sayings, policies, and initiatives *are*

discourse, and ‘it works to construct problems and solutions, as well as evidence and arguments’ (Anderson & Holloway, 2020, p. 201).

In this chapter, many of the excerpts I introduce are originally in Danish, and it is I who has translated them into English. I will however not note this in every single reference throughout the chapter, because I find it distracting.

Defense democracy, Campaign democracy and Competence democracy

I present three dominant discourses about democracy and democratic dannelsen. I draw distinctions between these three discourses and present them one at the time for analytical and explanatory reasons. In ‘reality’ they overlap, are intertwined, and merge with contemporary educational trends and logics; they constitute, support, uphold as well as reduce and resist and counter each other. The three democracy discourses I present are Defense democracy, Campaign democracy, and Competence democracy.

Defense democracy

There are not that many bilingual students at our school (principal at a Danish state school).

Prior to working on this project, I had an informal conversation at a private party with a person who worked as a school principal. We spoke about the school system and education in general, and at one point in this conversation I asked him about his school’s approach to democratic dannelsen, to which he replied: ‘there are not that many bilingual students at our school’. This answer was surprising as it seemed to assume that the democratic task of schools was linked to the number of students speaking languages other than Danish. The idea seemed to be that the democratic task of educators was different whether students had one or more languages, as if democratic dannelsen was not a relevant theme for a school with few or no bilingual students. At the time, I figured that the principal might just have misheard or misunderstood my question, and I soon forgot all about it. We can call it ‘shadow data’ (Benozzo & Gherardi, 2020) and only later it caught fire and lit up (Benozzo et

al., 2013), and it did so because such a link between democratic dannelsen and 'bilingual students' occurred again and again. I consequently became attentive to this pattern. The answer of the principal was neither odd nor uncommon, but is instead an illustrative example of a way of thinking conditioned by one of the dominant discourses about democracy, a discourse that involves, as I will show, a prejudicial discourse about minoritized Danes.

In the following I elaborate briefly on some typical associations the theme of my project has fostered. I then look at a political commitment by the EU member states to respond to an allegedly European democratic crisis, namely, the 'Declaration on promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education' (European Union Education Ministers, 2015). I also take up some of the Danish national initiatives under the auspices of education, following the European commitment. To illustrate how prevalent this discourse is, I also include a few examples from local and private initiatives with the stated aim of promoting democracy and democratic dannelsen.

My argument is 1) that in this discourse, the notion of democracy sits within a metaphorical framework of warfare terminology and appears as a defense category (whence my label for this democracy discourse, 2) the 'threat' and 'enemy' in this 'war' is often articulated as an abstract generalized threat. But when it is exemplified and concretized, it is primarily connected to what is categorized as 'non-Western', which means that 3) the threat becomes personalized and is associated with people categorized and perceived as 'non-Western' or 'of a non-Western background' (a label it seems, from which one can never escape). The 'truth' produced is thus that democratic dannelsen is something of particular relevance for the 'non-Western' (minoritized Danes). 4) This particular connection also produces a disconnection between democratic dannelsen and the category of people that goes without saying, 'the not non-Western' (majoritized Danes). And finally 5), the notions of democracy and democratic dannelsen are 'hijacked' in a discriminatory and racist structure and serve to provide an already existing systemic racism with both power, justification, and (more) obscurity.

To argue and show the racist characteristic of this democracy discourse, I draw on the theorizing of French philosopher Etienne Balibar (Balibar, 1991), and on Danish professor in migrant studies Peter Hervik (Hervik, 2015). I will present the arguments and concepts of these scholars as I put them to use.

Before we get to the discourse, I will provide a brief clarification of two concepts used in this section. First, in Danish, the term for bilingual [in Danish: to-sproget] is used when talking about certain, often racialized, forms of bilingualism (Kofoed, 2011). It is thus a loaded term, which first and foremost refers to specific identities (minoritized Danes) rather than the phenomenon of bilingualism in general. Second, I use the terms *minoritized* and *majoritized* Danes (rather than *minority* and *majority* Danes) to emphasize that these are not two states, but rather two identities produced by relations of power (Foucault, 1982).

Ignoring radicalization processes is a privilege of the majoritized

The first example of this discourse that came to my attention was the fact that when speaking to people about my project, the conversation often moved to the theme of integration. This happened both in everyday informal conversations with neighbours and friends whom I told about the project, but also in more formal settings, such as at PhD courses and academic conferences. Sometimes conversations also touched on things we fear, such as conflicts, culture clashes, violence, radicalization and terrorism. Saying that my project was about democratic dannelselse several times led people to think of it as research that could (and should) contribute to the prevention of radicalization and ultimately the prevention of terrorist attacks. But my project had nothing to do with radicalization. Nor did I want to limit the notion of democratic dannelselse to its connection with these themes.

However, in the process of becoming aware of this pattern I realized that I myself had also played strategically on exactly this link in my grant application. This was not a matter of any strong emphasis, as the main argumentation in the project description was based on other aspects. But I had made sure for deliberately strategic reasons (and I remember making this choice) that the link was there for the reader to pick up on. What I want to highlight about this, and what is interesting for the analysis at hand, is the fact that I thought about this connection as something of possible significance for the distribution of money for educational research even before I began paying attention to discourses about democracy. I was most certainly aware of the prejudicial narrative about minoritized Danes 'in need of' democratic dannelselse. I took advantage of this narrative for my own benefit in the process of applying for funding, and I had the privilege of forgetting all about it immediately afterwards. I benefitted from 'the racial contract' (Mills, 1997/2022).

For a while, I ignored the link when it was made. I simply ‘missed’ it, which is also to say that I ignored the racialization process (Myong Petersen, 2009) going on in relation to the notion of democratic dannelsen. In my own justification of this, I thought of my attitude as a refusal to partake in discrimination, and at the same time as an attempt to wrest the notion of democratic dannelsen free from this discrimination. It seemed to me that the very idea of democracy was incompatible with discrimination and so whenever the link was made, I ignored it so as to deny or even sever any such link.

But as I contended in chapter four, there is no standing ‘outside’ of discourses to ‘amount attacks on it’ (Hardy, 2022, p. 5), and I came to realize that ignoring the racialization process going on is not only a privilege of the majoritized it is also an action (or non-action) that further privileges the majoritized. Put differently, if we are serious about the ideals embedded in the idea of democracy, such as freedom, equality and solidarity, racialization processes are not something to be ignored but indeed ‘worthy of our serious attention’ (cf. McCabe, 2019). Thus, in a dissertation interested in the conditions for democratic dannelsen, I should scrutinize this discourse.

The metaphorical framework in the Paris declaration

In the Paris Declaration of 17 March 2015 (European Union Education Ministers, 2015) the EU member states reaffirm their determination to promote ‘citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education’ (p. 1). The reaffirmation is a ‘response to terror attacks in France and Denmark’ in 2015 and ‘similar atrocities in recent years’ (p. 1). The aim is to ‘support the fundamental values’ of Europe (p. 2), and these values are put forward as those ‘on which our democracies are based’ (p. 2). The member states’ ministers responsible for education therefore ‘call for renewed efforts to reinforce the teaching and acceptance of these common fundamental values and laying the foundations for more inclusive societies through education – starting from an early age’ (p. 2). Further, it is emphasized that the primary purpose of education is not only to develop knowledge, skills, and competencies but also to help young people to ‘become active, responsible, open-minded members of society’ (p. 2). (Notice the *become* – as if children cannot *already be* ‘active, responsible, open-minded members of society’. However, I shall pay attention to the adultist perception of the child later and here focus on racialization processes).

The metaphorical framework used to describe the purpose of the reaffirmation is characterized by a terminology of warfare, for example:

- **‘Prevent and combat** racism and intolerance’
 - **‘Take an active stand against** all forms of discrimination’
 - **‘Resist** all forms of indoctrination and hate speech’
 - **‘Prevent and tackle** marginalization, intolerance, racism, and radicalization’
 - **‘Protecting and strengthening** Europe’s spirit of freedom’
 - **‘Overcoming** adversity’
 - **‘Safeguarding** our pluralistic societies’
 - **‘Preserve** a framework of equal opportunities for all’
- (European Union Education Ministers, 2015, pp. 1-3 my emphasis).

The threat is articulated in general terms as racism, intolerance, indoctrination, etc. However, when specified and exemplified the threat is portrayed in form of the Charlie Hebdo shooting and the Copenhagen shootings, both of which are publicly labeled by media and politicians (and in the Paris Declaration) as terrorism.

However, in the case of the Copenhagen Shootings, the Danish news media, Danish politicians, including the Prime minister, and even the Danish queen framed the attack as terrorism only hours after the event (Hervik, 2018). This was despite the fact that according to the Danish Penal Code, terrorism is seen as the ‘the intent to seriously intimidate a population’ (Council of Europe cited in Hervik, 2018, p. 151), but since the perpetrator was killed by the police, it was rather difficult to determine his intentions (Hervik, 2018).

In the following weeks, it came out in the media coverage that the young man who committed the crime had recently been released from prison for a violent assault (with the intent to kill) and was known to have a long criminal record. Moreover, in prison he reportedly said that he suffered from anxiety and paranoia and felt threatened, watched, and uneasy. Critics have charged that the Danish Prison Service system neglected to do a psychiatric evaluation and provide the man with the help and the treatment he might have needed. Yet, none of this context was given much attention in the explanation of what drove the man to commit the attack. Again and again, what was mentioned as the most weighty and important information was that the man was Muslim and committed this crime in the name of Islam. The narrative constructed from this was that it was an incident of *Islamic* radicalization. In the public discourse

– and in the Paris Declaration – we seem to ignore that the man may have been seriously mentally ill, and we therefore neglect to ask whether that circumstance may have had more to do with his actions than his religion or, for that matter, his ‘lack of a democratic attitude’.

Danish professor of migration, Peter Hervik (2018), argues that violence committed by minoritized persons associated with Islam is now a part of the Danish and European hegemonic understanding of terrorism. The term radicalization is only used reluctantly in relation to terrorists who are not Muslims – such as Norwegian Anders Breivik, who is more often framed as ‘insane’ rather than radicalized. The taken-for-granted thinking and routine representation of the matter is that in the contemporary Danish context, at least, radicalization denotes *Islamic* radicalization (Hervik & Boisen, 2013).

In the Paris Declaration, (Islamic) terror attacks and other atrocities are presented as the symptoms of the democratic crisis in Europe. The Declaration thereby establishes a connection between this democratic crisis and Islam. Moreover, as we shall see more clearly in the following and again later in the analysis of the Competence democracy discourse, the problem is located in *individuals*’ (poor) attitudes and insufficient democratic competencies. Following Foucault, dominant discourses are experienced as ‘real’ and as ‘natural’, hence, the response which purports to be the useful, natural, and patent is to reinforce the teaching and acceptance of common values starting from an early age.

The metaphorical framework in project ‘Democracy and citizenship’

The European reaffirmation has led to several initiatives within the Danish Ministry of Children and Education, in which the metaphorical framework of warfare terminology is continued. For example, in 2017 the Ministry launched a project under the title ‘Democracy and Citizenship’ (Ministry of Children and Education, n.d.-a). Beneath this title, the initiative is called: ‘early **prevention** of radicalization and negative social control’ (Ministry of Children and Education, n.d.-c my emphasis). The purpose of the initiative is to ‘**strengthen** children’s and young people’s **power of resistance against** extreme attitudes, movements, and negative social control’ through ‘**strengthening** practitioners’ practice’ regarding ‘**preventive** initiatives’ (Ministry of Children and Education, n.d.-a). The initiative offered both courses for individual classes and schools and courses for teachers, school leaders, and municipal

school administrative personnel. Moreover, teachers could seek knowledge, inspiration, and concrete teaching materials and lesson plans regarding themes of democracy and citizenship.

Along with themes of radicalization, religious control, and culture clashes, a big part of the materials also consists of what we could call ‘classic’ democracy themes, like critical thinking, knowledge about human rights and election procedures, and themes of community and solidarity. But what I wish to emphasize is the fact that when one visits the site of the Danish Ministry of Children and Education to seek information about the democratic dannelsen of the state school, this appears first and foremost as a theme of how to mount an effective defense against radicalization. This primary focus on democracy as a category of defense transforms democratic dannelsen into being of particular relevance for individuals who are at some kind of risk. Further, the funding of the project derives from a political agreement on the field of integration (The Danish Government, 2017), which reveals a logic whereby the individuals at risk are first and foremost those perceived as in need of integration into the Danish society. This produces democratic dannelsen – at least as a political topic having implications for the distribution and prioritization of the public national budget – as a theme of particular relevance for minoritized Danes. In line with the Paris Declaration, the means is the field of education.

The undemocratic ‘nature’ of the ‘non-Western’

In 2018, following the European commitment to strengthening democratic values, the then Danish Minister of Children and Education appointed a Council of Democratic Dannelsen [in Danish: Rådet for demokratisk dannelsen]³⁴. The role of the council was to advise the minister on how to ‘strengthen the democratic learning environment at youth education institutions’ (Ministry of Children and Education, 2018, p. 1).

Many of the members appointed for the council have professional expertise and/or are public debaters on themes like Middle Eastern studies, religion, integration, culture clashes, social control, and radicalization processes. Other members are representatives of youth education institutions having a large number of minoritized students.

³⁴ The following Minister of Children and Education closed the Council again in December 2020. The council had however, been inactive since the change of government in June 2019.

In the terms of reference of the council (Ministry of Children and Education, 2018) we get insights into the range of problems at youth education institutions on which the council is to advise. These problems are articulated as: ‘culture clashes, conflicts, conflicting worldviews, and religious bullying, and religious control among students’ (p. 1). According to the terms of reference, these problems may have the consequence that 1) ‘Western traditions of freedom are challenged’ (p. 1), 2) ‘students of non-Western background are concentrated at the same institutions’ (p. 1), or 3) ‘the student make-up can affect the academic level in a negative direction’ and this will in the end ‘challenge the democratic ‘dannende’ [dannelse as a verb in present participle] study environment that the youth education institutions are obliged to create’ (p. 1).

My aim is not to deny that there exist real and serious problems in youth education institutions. Nor do I deny that the members of the council are qualified to advise on the complexity of such issues and on how to handle them. What I wish to highlight is rather the fact that encapsulating these problems as a problem with the democratic environment, and further, posing the strengthening of democratic dannelse as the answer, produce democracy as a defense category and the problem as the threat of ‘non-Western’ elements, which in the document are presumed to ‘challenge the democratic ‘dannende’ [dannelse as a verb in present participle] study environment’ when ‘concentrated at the same institutions’. The certain regularity (Foucault, 1972, p. 145) with which democratic values and democratic dannelse is articulated functions to produce the non-Western identity – including ‘non-Western background’-identity – as incompatible with democracy, as illustrated in the following quote:

The work to strengthen democratic dannelse will only become more relevant in the future. In 2017, one in ten students who started in primary school was of non-Western background. Moreover, there are municipalities in Denmark where more than 20% of the citizens are of non-Western backgrounds. The challenges of, for example, cultural clashes, because of the demographic change will unavoidably affect the youth education institutions (Ministry of Children and Education, 2018, p. 1).

The logical assumption in this statement seems to be that if there were no students who could be characterized as ‘of non-Western background’ democratic dannelse would not be a particularly relevant issue. The logic furthermore seems to be that the students that go without saying – that is students of what we might call of ‘not non-

Western background’ are democratic per se. Hence the ‘truth’ is that the magnitude and concentration of the ‘non-Western’ matters a lot.

This line of thinking enables a shift in responsibility. The youth education institutions are ‘obliged to create’ a ‘democratic ‘dannende’ study environment’. But when this fails to happen it is not the youth education institutions that are held responsible. Rather, the problem is defined as the ‘non-Western background’, which (in large concentration) will ‘unavoidably’ (negatively) affect the democratic ‘dannende’ learning environment and therefore youth education institutions’ obligation seems to cease as they can do nothing else but distribute the ‘non-Western’ students so that the concentration of the ‘unavoidable’ problem does not become too large at individual institutions. The responsibility does not shift to the collective or state level but is solely (naturally) thought as the incompatibility, the inadequacy, and an inherently undemocratic nature of the ‘non-Western’.

Defense democracy sits within a prejudicial discourse about minoritized Danes

The discourse of Defense democracy is evident and widespread in various initiatives pertaining to democracy and citizenship, and it also makes itself manifest in public discourse – for example, in politics and the media. There are many examples, but here I will just provide two so as to illustrate how Defense democracy crops up in the distribution of money.

For example, I came across a local municipality that was ‘investing big time in democratic dannelse’ (notes from my conversation with the project manager) in the school year 2018/19. I investigated the public records of decisions made by the local government and found that the money allocated for this investment came from local government’s budget allocated for integration.

Another example is a private organization based in Copenhagen, Denmark’s largest municipality. The organization had received funding to develop and offer lesson plans and teaching materials with the theme of democracy and citizenship. The purpose was to promote democratic dannelse in local schools. I discovered that the funding for the project came from Copenhagen’s ‘Anti-radicalization Agenda’.

Closely intertwined with fear, the Defense democracy discourse enjoys significant political attention and prioritization. Although it can be argued that these initiatives and policies are introduced to address certain (genuine) problematic situations, they sit within a more general prejudicial discourse about minoritized Danes.

So, what are the effects and consequences of the Defense democracy discourse? How does it condition ways in which democratic discourse is possible to conceive, address and in the end pursue? And what kind of condition for acting as a subject is this discourse and for whom? We have already seen how the 'non-Western' is produced as incompatible with democracy, and the people who go without saying are produced as being democratic *per se*. To investigate this a little further, I turn to the field of racism research.

A discourse with neo-racist elements

The construction of cultures' incompatibility is not new. According to French philosopher Etienne Balibar (1991), the 'biological' signifier as the key representation of fear of the other was replaced by a 'sociological' signifier in the interwar period. In 1991 he wrote:

Ideologically, current racism fits into a framework of 'racism without race'. It is a racism whose dominant theme is not biological heredity but the insurmountability of cultural differences, a racism which, at first sight, does not postulate the superiority of certain groups or people in relation to others but 'only' the harmfulness of abolishing frontiers, the incompatibility of life-styles and traditions (Balibar, 1991 p. 21).

Balibar called this Neo-racism, which is to be understood as a 'second-position' racism, a 'differentialist' racism, which seems to have drawn the lesson from the battle between racism and anti-racism. Neo-racism does not operate with the pseudo-biological concept of race as its main driving force, rather it concurs with the argument that in reality there are no 'human races' and the behaviour of individuals cannot be explained as a result of genes but as a result of their 'cultures' (pp. 23-24). Neo-racism presents itself as the true anti-racism, but as Balibar argues, biological naturalism is not the only means of naturalizing human behavior. Culture can also function like a 'nature' and as 'a way of locking individuals and groups a priori into a genealogy, into a determination that is immutable and intangible in origin' (p. 22). Neo-racism's prototype is anti-Semitism (p. 24).

And behind this situation lie barely reworked variants of the idea that the historical cultures of humanities can be divided into two groups, the

one assumed to be universalistic and progressive, the other supposed irremediable particularistic and primitive (Balibar, 1991, p. 25).

The Defense democracy discourse operates with exactly such a division. The identity that goes without saying, which I in this text for the sake of convenience have referred to as the ‘not non-Western’, appears to be universalistic, just as its version of democracy and democratic values appears to be natural and desirable. The identity referred to as ‘non-Western’ is produced as inherently at odds with democracy – that is, as primitive and particularistic. It is also produced as regressive, following the narrative of the ‘unavoidably (negative) affect’ it has on the ‘world’ of the ‘natural democratic individuals’.

In a more recent Danish context, Peter Hervik draws on a distinction between ‘traditional’ racism and Neo-racism. According to Hervik, the question all too often becomes whether Danes are racists or not (Hervik, 2015). This is highly problematic, Hervik argues, firstly, because in a Scandinavian context, the concepts of *race* and *racism* are words with strong negative connotations most commonly associated with Nazi ideology, the apartheid system in South Africa, and race-struggles and the history of slavery in the US, and hence they are not considered to be highly pertinent to modern Denmark. Secondly, the egalitarian philosophy that characterizes the identity and narrative of the Scandinavian welfare state fosters the widespread agreement that racism is utterly wrong and should hence be combated (Hervik, 2015). In Denmark racism is significantly taboo and is not something most Danes want to be associated with. Thirdly, racism is understood through a category of intentionality, meaning that the absence of a direct racist *intention* (with reference to biological signifiers) makes critique with reference to racism almost impossible to put forward, let alone to take seriously. For these reasons, Neo-racism is subtle and almost invisible by nature and is extremely difficult to speak about. Thus, it is also extremely difficult to track down and eliminate (Hervik, 2015).

Hervik’s point is that the question of whether Danes are racists or not will not get us anywhere. Rather, we should ask whether racism is *present* in Denmark. We can approach this question by investigating whether actions and rhetoric have a racist element in them. Hervik suggests a practical analytical perspective on three fundamental elements that constitute both ‘traditional’ and Neo-racism. Although the two ‘types of racism’ differ in their fundamental assumptions, they nevertheless have

equal consequences for the people who are their targets. The elements to look for are: 1) a construction of a 'them and us'- framework of interpretation that implies an assumption of incompatibility; 2) a dichotomization that executes a hierarchy with 'us' as the primary and the 'true' or superior, and 'them' as the 'other' and 'inferior'; and 3) the construction of 'them and us' implies an asymmetric power relation in which the 'us' have the power to transform the racialized constructions into concrete actions which, for example, results in a fixation and marginalization of 'them' (Hervik, 2015 p. 35-38).

Returning to the Defense democracy discourse, we see this construction of a hierarchical 'them and us', with 'us' as the 'true' and 'them' as the 'inferior':

The question is whether the relationship constitutes a racialization, a hierarchization, a subordination, a contempt, a dehumanization, a speech of 'the other' as incompatible, primitive, regressive, traditional, medieval, disgusting or the like. Often 'the other' are referred to as controlled by their culture, while 'we' are most often seen as the modern, individual and rational humans (Hervik, 2015 p. 36).

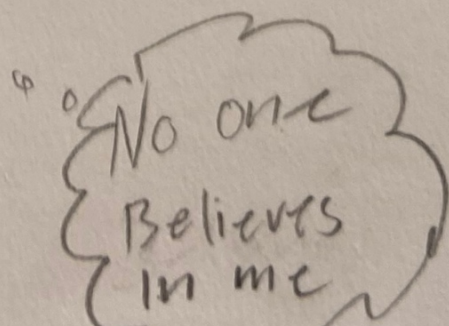
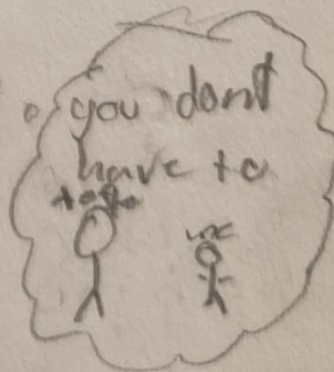
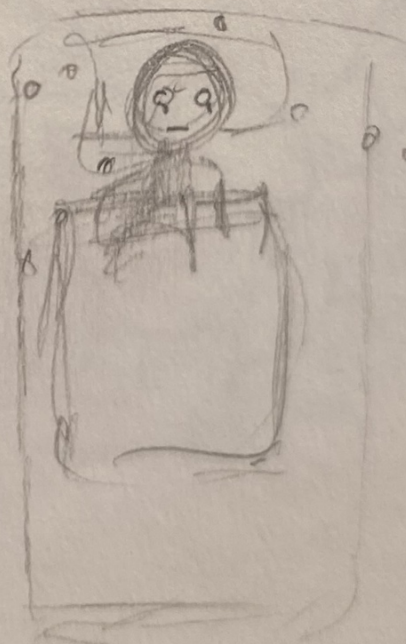
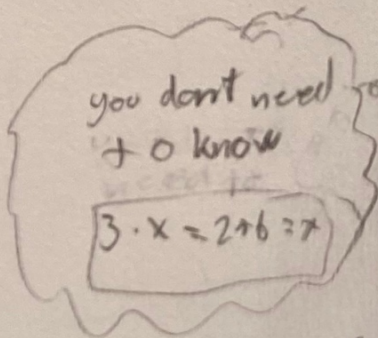
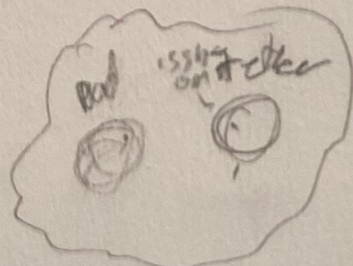
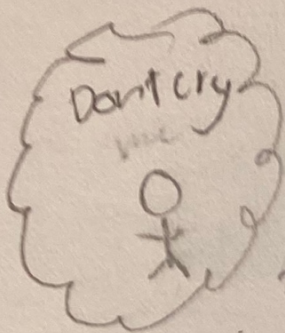
In relation to the aspect of power, we can say that the European Union and the Danish Ministry of Children and Education, from which the policy documents in this analysis derive, are *very* powerful institutions that indeed possess the power and resources to transform the 'them and us' dichotomization into concrete policies and initiatives.

In service of a Neo-racist police order

Summarizing, the Defense democracy discourse is a rather widespread discourse in Denmark. While there are many local and private initiatives that do not seem to draw on or operate within this discourse in any significant way, there are on the other hand some very powerful and influential forces characterized by the Defense democracy discourse, such as the European commitment to strengthen democratic values and the Danish initiatives under the auspices of the Ministry of Children and Education.

The Defense democracy discourse produces a 'them and us' dichotomization in which it is primarily the 'them' who are in need of democratic dannelselse while the 'us' is presumed to be democratic by nature. This particular connection is at the same time a disconnection; that is, a logic in which democracy is disconnected as something of relevance for all of us. Moreover, it ends up in the paradoxical situation that the effort and initiatives meant 'to prevent and combat racism and intolerance', 'take an active

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stance against all forms of discrimination’, and ‘prevent and tackle marginalization, intolerance, racism and radicalization’ on the contrary constitute a rhetoric with Neo-racist elements, that is, it produces the ‘inferior’ and ‘primitive’ subjects itself.

Of course, this should be understood in the context of an inheritance of the historical racist dumbing down of non-white people, which I emphasized in the conceptual framework. The colonial project is an *ongoing* process rather than an historical epoch we have left behind. Today, we are still engaged in, or at least a part of, or living in the context of a colonial project (Biswas, Rollo, et al., 2023). The colonial project is even embedded in dominant democracy discourses, which illustrates how the colonial project is provided with legitimacy and justification from *the* word that is a source and embodiment of political power itself (Dunn, 2018).

The Defense democracy discourse is based on a belief system (not a *knowledge* system) in which minoritized Danes – with reference to their culture and religion and the ‘naturalized’ behaviour emanating from them – are portrayed as potentially dangerous to democracy and as in need of discipline and training before they can be accepted as citizens in the society in which they already live. The Defense democracy discourse employs a (widely shared) opposition in which the categories of non-Western and democracy occur as a (false) binary. This conditions a line of thinking that furthermore ignores minoritized Danes’ status as Danish citizens. The focus on reinforcing the ‘teaching and acceptance’ of ‘common fundamental values’ seems to be something done to or forced upon the assumed regressive (by nature) ones. The assimilation demanded from minoritized Danes appears as progress, as emancipation, as the ‘noble gesture’ to bring individuals from the sphere of ‘the primitives’ into the sphere of ‘the progressives’. Or to put it in the words of Biesta, it is an understanding of democratic dannelsen as a ‘process which happens ‘from the inside out’, a process which emanates from the position of those who are already considered to be democratic’ (Biesta, 2009, p. 6), which implies ‘that someone is setting the terms for inclusion and that it is for those who wish to be included to meet those terms’ (p. 6). It appears as the undeniably desirable strengthening of democratic dannelsen. The effort is perceived as ‘protecting and strengthening Europe’s spirit of freedom’. Once again, we forget to ask: freedom for whom and freedom for what?

The notion of democracy is ‘hijacked’ into the service of the police order (Rancière, 1999). The purity, desirability, and unquestionability of the notion of democracy provides justification, necessitation, and naturalization of the Neo-racists

elements in the rhetoric embedded in the policy documents and initiatives analyzed in this chapter. What we see is a semantic technology with a privileged common-sense position that upholds and protects the (prejudiced) police order.

Following the ideas of Rancière, the initiatives do not – as intended – strengthen democratic culture. On the contrary it strengthens the rigidity of the borders of the police order, it strengthens the wall between what is visible and what is invisible, what is heard and taken seriously as a discourse and what is heard as noise (Rancière, 1999, p. 29). The Neo-racist prejudice against minoritized Danes embedded in the current police order is invisible because the response to the ‘democratic crisis’ is precisely created *through* the prejudicial lens, and prejudices are inherently self-justifying. The initiatives rather complicate and maybe even inhibit the event of democracy; they complicate opportunities of putting forward a claim in the name of equality, let alone reconfiguring the police order (Rancière, 1999). The Defense democracy discourse, I wish to suggest, establishes conditions such that claims put forward by a minoritized Dane regarding the perception of injustice are very easily heard as ‘noise’.

A de facto apartheid school system

I did not encounter the Defense democracy discourse at the schools I visited. However, it should be noted that at the time of my school visits, I did not pay much attention to this discourse. Retrospectively, I realized that the participant schools were schools with not that many students having visible signs of being minoritized Danes, by which I mean brown skin colour and/or Islamic symbols like a veil. In general, my experience was that democratic dannelsen was not something the teachers at these schools thought about very much in their everyday practice. As one teacher said during our interview:

I must admit, I don't really give it much thought. I mean, I don't think about democratic dannelsen when I teach maths for example. But maybe I should think more about it. I remember, we used to talk a lot about it at my teacher education... a long time ago (interview).

One could of course argue that if democratic dannelsen is perceived as more (or primarily) relevant for minoritized Danes it is not that odd that it is not something you reflect a lot about at schools where most students are ‘students that go without saying’, the democratic *per se*. I do not mean to imply that this is the case at my participant schools. It is merely a reflection stemming from the fact that such an interpretation

would certainly match the initial quote of this chapter: ‘we don’t have that many bilingual students at our school’.

To be sure, the student make-up at Danish schools certainly comprises a condition for democratic dannelsen. I am, however, not speaking about the kind of conditioning like that which we have seen in the logics in education policies and initiatives I have presented above (numbers of non-Western students matter). I am speaking here about something quite different.

Only a rather small percentage of Danish schools can be said to represent the variation of people in the Danish population – in many ways – but also regarding minoritized and majoritized Danes. The ‘basic political realities’ (Mills, 1997/2022) are that there are many schools with a high percentage of majoritized Danes, and there are many (but a lot fewer given the fewer number of minoritized Danes in Denmark) schools with a high percentage of minoritized Danes. A principal I confronted with the fact that there were primarily majoritized middle-class and wealthy students and families at his school (and therefore hardly a ‘*people’s* school’), rejected the critique underlying in such an observation by emphasizing that the students at the school mirrored one to one the population in the local community. He was right, and this directs attention to the fact that a basic political reality is that many of the schools with a high percentage of majoritized Danes are placed in expensive residential areas, whereas *none* of the schools with a high percentage of minoritized Danes are placed in an expensive community. Rather, many of them reside in or close to so-called marginalized residential areas [in Danish: udsatte boligområder] and/or in communities that are listed on the so-called ‘ghetto list’. In other words, besides educational policy, a school’s student make-up has everything to do with social, housing, and economic policies. It illustrates what Mills calls ‘the racial order’ that is beneficial for whites in terms of ‘determining who gets what’ (Mills, 1997/2022, p. 9). Minoritized Danes do not generally get to reside in expensive residential areas. Relative to the percentage minoritized Danes comprise of the Danish population they are almost not represented in job positions that entail desirable things such as status, privileges, further desirable career opportunities, political power, powerful networks or high (or even medium) wage levels. The Danish narrative and self-image as the ‘champion’ of a progressive egalitarian welfare model, where everybody has the same opportunities, simply does not match basic political realities. To put the matter somewhat starkly but nonetheless quite accurately, it is a basic political reality that

Denmark comprises what we might consider a *de facto apartheid society*. In this police order (Rancière, 1999) the place assigned to the minoritized body, that is, the non-white body is ways of acting and being that have ‘no business being seen’ (Rancière, 1999, p. 30) or understood as democratic. They are included as the excluded in the (perceived democratic) police order.

What does a de facto apartheid system mean for democratic dannelsen? A majoritized Dane may very well grow up and live a life without ever sharing a school life, local community or job life with a minoritized Dane. Following Biesta (2002) we can think of the plurality in Danish society in terms of difference (and here I have the two categories in mind – minoritized and majoritized Danes). Any attempt to describe the plurality is always made from one of the positions *within* the plurality (Biesta, 2002). The role of democratic dannelsen becomes that of offering encounters with who and what is other and different, which allows ‘being and thinking in one’s own identity where one is actually not’ (Hannah Arendt in Biesta, 2002, p. 349), ‘thereby permitting oneself the *disorientation* that is necessary to understand how the world can look different to someone else’ (Biesta, 2002, p. 349).

As such, it is then tremendously problematic that many schools (as well as local communities and the job market) are divided into minoritized and majoritized Danes. There will simply not be (many) possibilities for encounters with what and who is other and different, and we can ‘only be with others in our imagination’ (Biesta, 2002, p. 349). Or to put it differently, the ‘encounters’ would be with the ‘conceptual other’, that is, the ‘portrayed other’ of dominant discourses, like the one I have outlined in this chapter.

Following Foucault, discourses discipline subjects both in how individuals are known and recognized and how they know and recognize themselves. In the defense democracy discourse, minoritized Danes (the non-white body) are portrayed and thus known and recognized as presumably regressive, undemocratic and as a danger when in large numbers, whereas the majoritized (the white ‘default’ body) is known and recognized as the superior and democratic.

The de facto apartheid system invalidates democratic dannelsen, in that it deprives children (and perhaps most Danes) of important encounters which can ‘put a challenge to our own “certainties”, which in turn can lead us to reconsider our own “position”’ (Biesta, 2002, p. 349). It strengthens the existing police order. Claims for equality made from the ‘outside’ based on perception of injustice (Biesta, 2009, p. 8) are made

by a ‘conceptual other’ rather than from an actual ‘encountered other’ and thus the possibility is diminished for a *disorientation* (Biesta, 2002, p. 349) that could raise a challenge to our own certainties.

Defense democracy discourse as a condition for democratic dannelsen

So, what can we say about the Defense democracy discourse and the basic political realities mentioned above as a condition under which acting as a subject can take place in our schools? How much acting is actually possible under such conditions? And for whom? What *quality* of subjectification is possible and for whom?

Given the post-colonial literature I presented in the conceptual framework and the theorizing of Biesta and Rancière, it is not surprising to discover a ‘colonial way of understanding democratisation’ (Biesta, 2009, p. 9) in the European and Danish effort to strengthen democracy and so-called democratic values. Given the basic political realities, it is also clear that it is limited what schools can be expected to do in this regard. Distributing the ‘problem’ would perhaps enable more encounters with who and what is other and different, however, this distribution is accompanied with highly problematic logics and assumptions. The non-white bodies are distributed for the wrong reasons and there are no signs of intentions to otherwise challenge the basic political realities, that is, ‘the racial order’ in terms of ‘determining who gets what’ (Mills, 1997/2022, p. 9).

It becomes clear that the European commitment to renew efforts to strengthen democracy through education is misunderstood symptom treatment and it resembles an intensification of colonial thinking. The strength, in terms of influence and effect, of the means (e.g., policy instruments and more concrete pedagogical tools) with which this effort is renewed is also the extent to which the colonial project is renewed and re-affirmed, which is also to say that it is the extent to which the current *colonial* police order (Rancière, 1999) is legitimized and strengthened – all in the very name of democracy.

Perhaps it is by now almost needless to emphasize that the European and Danish commitment to strengthen democratic values on the contrary prohibits rather than enables the ‘appearance of democracy’ (Biesta, 2009, p. 8), that is, the possibility of a reconfiguration of the existing police order when the claim for equality involves a wish to reconfigure the *racial* order. Thus, the question about how much action, and what kind of action, and what quality of subjectification is possible clearly depends – among other things – on the colour of one’s body.

Campaign democracy

Meet Julie! She is the chairperson of the student council. She is going to speak at the teachers' meeting later tonight. You should come – it is exactly what you are interested in with your project on democratic dannelsen! (principal, Vesterborg elementary school).

On my first day visiting Vesterborg elementary school (VES), the principal showed me around. We passed many students and teachers on our walk, and the principal nodded to most of them as we passed by. We chatted about the school, the buildings, the decorations, and about my project and my visit. Suddenly, we ran into a student he thought I should meet. It was a student named Julie, and the reason why the principal thought I should meet her was that she was the chairperson of the student council. I politely shook her hand and smiled. She smiled politely back at me. None of us said much. The principal did most of the talking. He said that Julie was going to speak at a staff meeting later that day, and he invited me to come. Unfortunately, I was not able to participate, and the principal replied: 'oh that is such a shame. I think it is *exactly* what you are after. Are you absolutely sure, you can't come?' (field notes).

Participating in the staff meeting would most likely have been interesting for me, but the point I want to make is that the principal automatically drew a connection between the theme of the project, democratic dannelsen, and the chairperson of the student council and the event where she would speak. To him, it was of relevance that I meet *her* – as opposed to all the other maybe thirty or so students we passed on our walk. He did *not* present me to a student from the 9th grade who may love to play basketball or watch science fiction movies. He presented me to the *chairperson* of the student council. To him, it was such a pity that I was not able to observe her speech at the staff meeting.

This example illustrates the democracy discourse to which I have chosen to give the rather unflattering name of 'Campaign democracy'. This label serves to emphasize a sort of reductionist thinking about democracy. In the Campaign democracy discourse, democratic dannelsen and democracy are first and foremost associated with specific events (e.g., student council meetings), practices (e.g., voting practices, debate practices), behaviours (like that of speaking in a particular way), locations (e.g., government buildings), and identities (e.g., chairperson of the student council).

The steps in my argumentation run as follows: 1) in this discourse, democratic dannelsen as well as democracy itself are associated with specific events, practices, behaviours, locations, and identities, and these comprise the metaphorical framework of the Campaign democracy discourse; 2) this metaphorical framework hence also conditions a *disconnection* from other events, practices, behaviours, locations, and identities, that is, democratic dannelsen is disconnected from the ‘whole’ of people’s lives, the ‘whole’ of practices and processes constituting the life in school, and from something concerning *all* identities; 3) thus, the Campaign democracy discourse has the unfortunate (unintended) implication that it makes invisible important aspects of democratic dannelsen. The extent to which efforts to strengthen democratic dannelsen are based on the Campaign democracy discourse, is the extent to which the ‘everyday lessons’ in democracy are rendered invisible, and 4) it is furthermore the extent to which it functions as dividing practices distinguishing between what can be heard as discourse and what can be heard as noise, and thus the extent to which equality for the silent ‘voices’ or ‘voices’ which are not recognized, acknowledge and/or accepted as ‘voices’ are restricted. Finally, 5) the Campaign democracy discourse limits or distorts our possibility to reflect on what the everyday lessons in democracy might be, and thus also limits and distorts our reflection on how much and what kind of acting as a subject is actually possible. We begin with how I became attentive of this discourse.

‘Why do you want to see normal everyday school life?’

As emphasized in chapter four, I have had difficulty in making a case for the fact that the project was about democratic dannelsen and yet I wanted to participate in just ‘everyday school life’. Teachers and principals have – in response to my research interest in democratic dannelsen – invited me to visit during school election week, the subject social science, and student council meetings. When I emphasized that I was interested in ‘just normal everyday school life’ I noticed quizzical looks, and one time a teacher asked me directly ‘*why* is it again that you want to look at everyday school life? I am not sure I get it’ (field notes).

Similar situations occurred at PhD courses I attended, where I sometimes not only felt the need to explain this apparent paradox, but also felt required to defend it. Fellow academics as well as friends and family have sometimes asked me how I would *measure* democratic dannelsen, or how I would *see* it and document it. Would I for example study discussion and debate practices, or would I concentrate on instances of

collective deliberation and decision-making that may or may not include voting or ballots?

The Campaign democracy discourse also conditions situations in which a teacher does something in class in a particular way because of my presence, as illustrated in the following excerpt from my notes:

The teacher asks the students which game they want to play. The students make several suggestions, and the teacher writes the suggestions on the board. 'Okay let's vote on these suggestions' the teacher says and looks at me and smiles. 'The majority gets to decide. That is democracy, right Maria?' he says and smiles at me again (field notes).

These associations bothered me. They made it very difficult for me to 'make sense'. It felt difficult to have conversations about democracy, because the only conversations that seemed possible were what was possible within the parameters of the Campaign democracy discourse. I reflected on ways to 'avoid' it or 'escape' it, to be 'free' of it, so to speak, to disregard it. However, following the Foucauldian approach there is no standing outside of discourses. There is no getting around it (Hardy, 2022), and as emphasized in the methodological chapter, I realized at some point that my frustration regarding this challenge was an important clue. It was data.

Following Law (2004), we need to teach ourselves to think and to 'know' some of the complex and messy phenomena in the world through e.g., 'forms of knowing as emotionality and apprehension' (Law, 2004, p. 3), and hence this 'private' emotion of mine is a 'research tool' to 'know' the dissertation's topic, democratic dannelsen. My 'private' emotion of frustration was a *regulative* feeling resulting from the fact that my idea of democracy was not in accordance with dominant discourses (Foucault, 1982). My feeling was produced by 'dividing practices' which function to separate the sane from the mad (Foucault, 1982, pp. 777-778). I had to scrutinize the limitations and possibilities of this prevalent discourse and its metaphorical framework.

I begin by introducing a series of examples and vignettes to illustrate the pattern in the Campaign democracy discourse.

Campaign democracy discourse in general public

In the media and public debates, the Campaign democracy discourse is also very prevalent. For example, in 2019, Denmark had a parliamentary election. In the period

leading up to election day, the media aired programmes related to the election. The titles of the programmes were, for example, ‘Taking the temperature of democracy’ (referring to interviewing citizens about their opinion on the vote), and ‘Young Danes’ first experience with democracy’ (referring to young people’s first-time voting). In these programmes, I noticed phrases like ‘it is a shame if young people do not take part in democracy’ (referring to young people not voting) or ‘this is democracy speaking’ (referring to a televised party leader debate) and by the end of the programme; ‘tonight democracy has spoken’.

When Denmark once again had a parliamentary election in 2022, a broadcasted party leader debate was interrupted by climate activists. The activists booed loudly and one of the party leaders shouted; ‘Go home will you. We do not want to be bothered with your nonsense. We are having a debate here’. Another party leader took it a step further and left the stage and approached the activists with a finger-wagging while shouting indignantly; ‘This is the night of democracy. You are ruining democracy. How dare you do that. Sit down and behave’. The audience in the studio applauded him³⁵.

When Americans stormed the US Capitol in January 2021, there were phrases in both American and Danish media like ‘an attack right on the heart of American democracy’, ‘the enemies of democracy’ (referring to the people storming the building), and ‘today democracy is bleeding’.

Although I concede that parliamentary elections, and buildings and institutions like the US Capitol have both important symbolic and institutional functions related to the idea of democracy, my theoretical assumptions lead me to reject the proposition that young people’s first experience with voting is their first experience with democracy, or that one *ruins* democracy when booing and interrupting politicians, who on the other hand are entitled to claim to be democracy’s *rightful* ‘voice’ and ‘behaviour’.

And though the expression ‘attack on the heart of American democracy’ may make sense in some way and certainly got a very visible expression on the 6th of January 2021, the ‘attack’ or ‘bleeding’ did not begin with the people who stormed the Capitol. To stay with the media’s analogy, these people were not the ‘knife’ stabbing

³⁵ See e.g., <https://nyheder.tv2.dk/politik/2022-10-30-partilederdebat-blev-afbrudt-af-demonstranter-og-saa-fik-soeren-pape-nok>

democracy's 'heart. Rather they are drops or perhaps jets of blood – however very visible ones – stemming from the wound.

But these sorts of expressions make sense in a discourse where democracy is 'located' in and connected to specific events, practices, locations, behaviours, voices, and identities. I shall demonstrate that this is a highly problematic line of thinking, intricately interwoven with the 'ongoing colonial project' (Biswas, Rollo, et al., 2023; Rollo, 2018a) which continuously produces justified and 'naturalized' processes of domination and exclusion.

Campaign democracy discourse in the reform of the Danish elementary school and in the European commitment to strengthen democratic values.

As was also mentioned in the discussion of my conceptual framework, the Danish state school was reformed in 2014. The reform was promoted as a 'Learning reform' but it was also presented as a (much needed) fundamental 'paradigm shift' and a 'culture shift'. The purpose was to change the '*Pädagogical*-didactical foundation' with 'learning directed teaching' (the then Minister of Education; Christine Antorini cited in Olsen, 2015 my translation), and to make teachers think differently than they were used to thinking (Skovmand, 2016).

Remarkably, there were no discussions or reflections either in the political documents or in the public debate that followed regarding how a fundamental paradigm and culture shift could possibly affect the democratic role of the Danish state school. The reason why I find this remarkable is that it is very common in Denmark to refer to a Hal Koch/Dewey-thinking about the school as a context of experience and as a miniature society (Dewey, 2007; Koch, 1991/1945) when speaking about democratic *dannelse*, so it would seem that an obvious question should be the question about what might happen to this context of experience when the culture of the context changes *fundamentally*. However, such a question was completely absent.

Furthermore, the initiatives deriving from the European commitment to strengthen democratic values (European Commission, 2015) consist mainly of what I will refer to as *external* initiatives, rather than *internal* ones. These were external initiatives were, for example 1) the establishment of a task force of learning consultants with expertise on issues regarding democracy, 2) the launching of a national democracy campaign which included developing a website containing a wide range of teaching

resources, podcasts, movies and other activities to support teachers and schools with the democratic task, 3) funding (or co-funding) and ordering of studies and analysis to provide new knowledge about democracy and democratic dannelsen, 4) the holding of conferences, workshops, and courses for educators and educational administrative personnel on the theme of democratic dannelsen, and 5) the establishment of the Council of Democratic dannelsen. In comparison with *external* initiatives deriving from the European commitment, there have been few initiatives that can be characterized as *internal*, that is, initiatives specifically directed to the existing school life and the democratic quality, so to speak, of this life.

Again, this seems odd given the frequent reference and endorsement of the Hal Koch/Dewey-thinking. Would an effort to strengthen democratic dannelsen in this line of thinking not be oriented towards the context of experience, that is, the democratic quality, so to speak, of everyday life in school?

However, this makes sense in the Campaign democracy discourse. It makes sense because the culture and paradigm change did not involve any changes to the activities, configurations, and what is officially prescribed and formally taught *within* the metaphorical framework of the Campaign democracy discourse. That is, the reform did not involve (noticeable) changes in relation to the student council, the subject of social science, the formulation in the preamble of the school law, the expectations regarding the presence of students on various local councils, committees, and potential ad hoc working groups, or the expectations regarding a debate and discussion culture in classrooms, voting practices and students' opportunities to make choices regarding their school life. On the contrary, the focus on some of these things was actually enhanced by the reform. For example, some municipalities include student representation on various local councils or boards as a target figure in their accountability system and quality reports. As a member of the school management at one of the participant schools said: 'we are being measured on democratic dannelsen in raw data. Democratic dannelsen is very important for the municipal school administration' (field notes).

The focus and investment in external (rather than internal) initiatives to strengthen democratic values is what purports to be useful in the Campaign democracy discourse. Everyday school life, which includes such things as maths lessons, physical education, birthday celebrations, and field trips are not part of the metaphoric framework related to democratic dannelsen (or at least they are only peripheral to it). Hence, why should

any effort be directed towards such areas of the school that are ‘irrelevant’ to democratic dannelsen?

Moreover, the reform text reveals the common-sense perception of the state school already being ‘among the best in the world to develop students to be active citizens’ (Agreement, 2013, p. 1) and to promote ‘the student’s ability to understand and participate in democratic processes’ (Agreement, 2013, p. 1). The interpretation of the results of the ICCS³⁶ reveals the common-sense perception that Danish ‘students are well prepared to their future life as citizens in Denmark’ (Agreement, 2013, p. 1). In fact, as the media reported, Danes are already ‘world champions in democracy’ (e.g., in Berlinske, Sørensen, 2017).

Considering the intersection between the Campaign democracy discourse (in which democracy is associated with specific events, behaviours, institutions etc.), and the Defense democracy discourse (in which democratic dannelsen is first and foremost a matter relevant to handling the threat of the non-Western), we begin to see how these discourses intersect and co-produce certain ways of thinking, understanding, perceiving, and doing democratic dannelsen, while limiting others. What is conditioned here, is that the idea and picture regarding the ‘state’ of democratic dannelsen in Denmark – which purports to be the ‘truth’ – is that the democratic role of the Danish state school is very successful. The problems – because even ‘world champions’ have problems – are problems with individuals, and some cultural backgrounds, recognized by ‘bodies’, are more ‘naturally’ disposed to comprise an undemocratic ‘nature’ than others.

Outsourcing democratic dannelsen to private suppliers

My inspiration for the name ‘Campaign democracy’ is partly the name of the Danish national initiative deriving from the European commitment to strengthen democratic values, namely, the National Democracy Campaign (Ministry of Children and Education, n.d.-b) (funded by a part of the public budget allocated for *integration*, which reveals the intersection with logics of the Defense democracy discourse). This campaign was a three-year project running from 2018-2021 and has thus now ended. The project leader is no longer employed. The task force of learning consultants with

³⁶ International Civic and Citizenship Study

expertise on democracy and citizenship along with the possibilities for municipalities and schools to get feedback or development courses and workshops are no longer available. The webpage and teaching and inspiration material produced during the project are, however, still available, but my point here is that this closure of the effort seems to express the conclusion that we are now done with strengthening democratic values and can move on to focus resources on other important issues (of which there of course are many). The commitment Denmark made to strengthen democracy was managed with a campaign.

The other source of inspiration for the name ‘Campaign democracy’ was a local municipal project I heard of. A local government had decided to prioritize and ‘invest heavily’ (notes from telephone conversation) in democratic dannelsen in all the schools in the municipality. In a conversation with the municipal project leader I learned that what was called ‘this year’s big investments in democratic dannelsen’ was a one-week campaign for the 8th graders in the municipality. This was a campaign developed by a private communications agency, which – judging from the information on that agency’s website – offers a wide range communications services and is hence not working exclusively with themes pertaining to either democratic dannelsen or education. I do not mean to disparage or criticize this campaign (or the communications agency) and I do not have any knowledge about the campaign that enables me to question the potential positive impact of the campaign on democratic dannelsen. The point to be made with this example is rather the fact that it seems to give the impression that the democratic task of schools can be ‘outsourced’ to private suppliers and ‘checked off’ after a one-week campaign for one year group in the municipality. And that is considered to be what it means ‘to invest heavily in democratic dannelsen’.

In service of the ongoing colonial project

In principle, there is nothing wrong with the activities mentioned above, and they can certainly be important and valuable. They do after all aim to teach students to navigate in existing structures and such an ability is arguably very valuable. However, informed by the work of Westheimer and Kahne (2004) (introduced in conceptual framework part two) I argue that putting an emphasis on teaching students to operate *within* existing structures risks detracting from other important democratic priorities – for example, considering the value and quality of such existing structures in the first place. Such an emphasis may risk hindering what we usually consider to be a central

aspect of democratic dannelsen: so-called independent critical thinking. The implication (and the sometimes inconvenience but at the same time value) of independent critical thinking is that *nothing* evades scrutiny and possible reconfiguration.

If we take this ideal of independent critical thinking seriously, then the Campaign democracy discourse is potentially problematic in that it paves the way for a reduction of democratic dannelsen to socializing and disciplining processes focusing on already known practices, identities, and ways of being and doing; being democratic is reduced to the 'performance' of these identities, practices, and behaviours. It paves the way to the reduction of independent critical thinking to the passive acceptance of the thinking already completed by someone else and already widely accepted as 'legitimate' critical thinking. It risks turning democratic citizenship into a charade. This also raises questions about who is privileged in this discourse. What can be known and recognized as independent critical thinking? Who is *entitled* to be able to demonstrate 'independent critical thinking'?

What we see in the Campaign democracy discourse is a privileging of the 'speaking' being, or to be more precise, a privileging of what can be *recognized* and *acknowledged* as speech, which thus also involves a privileging of identities that can be *recognized* and *acknowledged* as speaking beings. It is a discourse that reproduces what Ackerly (2008) calls 'epistemological' domination because the criterion for exclusion is what counts as knowledge and who counts as a bearer of knowledge.

Campaign democracy discourse draws strongly on the criterion for exclusion, *linguistic skills*, and on the important lesson (and 'truth') we have inherited from the historical struggles of different social groups defending themselves from the claim that they lacked sufficient capacity to exercise a 'voice'. The 'lesson' is that exclusion and disqualification of non-speakers is legitimate, justified, and even 'natural' (Rollo, 2021). As emphasized in the conceptual framework, marginalized groups have historically been required to prove that they were not disabled, children, or animals. What we have inherited and what is reproduced in the Campaign democracy discourse is, in Rollo's words, to be 'effectively blackmailed under threat of being ignored, misrepresented, or harmed' into 'the very problematic position of affirming some exclusions as natural while arguing that [we] do not belong in the category of natural exclusion' (Rollo, 2021, p. 318).

Following this, it is easy to recognize and understand *why* Campaign democracy discourse purports to be so important and is such a persistent line of thinking. Of course, we want our children (who start out ‘naturally’ unqualified) to learn to ‘speak’ and ‘speak well’ so that they can ‘escape’ the sphere of ‘natural’ exclusion. We wish for nothing but to bring them into the ‘democratic sphere’ (Biesta, 2009). Campaign democracy discourse comprises ‘a colonial way to understand democratisation’ (Biesta, 2009, p. 9), and a powerful driving force behind the Campaign democracy discourse is our tremendous love and hopes for our children.

In this sense we can draw lines from the Campaign democracy discourse to the ‘concern industry’ (Pettersvold & Østrem, 2019) (introduced in conceptual framework) and its ‘prevention logic’ that targets children’s so-called ‘social and emotional learning’. According to the community of early childhood education scholars, the ‘concern industry’ pathologizes completely normal human emotions and resistance and produces the idea that the child is ‘by nature’ a problem. Likewise, the Campaign democracy discourse pathologizes and ‘de-democratizes’ completely capable ‘voices’, behaviours and resistance merely on the basis that these voices, behaviours and resistance are enacted by children and young people.

The main problem, I wish to suggest, is the adultist perception of the child and the adultist perceptions of what it means to ‘think critically’, what it means to speak and know. Despite good intentions, the Campaign democracy discourse draws on and further reproduces the child as ‘naturally’ incapable and apolitical.

Claims for equality based on the perception of injustice *is* critical thinking

According to Rancière, any police order comprises ‘an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and that sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task (Rancière, 1999, p. 29). Any police order is made up by ‘the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible, and another is not, that this the speech is understood as discourse and another as noise’ (Rancière, 1999, p. 29). Furthermore, a police order ‘can produce all sorts of good, and one kind of police may be preferable to another’ (Rancière, 1999, p. 31). Politics is the actions that *reconfigure* the order. The actions, that is, that make a claim for equality ‘based on the perception of injustice’ (Biesta, 2009, p. 8) is not aimed merely at gaining ‘a seat at the table’ (Biesta, 2009, p. 8) but is aimed at *redefining* the order ‘in such a way that new identities, new ways of doing

and being become possible and can be ‘counted’”(Biesta, 2009, p. 8). A claim for equality *is* in other words *critical thinking*.

Following this, I want to suggest that if the ideal of a society is ‘democracy’ based on ideas of equality, freedom, and solidarity, then a ‘preferable’ police order is an order run in alignment with the ideal of being responsive to claims for equality, or perhaps even an order in which claims of equality are *expected* and *invited* (however inconvenient they may appear). The democratic *quality*, so to speak, of a police order is determined by the strength or looseness with which it is run, and by the extent to which the ‘running of the order’ allows, enables, and invites (or rejects, dismisses and sanctions) claims for equality. So how much ‘action’ – understood here as *politics* and claims for equality (Rancière) – is actually possible in our schools and in our society? When taking into consideration the lack of political self-confidence of Danish students (suggested by the result of the ICCS) (Bruun et al., 2018; Lieberkind, 2020, 2021a, 2021b) it seems to suggest that the running of the police order has been tightened, so to speak.

While we bemoan the lack of political self-confident and desire to do something about it, and furthermore while there is general political agreement in Europe on the need to strengthen democracy through education, I hope it is clear from this analysis why and how such efforts based on the rationalities and logics in the Campaign democracy discourse are problematic and potentially disastrous. Campaign democracy discourse draws on or perhaps fundamentally *is* rationalities and logics of the historical (ongoing) colonial project, and renewing efforts to strengthen it is renewing efforts to strengthen colonialism. Incorporating this logic in terms of target figures in accountability systems and quality reports of the school system and measurements of democratic dannelsen in ‘raw data’, to use the phrase of the school manager at one of the participant schools, and encouraging and guiding teachers and schools to enhance activities and teaching to pursue certain perceived democratic behaviours, not to mention communicating to students that these specific behaviours *are* democratic while others are not, is highly problematic. It is a matter of enhancing the ‘dividing practices’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 777). It is enhancing our blindness to the fact that the yelling, shouting, screaming, cursing, crying, rejecting, refusing, provoking, fighting subject, or the completely silent, invisible or self-destructive subject is a *political* subject, that is, a thinking, speaking being, who is perhaps precisely enacting critical thinking and perhaps also making a claim for equality based on a perception of injustice. It is enhancing and at the same time affirming the

naturalization of the marginalization, exclusion, and subjugation of a whole range of perfectly capable 'voices' and perfectly capable critical thinking.

The point is not that we should not make an effort to enhance certain behaviours that are more desirable than others in a society where people live together. Dealing with disagreements in a peaceful manner, being polite and helpful, debating in accordance with certain rules, obeying the law, learning to give comprehensible and effective talks in front of a crowd, or writing letters for the city council are activities that are most certainly desirable, empowering, and largely worth pursuing, but there is *nothing* inherently democratic about them. The Campaign democracy discourse blurs the very important fact.

I'm fine



Competence democracy

Democratic *dannelse* poses a challenge to the governance of education

In a Danish context, the primary term used to encompass the democratic task of schools is ‘demokratisk *dannelse*’. The teachers and principals I talked to during this project all use the term. As we have seen in the conceptual framework, the concept of *dannelse* (which is considered *democratic dannelse*) is ambiguous and generalized, and it suffers from normative and semantic overload. It is a popular and frequently used concept in Denmark when speaking abstractly and generally about the democratic task of schools, and particularly when accompanied with the term *democratic* it becomes a respected and highly valued notion used to describe basically anything considered desirable by those who refer to it as democratic (Mounk, 2018), which we saw in the analysis of the Campaign democracy discourse is highly problematic.

The concept of democratic *dannelse* also poses a challenge at the level of educational policymaking and governance. How can one govern such an unmanageable concept in the detailed way ideally required in an age of measurement (Biesta, 2010)? The solution seems to have been to ‘tame’ democratic *dannelse* using the term *competence*.

An example is the Danish approach to ‘Education for active citizenship’ (Danish Ministry of Children and Education, 2021). On the ministry’s website ‘Denmark’s learning portal’ (Danish Ministry of Children and Education, n.d.) the concept of active citizenship is put forward as a vital part of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and hence as an important purpose and aim of education (Danish Ministry of Children and Education, 2021). The Danish definition of the term ‘active citizenship’ is based on the OECD’s ‘Learning Compass 2030’ (OECD, 2019), and as a way of ‘operationalizing education for active citizenship’ the concept is refracted into nine ‘democratic competencies’ (Danish Ministry of Children and Education, 2021). These nine competencies are defined with inspiration from the Council of Europe’s ‘Education for Democratic Citizenship’ programme (CoE, 2010) and the ‘Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture’ (CoE, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). Moreover the Ministry’s ‘Department of teaching and quality’ uses these nine competencies as a basis for analyses aiming at informing future educational

policymaking (Department of Teaching and Quality, 2021). Thus, the concept of democratic *dannelse* primarily exists in the vocabulary of practitioners and in the educational research community, whereas at the level of policymaking and governance of education the concept of democratic *dannelse* is used in a generalized way (it basically just functions as a title), but has been transformed into democratic *competencies* as a way of transforming the democratic task of schools into something governable and measurable.

This transformation is not surprising given the spread of global comparisons of national schools and education systems and the global hegemonic educational discourse, as presented in the conceptual framework, in which the two key concepts in the ‘new educational order’ (Field, 2008) are *learning* and *competence*. The prominent position of the term ‘competence’ began with the development of PISA tests and the effort to ‘tame’ the ‘output’ of educational endeavours into measurable and thus governable phenomena (Brogger, 2019; Moos, 2016). Under the influence of transnational scientific and educational agencies, the Danish concept of democratic *dannelse* has undergone a ‘competensification’. It does not feature anywhere as a deliberate choice, which might have included reflections on what such transformations may or may not imply for the democratic task of education. Rather, the use of international organizations as sources of knowledge and inspiration functions as sufficient validation and legitimation (Mausethagen, 2013), and the idea of competence-based education has swept across educational systems throughout the world.

In this section, I will investigate what it implies to transform democratic *dannelse* into democratic competences and to subject it to the contemporary logics of accountability systems. My interest in this dissertation lies in what can be thought and said about the democratic role of education when it merges with the competence discourse. What remains when what I have chosen to label the *Competence democracy discourse* is a condition under which acting as a subject can take place? How much action is actually possible, and for whom? What *quality* of subjectification is possible and for whom? These are the questions at the centre of this section.

The empirical material I draw on to construct what I present as the Competence democracy discourse is a matter of excerpts from one of the primary sources of inspiration for the Danish approach to active citizenship, the Council of Europe’s ‘Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture’ (CoE, 2018a, 2018b,

2018c). I do not provide a comprehensive analysis of the entire framework. Rather I use excerpts primarily from volume two, ‘Descriptors of competences for democratic culture’ (CoE, 2018b) as illustrative examples of a ‘competence based approach’ to democratic dannelsen in order to discuss what happens to democratic dannelsen when it is absorbed in the Competence democracy discourse.

The two words, ‘learning’ and ‘competence’ are closely related in that to become competent within a particular field one must learn something specific, and in this section, I draw on Biesta’s critical analysis of what he calls the ‘naturalization of learning’ (Biesta, 2013a). I begin by presenting the primary source of inspiration for the Danish national approach to democratic dannelsen, the ‘Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture’.

Project Competences for Democratic Culture and Intercultural Dialogue

In 2014, the Council of Europe presented a project with the title ‘Competences for Democratic Culture and Intercultural Dialogue’ (CoE, 2013). The aim of the project was to develop a:

[C]onceptual model of the competences which need to be acquired by learners if they are to participate effectively in a culture of democracy and live peacefully together with others in culturally diverse democratic societies. It is intended that the model will be used to inform educational decision making and planning, helping educational systems to be harnessed for the preparation of learners for life as competent democratic citizens (CoE, 2018a, p. 11).

It was decided that the model should be developed as ‘competence-based education’ and hence ensure that the framework was linked directly to learning outcomes that could be used in classrooms (Barrett, 2020). The theoretical foundations of a competence based approach to education have multiple learning theory roots; functionalist, behaviourist, and humanistic learning theories (Gervais, 2016), and a key component is assessment based on ‘the performance of the individual learner’ (Gervais, 2016, p. 101).

It was decided that the ‘Common European Framework of Reference for Languages’ (CoE, 2001) (also adopted in Denmark) should be the model of inspiration (Barrett, 2020), and in 2018, ‘Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture’

(RFCDC onwards) (CoE, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c) was presented as heralding ‘a new approach to education for citizenship and human rights education’ (Barrett, 2020).

Thus, the RFCDC offers detailed proposals on how formal education (from pre-school to university) can be used to ‘equip’ (Barrett, 2020, p. 7) children and young people with ‘the competences needed for participating actively in democratic culture, for respecting, promoting and defending human rights, and for engaging in respectful, appropriate and effective intercultural dialogue’ (p. 7) and to ‘equip’ (p. 7) children and young people with ‘the competences that confer resilience to radicalization, violent extremist propaganda and hate speech’³⁷ (p. 7). RFCDC is considered to be the primary instrument through which education for citizenship and human rights can be implemented in the 47 member states of the Council of Europe (Barrett, 2020, p. 1).

Detailed descriptions of observable (democratic) behavior

In the RFCDC, 20 (needed) democratic competencies are identified. The competencies consist of ‘Values’, ‘Attitudes’, ‘Skills’, and ‘Knowledge and critical understanding’, illustrated in the model (CoE, 2018a), see figure 1.

³⁷ This also illustrates the presence of the Defense democracy discourse related to RFCDC.

The 20 competences included in the model

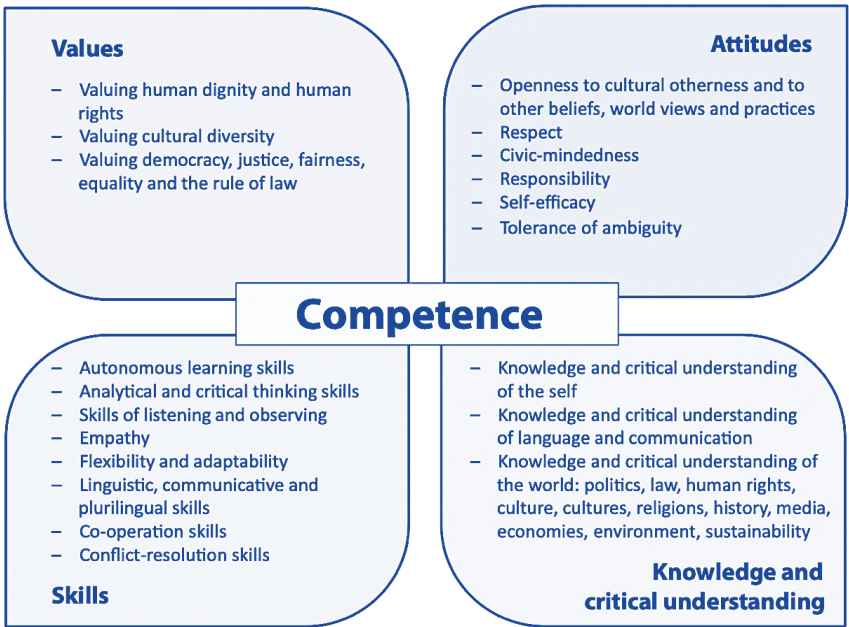


Figure 1

Further, RFCDC contains a total of 447 descriptors of ‘observable behaviour’ (Barrett, 2020, p. 9), that is, statements or descriptions of what a person is able to do which indicates that this individual masters the various competences. The 447 descriptors are further assembled into 135 key descriptors which are assigned to three levels of proficiency: basic, intermediate, and advanced. Figure 2 is an example of the key descriptors of the competence ‘Skills of listening and observing’ (CoE, 2018b, p. 19).

12. Skills of listening and observing

70	Listens carefully to differing opinions	Basic
71	Listens attentively to other people	
72	Watches speakers' gestures and general body language to help himself/herself to figure out the meaning of what they are saying	Intermediate
73	Can listen effectively in order to decipher another person's meanings and intentions	
74	Pays attention to what other people imply but do not say	Advanced
75	Notices how people with other cultural affiliations react in different ways to the same situation	

Figure 2

It is difficult to disagree with the desirability of, for example, 'empathy', 'conflict-resolution skills', or 'respect', and as emphasized elsewhere my aim is not to suggest that such traits are irrelevant. However, thinking of them as *necessary democratic* competencies that can be verified in certain observable behaviours – behaviours which are then (necessarily) to be taught (and assessed) – amounts to a tremendously problematic line of thinking.

The RFCDC descriptors are normative judgements about desirable behaviour

Biesta has already showed us problems with the term 'learning' and specifically the naturalization of learning (Biesta, 2013a). The primary target of Biesta's critique is the widespread assumption that learning is something natural and unavoidable – as natural as breathing or digesting food. This perception, Biesta argues, is merely a construction. When we label something as 'learning' it is in fact not just a description of a naturally occurring phenomenon – rather we are making 'a normative judgement about desirable change' (Biesta, 2013a, p. 60). We judge it either positively (the child has learned to read) or negatively (the child may have learned some bad habits in the process). Judgements like these are relevant in educational contexts but it is, however, important to be clear that they are *not* objective descriptions. This is important because the construction of learning as something natural adds obscurity and legitimacy to the (hence unnoticed) political work done through the discourse of learning, and specifically through the naturalization of learning. Seeing the word 'learning' as a label for an evaluative concept rather than a descriptive one makes it possible to ask what the reasons are for making such judgements, and who has the power to make such judgements, or who claims to have such power (Biesta, 2013a, p. 69):

If part of the way in which the politics of learning is able to do its work stems from the suggestion that learning is a natural process and phenomenon, then the first step toward exposing the political work being done through learning is by denaturalizing learning (Biesta, 2013a, p. 69).

In order to denaturalize learning, Biesta attempts to remove it from the sphere of necessity and inevitability. This will enable us to see that learning is not something that necessarily holds power over us but rather something that we should (and can) hold power over (Biesta, 2013a, p. 60). Likewise, we can say that if part of the way in which the politics of democratic competencies is able to do its work stems from the suggestion that democratic competencies are necessary – competencies that ‘...need to be acquired by learners if they are to participate effectively in a culture of democracy’ (CoE, 2018a p. 19), then a way to expose the political work being done through the idea of democratic competencies is by de-necessitating them.

Following this line of thinking, the competencies and key descriptors identified in the RFCDC are not merely objective descriptions of what democratic citizenship is made of. Rather, they are normative judgements about desirable behaviour, and we might ask what the reasons are for making such judgements and who has the power to make them? Who – to be very concrete – is in a position to judge whether an individual ‘can listen effectively in order to decipher another person’s meanings and intentions’? Who is it who has the power to judge whether an individual can ‘notice how people with other cultural affiliations react in different ways to the same situation’ (figure 2)? and further, who – or perhaps we should say which ‘naturalized’ *ontological* identities (Fricker, 2009), that is, *which bodies* – are assigned to be judged?

Subjecting the Neo-racist Defense democracy discourse to judgement through the RFCDC

To illustrate the problematic and inadequate line of thinking in the RFCDC, I want to make a little experiment using a Foucauldian discursive theorizing. Foucault showed that the articulations of a phenomenon always follow a certain regularity (Foucault, 1972, p. 145), that is, certain rules of appearance, formation, or transformation that function to include some things and exclude other things. Thus, a statement will always be judged and perceived as either correct or incorrect, plausible or implausible, true or false on the basis of how it sits (or not) within the regularity. We *feel* exactly

this as it appears as really difficult (and inappropriate) to disagree with or oppose the claims made in RFCDC, e.g., that phenomenon such as empathy or respect are necessary democratic competences. Therefore, thinking with Foucault, one of the ways to challenge the truth and enable resistance to arise is to examine the truth through another perspective than its own. The perspectives we change here are a perspective on the behaviour of individuals and a perspective on the behaviour of a collective. I shall explain this method in more details shortly. First the experiment. I will subject the Defense democracy discourse, which I presented and examined at the beginning of this chapter to a judgement through some of the key descriptors in the RFCDC. Our question here is, how does the underlying Defense democracy discourse embedded in the Danish initiatives following the European commitment to strengthen democratic values *perform* in this ‘instrument through which education for citizenship and human rights education can be implemented’ (Barrett, 2020, p. 1)?

With my analysis of the Defense democracy discourse, in which I emphasized the Neo-racist characteristic and the construction of the ‘non-Western’ as primitive and regressive in mind, I ask the reader to *judge* to what extent the Defense democracy discourse itself demonstrates the following so-called democratic competencies.

1. Does the defense democracy discourse express ‘the view that the cultural diversity within a society should be positively valued and appreciated’ (CoE, 2018b, p. 16) (see figure 3) and thereby demonstrate the democratic competence ‘Valuing cultural diversity at an intermediate level?

2. Valuing cultural diversity

7	Promotes the view that we should be tolerant of the different beliefs that are held by others in society	Basic
8	Promotes the view that one should always strive for mutual understanding and meaningful dialogue between people and groups who are perceived to be “different” from one another	
9	Expresses the view that the cultural diversity within a society should be positively valued and appreciated	Intermediate
10	Argues that intercultural dialogue should be used to help us recognise our different identities and cultural affiliations	Advanced
11	Argues that intercultural dialogue should be used to develop respect and a culture of “living together”	

Figure 3

2. Does the defense democracy discourse express ‘respect for other people as equal human beings’ (CoE, 2018b, p. 17) (see figure 4) and thereby demonstrate the democratic competence ‘Respect’ at a basic level?

5. Respect

27	Gives space to others to express themselves	Basic
28	Expresses respect for other people as equal human beings	
29	Treats all people with respect regardless of their cultural background	Intermediate
30	Expresses respect towards people who are of a different socio-economic status from himself/herself	
31	Expresses respect for religious differences	Advanced
32	Expresses respect for people who hold different political opinions from himself/herself	

Figure 4

3. Does the defense democracy discourse seek and welcome ‘opportunities for encountering people with different values, customs and behaviors’ (CoE, 2018b, p. 17) (see figure 5) and thereby demonstrate the democratic competence ‘Openness to cultural otherness’ at an advanced level?

4. Openness to cultural otherness

21	Shows interest in learning about people's beliefs, values, traditions and world views	Basic
22	Expresses interest in travelling to other countries	
23	Expresses curiosity about other beliefs and interpretations and other cultural orientations and affiliations	Intermediate
24	Expresses an appreciation of the opportunity to have experiences of other cultures	
25	Seeks and welcomes opportunities for encountering people with different values, customs and behaviours	Advanced
26	Seeks contact with other people in order to learn about their culture	

Figure 5

Based on my analysis of the Defense democracy discourse and judging with the RFCDC instrument, it does not look that good. The Defense democracy discourse does not even manage to demonstrate 'Respect' at a basic level. It seems that the line of thinking guiding the Danish national initiatives to strengthen democratic values through education is not 'equipped' with 'the competences needed for participating actively in democratic culture, for respecting, promoting and defending human rights, and for engaging in respectful, appropriate and effective intercultural dialogue' (Barrett, 2020, p. 7).

Competence is an individual and individualizing term

However, neither the Defense democracy discourse, nor the European Union or the Danish Ministry of Children and Education responsible for policy documents based on the Defense democracy discourse is *assigned* to be judged through the RFCDC. In fact, a discourse or a national agency is impossible to subject to the key descriptors of the RFCDC because the framework is simply not designed for that. The perspective of the RFCDC is a perspective on individuals and not on national agencies or collective dominant discourse.

The question about whether the discourse masters a certain level of competencies is not a meaningful question. The reason for that lies in the characteristics of the term *competence*. As Biesta argues in relation to the term 'learning', the term 'competence' is an *individual* and *individualizing* term. 'After all, one can only learn for oneself and not for others' (Biesta, 2013a p. 63). Biesta shows how the learnification has created an ideological shift that concerns a transformation of lifelong learning as a *right* to lifelong learning as a *duty* (Biesta, 2013a p. 66), which enables 'the increasing tendency to turn political problems into learning problems, thus shifting the responsibility for addressing such problems from the state and the collective to the level of individuals' (Biesta, 2013a p. 67).

Likewise, one can only hold and develop (learn the behaviour to demonstrate) competencies for oneself and not for others. This fosters a situation in which problems in the state of democracy are defined as a matter of individuals' 'lack', 'inadequacies', or 'poor attitudes', or to stay in the competence terminology: as a matter of individuals' insufficient democratic competencies. Here we see one of the problematic aspects of the Competence democracy discourse; namely, it contributes to making a situation in which we are deprived of the possibility to address a *structural* or

collective responsibility for e.g., the Neo-racist characteristic of the Defense democracy discourse and the concrete initiatives based on this discourse.

A neutral, empty, and positive term, almost impossible to question

In the RFCDC, democratic competencies are placed in the sphere of necessity: ‘the competences that **need to be acquired** by learners if they are to participate effectively in a culture of democracy’ (CoE, 2018a, p. 11 my emphasis). However, the term ‘competence’ is in itself – as Biesta argues in relation to the word ‘learning’ – neutral or empty regarding content, direction, and purpose:

To suggest that learning is good or desirable [...] does therefore not really mean anything until it is specified what the content of the learning is and, more important, until it is specified what the purpose of the learning is (Biesta, 2013a p. 63).

Regarding the term ‘competence’, we can likewise say that to suggest that competencies are good or desirable does not really mean anything until it is specified what the content of the competences are and until it is specified what the purposes of the competences are. One could argue that the competences in the RFCDC are indeed specified, however we still need a subject to interpret both the descriptors and the ‘observable behaviour’, thus the judgements will always be normative and dependent on the eye of the beholder.

Moreover, when seen in isolation the term ‘competence’ is perceived as utterly positive. The fusion of the concepts of ‘competence’ and ‘democracy’, which is also an honorific notion shrouded in positiveness and prestige (Mounk, 2018), and as Dunn puts it, a source and embodiment of political power itself with cumulative hypnotic effect (Dunn, 2018), fosters a situation where it becomes almost impossible to challenge or question, let alone *be against* what is presented as democratic competencies, especially as these – as is the case in the RFCDC – are placed in the field of education – which is dominated by the developmental discourse and the ‘not-yet’ assumption about the child – *and* in the sphere of necessity.

Here we see another problematic aspect of the Competence democracy discourse. The behaviour described as key descriptors in the RFCDC attain an almost unquestionable and commonsense position which blurs the fact that these descriptors do not really say much. To illustrate their ambiguity and emptiness, we will once again – ‘thinking with’ Foucault – look at them through another perspective than their own.

How about, for example, the training of suicide bombers?

One could argue that being able to ‘generate enthusiasm among group members for accomplishing shared goals’, which is a key descriptor for an advanced level of the democratic competence ‘Co-operation skills’ (CoE, 2018b, p. 20) (see figure 6) is a highly relevant competence for the person in charge of training suicide bombers. Thus, what may appear as a desirable and democratic competence may not be so desirable or democratic after all. To put it differently, there is *nothing* inherently democratic about being able to generate enthusiasm among group members for accomplishing shared goals.

Drawing on Westheimer (2015), I argue that when we fail to consider these descriptions of behaviour ‘within a broader social context, we risk advancing mere civility or docility rather than democracy’ (p. 45), and the Competence democracy discourse blurs this very important point.

16. Co-operation skills

94	Builds positive relationships with other people in a group	Basic
95	When working as a member of a group, does his/her share of the group's work	
96	Works to build consensus to achieve group goals	Intermediate
97	When working as a member of a group, keeps others informed about any relevant or useful information	
98	Generates enthusiasm among group members for accomplishing shared goals	Advanced
99	When working with others, supports other people despite differences in points of view	

Figure 6

The whole framing of the democratic role of education as that of ‘equipping’ students with democratic competencies, constructed as something possible to ‘operationalize’ in a ‘competence-based approach’, risks fixating democracy and ‘democratic behaviour’. The Competence democracy discourse contributes to a situation in which it becomes very difficult if not impossible to pose questions about what democracy is, can, or should be, and how democratic ways of acting and being can or should look. The answers purport to be evident and already decided upon. This illusion is built into frameworks and educational accountability systems like the RFCDC which – as

Barrett (2020) enthusiastically notes but which now more seems like a serious threat – are currently being implemented in educational systems in several European countries (Barrett, 2020). This state of affairs raises the question of whether an open (democratic) conversation about democracy is in the process of erosion.

The competence-based approach establishes an active/passive dichotomy

Furthermore, as a tool used to assess and govern the democratic task of education, the RFCDC establishes an active/passive dichotomy. The framework requires that some subjects play the role of judging and others take the role of being judged. Although it is stated nowhere, it is clear from the fact that this instrument is targeted education that the underlying assumption is that it is adult bodies (the presumed already democratically competent) who are assigned judge, and child and youth bodies (the presumed ‘not-yet’-everything but also ‘not-yet’ democratically competent) that are assigned to be judged, which then automatically assumes that the ‘correct’ interpretation and judgement ‘by nature’ lies with the adult body. In other words, this line of thinking is – as much else – shrouded in adultism. The extent to which this line of thinking is carried out in concrete technologies (as if the RFCDC were not concrete enough) and implemented in existing governance and accountability systems in school policies, laws, and concrete pedagogical practices is also the extent to which the magnitude and reach of the power of those already in power – adults – are increased.

With the notion of ‘politics of learning’ Biesta means to denote ‘the powerful work that is being done by, and which at the very same time is hidden behind, the discourse of learning’ (Biesta, 2013b, p. 62). This analysis adds by arguing that though it is not *exclusively* children and young people who experience the effects of this ‘powerful work’, it is *especially* children and young people who experience the effects of this ‘powerful work’. And this work has more to do with domesticating and making docile than with emancipating and democratizing.

Children are constructed as inadequate and inferior

The Competence democracy discourse is – as Biesta argues regarding the learning discourse – not an innocent language. To claim someone has to learn something is at the same time a very specific intervention in which it is claimed that this someone lacks something and is not yet complete (Biesta, 2013a p. 69). Claiming children and

young people ‘must acquire necessary democratic competences in order to participate effectively in democratic societies’ is also a very specific intervention in which it is claimed that children and young people lack something and are not yet complete.

While such a claim, as Biesta argues, can be perfectly legitimate in some situations (for example if I have expressed a desire to become a competent pilot and therefore must engage in certain activities to acquire the skills and knowledge needed to fly an airplane), it can be politically problematic when it comes to someone’s role and identity as a democratic citizen. For example, such would be the case when this claim entails that one cannot speak as a citizen before having learned to speak ‘properly’ (Biesta, 2013a p. 70).

According to the RFCDC, the key descriptors of the competence ‘Tolerance of ambiguity’ at an intermediate level are that one ‘is comfortable in unfamiliar situations’, ‘deals with uncertainty in a positive and constructive manner’ and ‘works well in unpredictable circumstances’ (CoE, 2018b, p. 18) (see figure 7). While this – again – arguably sounds desirable, we are still left with difficult interpretative questions about the meanings of the terms and phrases ‘comfortable’, ‘unfamiliar’, ‘uncertainty’, ‘positive and constructive manner’, ‘work well’ and ‘unpredictable’. Such questions in turn raise the question of who has the power to determine these meanings.

9. Tolerance of ambiguity

50	Engages well with other people who have a variety of different points of view	Basic
51	Shows that he/she can suspend judgments about other people temporarily	
52	Is comfortable in unfamiliar situations	Intermediate
53	Deals with uncertainty in a positive and constructive manner	
54	Works well in unpredictable circumstances	Advanced
55	Expresses a desire to have his/her own ideas and values challenged	
56	Enjoys the challenge of tackling ambiguous problems	
57	Expresses enjoyment of tackling situations that are complicated	

Figure 7

How about, for example, the ‘tolerance of ambiguity’ of Ukrainian citizens?

To illustrate the problem, let us once again examine these ‘truths’ through another perspective than their own. Let us take the current war in Ukraine as a case. This situation – at one point at least – was presumably an ‘unfamiliar situation’ to many Ukrainians. It was, moreover, a situation which arguably involves ‘uncertainty’ and ‘unpredictable circumstances’. Do the Ukrainians who are not ‘comfortable’, or who do not ‘work well’ or do not ‘deal with’ the situation ‘in a positive and constructive manner’ fail then to ‘master’ the ‘democratic competence’ ‘Tolerance of ambiguity’? This suggestion seems absurd and maybe even abusive and reprehensible, and thus we begin to sense how important the roles of judge and judged are for the RFCDC to work. It illustrates that the RFCDC is a not tool designed to assess Ukrainian citizens, but a tool designed very specifically to assess and discipline the behaviour of *children and young people in educational settings*, and thus a tool that assumes a particular relation between adults and children, and a particular student identity and a particular role of education. It involves a prejudicial belief system in which children are constructed as inadequate and inferior to adults – a belief system in which adults’ power to judge the behaviour of children is justified and naturalized based on the fact that they are adults. The educational setting including the notion of the learner and the educator provides further legitimation to this assumption. In other words, the RFCDC is a tool that measures so-called ‘democratic competences’ by an always transcending yardstick whose command is obedience to the ‘adultist contract’ (cf. Mills, 1997/2022).

The Competence democracy discourse intersects with the Campaign democracy discourse and mistakes democracy and democratic dannels with ‘proper’ behaviour and ‘proper’ voices – a judgement which lies with the more powerful, the adults, or in the words of Rancière, with those running the police order (Rancière, 1999).

For many children and young people this is particularly problematic in that what is considered ‘proper’ (and democratic) in, for example the RFCDC, can be characterized as the ability to express oneself and one’s point of view in an ‘intellectual’ manner and with a very limited space for emotional and embodied expressions, and many children are not able to do so – particularly not when stressed or under pressure.

The line of thinking embedded in the RFCDC excludes a contextual and relational perspective and thus constructs a potential problematic behaviour (or ‘proper’

behaviour for that matter) as an *intrinsic* competence of the child or young person, or as it is formulated in the RFCDC: the learner. This line of thinking ignores children's status as citizens already participating in society, as already capable of thinking, and as already having a voice, as already expressing themselves, their needs, and desires in meaningful ways.

If we were to subject the RFCDC to a judgement of itself – that is once again using the Foucauldian method of examining a discourse through another perspective than its own – we might ask to what extent the RFCDC demonstrates a basic level of the competence called 'respect', which according to itself can be verified in the observable behaviour described as follows: 'gives space to other people to express themselves' and 'expresses respect for other people as equal human beings' (CoE, 2018b, p. 17) (see figure 4). It seems that the RFCDC and the competence democracy discourse purport to endorse and foster *equality* between human beings while at the same time operating precisely on the oldest trope of 'natural' subjugation that can be traced back as far as we have recorded history (Rollo, 2018a), namely, adultism.

Discussing the Competence democracy discourse

The Competence democracy discourse intersects with the Campaign democracy discourse and can be criticized as a normative and problematic discourse based on a fixed normative (adultist) understanding of what democracy is and what democratic behaviour looks like (in the normative eyes of the powerful). The individualizing characteristic of the term 'competence' conditions a situation in which we are prevented from addressing collective and structural responsibility. Democratic discourse instead becomes a matter individual adaptation.

The RFCDC is an example of a concrete instrument that informs policy and aims to be directly usable in classrooms, but since this instrument is built on the logics of the Campaign democracy discourse and the Competence democracy discourse, we see that it is not as intended an instrument to promote democratic culture but an instrument with which to mandate the moral code of the existing police order, which is also to say that it is an instrument to (further) mandate adult domination.

The extent to which the more powerful (adults) mandate and maybe even force their own moral code in the name of democracy is the extent to which those who are subjected to this (children and young people) might (and perhaps ought to) refuse and reject (this version of) democracy. Thus, it is the line of thinking in the Competence democracy discourse that fosters the democratic crisis and not the lack or inadequacies

of individuals. The potential problematic behaviour of individuals is instead the symptom of the democratic crisis produced by discourses such as those I have examined in this chapter.

In the Competence democracy discourse it becomes almost impossible to have a conversation about what democracy is, could, or should be. This is paradoxical, since one of the most common reference points associated with democratic discourse in a Danish context is ‘the democratic conversation’ (Koch, 1991/1945). Again and again, Danes refer to the importance of ‘the democratic conversation’ as *the* fundamental aspect of a well-functioning democracy, but we may forget to ask what the conditions for such conversation in fact are, what counts as conversation, and who and what are allowed or presumed capable or incapable to participate in it.

The Competence democracy discourse is based on adultism. It is highly adultist. Children and young people are assumed inadequate, as lacking something. They are assumed to be passive objects and ‘becomings’ in need of educational (domesticating) intervention, rather than political beings in their own right. We see in the Competence democracy discourse – what I also highlighted in the conceptual framework – that adultism ignores children as persons capable of thinking, speaking, and reasoning – also critically and independently. A common feature of adultism is that children’s perspectives and views are marginalized and subordinated to adults’ perspectives and views. This is not new. This is how it has been – however in different models and in different ways (cf. Wall, 2010) for at least 2500 years, and surely the position of children in society has advanced in various ways. Today it is at least illegal to chastise children in Denmark. However physical violence against children is of course not uncommon and even if it were, adults surely have many other creative and eloquent ways of violating children, their rights and their dignity, which furthermore is quite easy to legitimize (which includes *believing* is legitimate) and get away with given the fact that adults are protected by their ‘naturalized’ *ontological* identity as a knower (Fricker, 2009) which entails the ‘moral obligation’ to raise the ‘naturalized’ *ontological* identity as a ‘not-yet’, the child.

Furthermore, adults are protected by the ‘adultist contract’ where adults simply protect adults as an unacknowledged and denied but accepted rule, and by the adultist perception of ‘voice’. A child protesting against something that the child perhaps has very good reasons to protest against can – with the discourse and logic embedded in a policy instrument such as the RFCDC – be perceived as a failure to demonstrate the democratic competence ‘Tolerance of ambiguity’ at an advanced level, according to

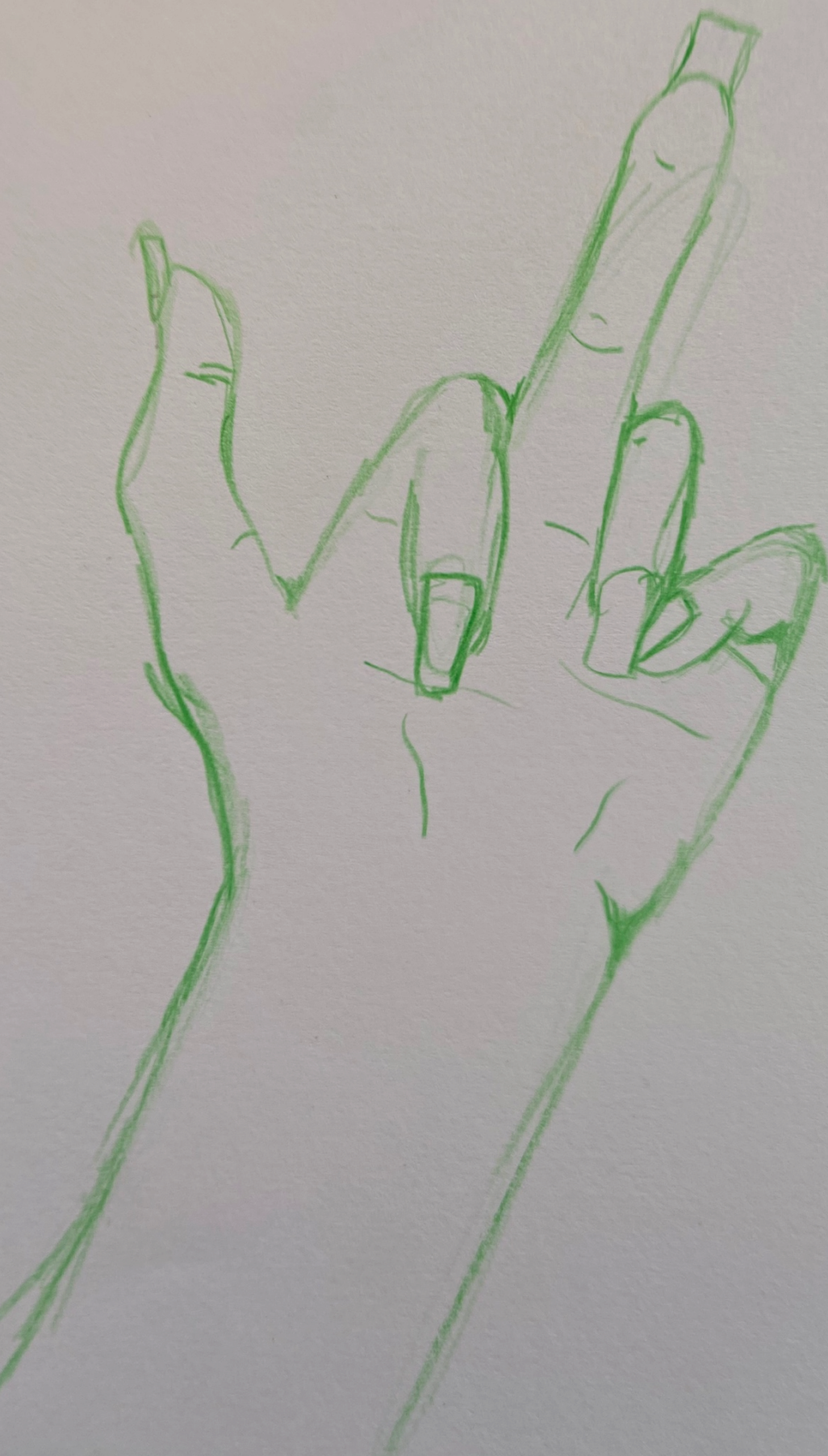
which the child should be able to demonstrate the observable behaviour ‘expresses a desire to have his/her own ideas and values challenged’ (see figure 6). And this in the very name of democracy and with the endorsement and legitimacy from powerful agency bodies such as the Council of Europe, the EU, the OECD and the Danish Ministry of Children and Education.

Adultism is not new, but it is still largely unacknowledged. So far, it still runs and operates beneath the radar. The work of the community of researcher from childhood studies, as was presented in the conceptual framework, has convincingly demonstrated how both research, policy, and practice aimed at strengthening democratic citizenship that fail to include a childist lens easily foster discriminating effects and thereby risk producing and reinforcing the political distrust and disengagement, and ultimately the situation in which children and young people turn their backs on the adult’s society including (the adult’s version of so-called) democracy.

It is fair to say that the political effort and commitment combined with a tool like the RFCDC and in the Competence democracy discourse have failed to include a childist lens. The Competence democracy discourse does not operate with a childist lens; on the contrary, it is based on the historical bedrock of adultism.

Moreover, though we should not draw overly strong distinctions, it seems reasonable to suggest that the Competence democracy discourse has a decisively ‘top-down’ force behind it (the view of the unruly disordered child in need of discipline, cf. Wall 2010). Part of the idea in contemporary educational trends and logics as we see in the idea of a measurable, observable (perceived democratic) behaviour seems to be to impose certain kinds of discipline and order as an answer to what is perceived as a chaotic and dangerous world.

I must once again emphasize that the point is not that themes like empathy and respect are irrelevant for democratic dannelsen. The point is that such themes become tyrannical and domesticating when operationalized as a matter of competencies, in the form of ‘a toolbox for designing, implementing and evaluating educational interventions’ (CoE, 2018b p. 11). The global contemporary logics of educational governance and accountability involving the idea of ‘competence-based education’ with the aim of ensuring a link directly to specific learning outcomes usable in classrooms is at the same time a *ratification* and *institutionalization* of an already



prevailing ‘epistemic injustice’ (Fricker, 2009) inflicted on children in their ‘naturalized’ lack of capacity as a *knower* and as a political subject. This kind of injustice is particularly hard to detect because it operates ‘beneath the radar of our ordinary doxastic self-scrutiny’ (Fricker, 2009, p. 40). Now it is also built into educational governance and accountability systems currently being implemented in a number of Council of Europe member states (Barrett, 2020).

Perhaps needless to say, this celebrated ‘new approach to education for citizenship and human rights education’ (Barrett, 2020) risks fostering an obedience culture rather than a democratic culture, and in that light, the disengagement, distrust, resistance and disobedience of the young generation is perhaps in fact a sign of democratic health.

Concluding remarks to dominant democracy discourses as a condition for democratic dannelsen

This analytic chapter focused on interrogating what kind of understanding(s) of democratic dannelsen are produced by the dominant ‘discursive formations’ which ‘systematically form the object of which they speak’ (Foucault, 1972/2013, p. 54). The questions at the centre of the analysis were: what are the rules, patterns, and ‘truths’ about democracy and democratic dannelsen & democratic education in the dominant discourses? What can be said, what can be done, and just as importantly, if not more importantly from both an explanatory and political viewpoint (cf. Fairclough, 1992), what cannot be said or done? What is marginalized, excluded, and perhaps appears as unnatural?

These questions are of interest for this dissertation because what can be thought, said and in the end done regarding democratic dannelsen is an important and influential condition under which ‘acting as a subject’ (Biesta, 2007) can take place. Thus, the discussions in this chapter have centred around the question of how much acting is actually possible under such conditions? And for whom? What quality of subjectification is possible and for whom?

The sources from which I have collected and constructed the patterns I have introduced in this chapter as discourses were very varied. The aim was to illustrate how the patterns in the discourses are widespread and general and operate on a continuum of entanglement between macro-level and everyday life in classrooms. The

discourses do not only produce the phenomenon of democracy or democratic dannelsse. They also produce subjects both as an individual's 'identity' and experience of 'being' that identity (Heyes, 2014). Not all individuals can (legitimately and successfully) perform (certain) subject positions. Only certain subject positions make sense within a discourse, and only some subject positions are allowed to 'speak' (Foucault, 1972/2013).

I have presented and analyzed three dominant discourses, which I labeled the Defense democracy discourse, the Campaign democracy discourse, and the Competence democracy discourse. I have addressed these three discourses individually for analytical and explanatory reasons, but they are of course intertwined and overlapping, which is also my point of departure in these concluding remarks.

The quality of subjectification depends on one's 'naturalized' ontological identity

I have emphasized how the colonial logic runs through these discourses, which on the one hand is not surprising to 'discover' given the theorizing of Biesta, who argues that the dominant idea of an all-inclusive democracy is basically a colonial way of thinking about democratization (Biesta, 2009). But the analyses contribute by highlighting ways in which the colonial logic is not only upheld and reproduced, but also intensified through contemporary educational trends and logics that foster consequent social technologies, such as the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture.

The same holds for the idea of strengthening (an adultist perception of) the 'students' voice' as target figures in accountability systems and quality reports. What we could refer to as the 'age of measurement' (Biesta, 2010) and 'governing through standards' (Brogger, 2019) thus enable a further institutionalization and ratification of the ongoing colonial project or what we could label the colonial police order. I have argued that the risk here is that it becomes increasingly difficult to put forward 'audible' and understandable claims for equality based upon the perception of injustice.

The analyses demonstrated some of the ways in which the question about how much action is actually possible *depends* on one's 'naturalized' ontological identity'. The brown body often categorized with seemingly innocent and neutral terms such as 'bilingual', 'non-Western', 'of non-Western background', 'culturally different' or 'Muslim' is subjected to an epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2009) which is difficult to

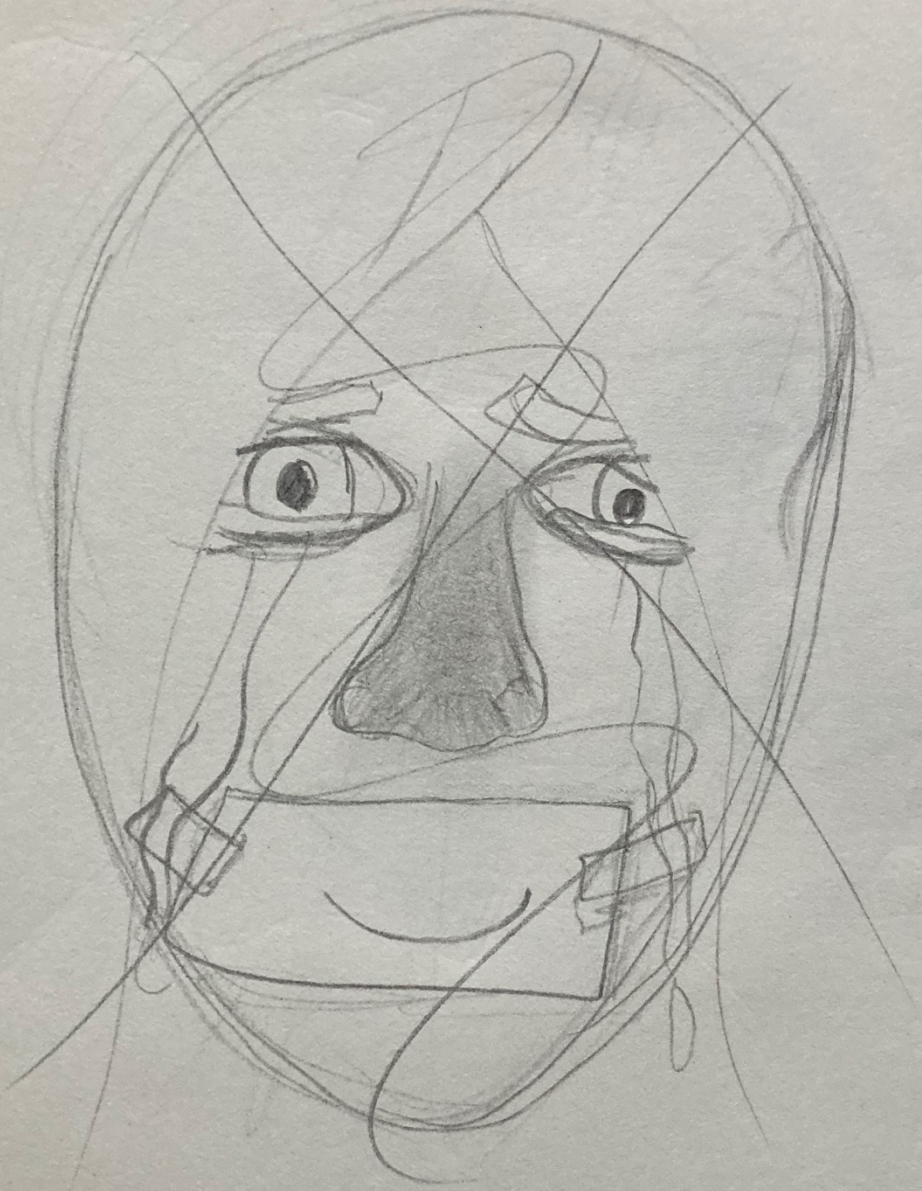
detect. The brown body is portrayed as being presumably regressive ‘by nature’, potentially dangerous to democracy, and therefore in particular need of democratic dannelse.

Likewise, the analyses highlighted ways in which the child and youth body is subjected to epistemic injustice on the basis of the criterion of adultist perceptions of what counts as ‘speech’, ‘voice’, ‘participation’, ‘critical thinking’, etc.

I have argued that what we have inherited and what is particularly visible in the Campaign democracy discourse (but in different ways evident in all three of the discourses presented in this chapter), is the most prolific and culturally powerful tropes of ‘natural’ subjugation that can be traced back as far as we have recorded history. The story of the fully human adult and the sub-human child is the logic that continues to effectively blackmail us ‘under the threat of being ignored, misrepresented, or harmed’ into ‘the very problematic position of affirming some exclusions as natural while arguing that [we] do not belong in the category of natural exclusion’ (Rollo, 2021, p. 318). As Duane simply puts it: ‘power is given to those who can “prove” that they are not childlike, and are thus deserving of rights’ (Duane, 2017b, p. 5).

In other words, current dominant democracy discourses foster the problematic logic that democratic dannelse is about ‘escaping’ the child position and anything associated with ‘childlike’, and thus the powerful and domesticating work done by, and at the same time hidden behind *the* word that is the source and embodiment of political power itself impacts children and young people the most. Not exclusively, but especially.

It is therefore not the idea of democracy as *rule by the people* which we pursue but rather what I will label *democratism*. The term democratism is one that I borrow from Emily B. Finley (2022), but which I use here in a slightly different way. I use it to denote the interpretation of democracy which utilizes a democratic language but which effectively transform democracy into *rule of those who can demonstrate the behavior to prove that they are not ‘child-like’*.



*Democratism:
Rule of those who can demonstrate
the behavior to prove that they are
not 'child- like'*

The violence of kindness and correctness

Democratizing through domesticating practices seems paradoxical and is nevertheless a violation of the integrity of the child and the minoritized, not to mention the kind of violence and injustice inflicted on the *minoritized child* which is perhaps better grasped through the intersection between adultism and racism³⁸. It is a form of aggression and violence, which only the older and/or more powerful can (legitimately) inflict upon the younger and/or less powerful. This is a type of violence, which I will refer to as ‘the violence of kindness and correctness’, and the true nature behind this form of aggression is only known in the experiences of the weak. However, the experiences of the weak are rarely taken seriously, let alone listened to because a police order is made up by ‘the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible, and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise’ (Ranci re, 1999, p. 29), and the experiences of the bodies with a ‘naturalized’ lack of capacity as a *knower* is ‘naturally’ heard as noise.

The power running through discourses is productive in conditioning how the democratic subject is known and recognized and knows and recognizes itself (Heyes, 2014), and therefore the dominant discourses and the ‘system of thought’ (Foucault, 1981) made available in these discourses is particularly damaging for democratic dannels. Taking into consideration the fact that the period of childhood and youth are perhaps the most formative years of human life, what might it then mean that individuals particularly in these years are subjected to the epistemic injustice which claims that the individual is not a *knower*, that its lived experiences are not ‘real’, that it is not capable of speaking its mind, that its opinions and ideas about the world are not ‘worthy of our serious attention’? What is the consequence of systemic encounters with the claim that one is *not* a political subject?

Prejudices are inherently self-justifying. They operate ‘beneath the radar of our ordinary doxastic self-scrutiny’ (Fricker, 2009, p. 40). There is a wall of incomprehension to break through. There is a biased discursive interpretive frame to dislodge. Given the analyses of dominant democracy discourses in this chapter, I argue that the democratic role of education is better grasped by recognizing – and hence deconstructing and reconstructing – the adultist pervasive norms that ground

³⁸ I only address two social categories here, but the point of course applies to intersections of any marginalized and relegated social category (cf. Crenshaw, 1989).

much educational practice and theory (cf. Wall, 2019). We need the perspective of childism. Childism can potentially shed light on human life and society more broadly and thereby potentially help to revise existing theories and produce a more age-inclusive scholarly imagination (Biswas & Wall, 2023; Biswas, Wall, et al., 2023). We need a childist theory to conceptualize the democratic role of education.

‘Taking into consideration the fact that the period of childhood and youth are perhaps the most formative years of human life, what might it then mean that individuals particularly in these years are subjected to the epistemic injustice which claims that the individual is not a knower, that its lived experiences are not ‘real’, that it is not capable of speaking its mind, that its opinions and ideas about the world are not ‘worthy of our serious attention’?

What is the consequence of systemic encounters with the claim that one is not a political subject?’



6

EXPLORING DEMOCRATIC DANNELSE AS A PRACTICE

Bringing theory and practice into some kind of relationship

In this analytic chapter, I explore democratic dannelse as a micro-interactional phenomenon. How can democratic dannelse be understood in terms of everyday living pedagogical relationships, as everyday doings, beings, and sayings in educational settings? Informed by the feminist, postcolonial, and childist critiques included in the conceptual framework, I argued that every dannelse theory so far has been inappropriate to providing an adequate theoretical understanding of the democratic role of education due to their default deficit-perception of the child. I was inclined to hold the view that the concept of dannelse is perhaps inappropriate because of its historical colonizing tendencies. The question therefore is whether it is possible to transform the concept and to detach it from its colonizing tendencies. I argued that we need a *childist* theory of democratic dannelse. I find such a childist *potential* in Biesta's theory precisely because of its emphasis on an attention towards '*acting* as a subject' (and thus leaving the developmental discourse behind) and towards the conditions under which such actions can take place.

In this analysis I attempt to bring Biesta's theory into some kind of relationship with the 'world of practice', which includes taking into consideration the theories held by the participants in the study (Maxwell, 2013). The aim is on the one hand to explore

the possibilities of Biesta's theory as a childist theory of democratic dannels and to be open to how the theories held by the participants might revise or expand Biesta's theory, and on the other hand to interpret educational practice through Biesta's theoretical frame, that is, to link the theoretical concepts to concrete, living pedagogical relationships. I pursue this by presenting excerpts of interviews and vignettes from the detailed thick descriptions of classroom and school life.

As I explained in the methodological chapter, the concept of childism was not an explicit lens informing my project from the beginning. Rather, in the early stages of the project the 'childist lens' was what I have referred to as an 'emotional and embodied awareness' informed partly by Rancière's idea of the equality of intelligences (1991). The childist lens gradually developed as I encountered and further engaged with the work of the community of childist researchers from the field of childhood studies, and as the concept of childism 'chose me' (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) and 'injected itself into my veins' and altered my thinking. It is therefore with this in mind that this analytic chapter should be read.

The empirical data analyzed in this chapter were derived from fieldwork conducted in 2019, before Covid 19. The analysis was produced 'rhizomatically' over a period of time predominantly within the first half of the project. This means that the childist lens is there, but is not as explicit and well-developed as it has been presented in the conceptual framework, the theoretical framework, and in the analysis of dominant democracy discourses in the previous chapter.

The chapter is split in two sections, one devoted to the case of Vesterborg elementary school and the other to Greenhill elementary school. The two cases will be presented in more detail at the beginning of each section. The analysis emphasizes *relationality*. I did not start with a focus on relationality. Biesta's theory does not in particular point to relationality (although it can be argued that it lies implicit there). Rather this focus emanates from my methodical endeavour to pay attention to the theories held by the participants in the study.

A movement away from education as subjectification

Going over transcriptions and field notes, I discovered that many excerpts, in which the participants speak about the changes they experience following the school reform of 2014, seemed to have some striking similarities. I found that participants articulate

– and problematize – the idea that something has been ‘pushed out’, ‘forgotten’, and/or had become ‘harder to prioritize and legitimize’ as a result of the new focus, the new discourses, the new increased tempo, and new ways of organizing and governing schools. The fact that something was ‘pushed out’ in favour of other things in a reform is not surprising – it is after all the purpose of a reform to make changes. But this something, is, according to the participants, quite important, and hence I became attentive to it. In different ways, the participants articulate and exemplify aspects of education that have become difficult to prioritize and pay attention to – not deliberately, but rather as an unintended side-effect. Through their examples the participants describe these aspects as something *fundamental* and therefore, they give expression to a concern regarding the lower priority it is given, and in some cases, a concern regarding its complete disappearance.

These side-effects can be understood as a movement away from ‘education as subjectification’ (e.g., Biesta, 2021), something which Biesta has already argued, that is, the conditions under which acting as a subject can take place have deteriorated following recent trends of global education policy. Likewise, much of the literature I presented in the conceptual framework also problematize such developments in different ways.

An example is Lieberkind’s description of a young generation whose political self-confidence is rather low, or the community of childhood researchers who problematize increasing disciplining agendas and the emergence of renewed governance strategies that view children as ‘the raw materials’ for society’s future (Cockburn, 2020; Hart, 2009; Sundhall, 2017; Warming, 2011) or the community of early childhood education scholars whose research raise concerns regarding the programme invasion’s creating of a ‘problem child’ and the pathologisation of completely normal human resistance (Buus, 2020; Buus & Rasmussen, 2015; Prins, 2021; Seeland, 2017; Sigsgaard, 2014; Vik, 2014, 2015; Aabro, 2016).

As policy researchers demonstrate, orientations towards children’s so-called ‘social-emotional learning’ has increasing political attention and has begun directing the development of politics, measurement instruments, management technologies, pedagogical programmes and standards, and furthermore has become a lucrative market for the edu-business industry (Belfield et al., 2015; Moos et al., 2015; Nemorin, 2017; Williamson, 2021; Williamson & Piattoeva, 2019), a market which in 2018 was estimated to be worth 4.3 Trillion \$ (Moos & Wubbels, 2018, p. 249).

Thus, it is not particularly surprising that the participants in this study raise similar concerns regarding these developments which could perhaps all in all be summed up in Biesta's conceptualization as 'a movement away from education as subjectification'. But the analysis will, however, bring some more nuance to our understanding of what is at stake, very concretely, when education is moving away from subjectification. This – among other things – has to do with the theme of *relationality*, which is then also a theme I shall discuss again in the concluding chapter, where I discuss the potential and limitations of Biesta's theory as a theory of democratic dannelsen.

But first I interpret educational practice – presented as the case of Vesterborg elementary school and Greenhill elementary school – through Biesta's theoretical frame. How can democratic dannelsen, or as 'acting as a subject' be understood in terms of everyday pedagogical relationships, as everyday doings, beings and sayings, in educational settings? And what kind of conditions do contemporary educational settings comprise for such democratic dannelsen?

The case of Vesterborg elementary school: Lola and Peter

Vesterborg elementary school (henceforth 'VES') is a school in a municipality that allocated large amounts of resources to the implementation of the school reform of 2014. This means the municipality did not only *just* live up to the organizational changes mandated by the school law, but went even further. This municipality has gone 'all in' on the logics characterizing the idea of school effectiveness. For example, the municipality invested heavily in developing the teachers' competencies, which includes the purchase of various manual-based programs regarding 'evidence-based' teaching practices, such as Visible Learning (Hattie, 2012), SOLO-taxonomy (John Biggs, n.d.), Goal Directed Learning (Heckmann, 2016; Ministry of Children and Education, 2014), 'PALS' (School Wide Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support, also described in chapter six), (Arnesen et al., 2008; Danish National Board of Health and Welfare, 2020).

At VES, I visited Lola, a teacher, and Peter, who is not employed as a teacher but as a *Pædagog* [in English; child and youth worker]. The two work together with one

of the school's three 4th-grade classes (students aged 10). They both have special roles in relation to recent years' developments at the school. Lola has the role of 'Impact coach' (Hattie, 2012), and her task in this role is to supervise and support colleagues developing their teaching practice in accordance with Goal Directed Learning and Visible Learning. She also serves on the school's 'Agent team', an evaluation tool inspired by Australian 'Learning walks', which is described by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School leadership (a public company based in Melbourne and funded by the Australian Government) as 'a group of teachers visiting multiple classrooms at their own school with the aim of fostering conversation about teaching and learning in order to develop a shared vision of high quality teaching that impacts on student learning'.³⁹

Peter has a role in guiding and supporting colleagues in the use of new digital Learning platforms (designed to assist Goal Directed Learning), and he has, according to his own description, 'chosen to go all in on these new developments and ideas about teaching and schooling' (field notes). He tells me that he cannot see any reason to doubt the key claim regarding the developments, namely, that they will improve students' learning outcomes. He likes the idea of evidence-based education. To him it makes good sense that the school should implement practices according to the best available knowledge about what works. 'Of course, we must do what works the best' (field notes) he tells me. However, he also says that at first he was sceptical. The reform resulted in fundamental changes regarding his personal work conditions. He primarily works at the after-school centre and had, before the reform, only a few hours of work during school time, mostly contributing to and focusing on social aspects. He never did any teaching. Yet that changed with the reform. He was thereafter supposed to 'think' of his pedagogical work as activities which were supposed to bring about certain learning outcomes. He had to plan and structure his work in alignment with 'Goal Directed Learning' and 'Visible Learning'. At first, this did not sound good to him, and as he said to me 'I was suddenly supposed to be a mini-teacher even though I am a *Pædagog*. But I am not put into this world to teach! I do *pædagogical* work' (interview). However, he chose to take up the challenge, and because he did not have to teach the concrete scheduled subjects but the new 'supporting lessons'⁴⁰ he saw an

³⁹ <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/tools-resources/resource/learning-walks>

⁴⁰ Supporting lessons [in Danish: understøttende undervisning] were implemented with the school reform and are described as 'learning activities beyond the scheduled subjects. The activities must

opportunity to get influence and to focus on what he considered to be important themes, such as cooperative activities, team building, and democratic themes (interview).

Both Lola and Peter describe themselves as having been in favour of the reform and of the initiatives taken in the municipality. They describe the time around 2014, when the reform was implemented, and the years after that, as a time when the staff more or less was divided into two groups. There were those who were against the new initiatives and changes, who ‘were resistant and complained a lot’ (field notes), and there were those who ‘chose to say, well ok, let’s try it out and see what it is’ (field notes). Of the latter group, some ‘just went with the flow’ (field notes) and others took on more ‘active roles’ (field notes). Lola and Peter position themselves among those who took active roles. Throughout the three weeks of my visit, I got the impression that they considered the recent years’ developments of the school as an improvement. Several times during my visit, I asked critical questions about the reform elements, and every time they defended the initiatives and explained to me some of the concrete ways in which they had actually led to something better. I found their arguments convincing.

For practical reasons and absence due to illness, the interview with Lola and Peter took place three weeks after I ended my visit to the school. Because I had the impression that they were strong proponents of the developments, it came as a surprise to me that throughout most of the 40 minute-long interview, they voiced some quite harsh criticisms of the changes made over the recent years. I have later reflected upon how my visit and our many conversations may have had something to do with this. For example, Peter said during the interview that he had actually decided not to ‘take up this battle’, by which he means that democratic dannelsen had become less prioritized even though it is articulated as a main task of the school in the preamble of the school law (interview). ‘But now’, he said, ‘I realize that I can’t leave it. I *must* do something. I don’t know what, but I can’t just sit on my hands’ (interview).

What I am trying to say with this is that I was very surprised about where the interview seemed to go. This surprising direction puzzled me at the time after the interview. When I transcribed the interview, it puzzled me again, and perhaps this

support the scheduled subjects and/or strengthen the students’ learning readiness [in Danish: Læringsparathed], social competencies, overall development, motivation, and well-being’.

recurrent puzzle led me to become attentive to similar narratives in the other interviews. On that note, let us move on to the theories held by Peter and Lola.

Time and expectations pressure, and ‘things that fall between two stools’

Peter and Lola’s criticisms of the reforms centre around the matter of *time* and *expectation pressure*. Lola used to teach the eldest classes, but because of an increased time and expectation pressure regarding the students’ exams she was increasingly stressed. For the sake of her health, she shifted to teaching the middle classes (grades 4-6) and thus avoided concerns and responsibility related to exams. The increased pressure Lola refers to has to do with the changes in the Danish education system following the reform of 2014. For example, more subjects now end with exams, and the results of those exams have become much more important than they used to be, because students’ grade point averages determine their subsequent access to the educational system. Moreover, elements of the curriculum that previously were not presented to students until upper secondary school are now expected to be covered in elementary school. When teaching the eldest classes and leading students to exams, Lola always felt that she was in a hurry, and that it was a struggle to manage to cover everything. ‘Interruptions’, such as the celebration of the school’s anniversary, which ‘stole her lessons’ (interview) could stress her tremendously. Her main concern was a fear of ‘failing the students’ (interview). She was happy about her shift away from teaching the eldest classes to teaching the middle ones. However, she also said that she discovered that the pressure concerning time and expectations has just followed her along and also characterized her experience in teaching in 4th-grade classes.

As I go over my field notes in the aftermath of the interview, I discover that on the first three days of my visit, I had noticed and written that keeping up with Lola meant ‘walking very fast’ (field notes). In my field notes I wrote: ‘I am getting physically out of breath when keeping up with Lola, but I also feel mentally out of breath after a whole day. Even sitting down seems to ‘happen’ at a high pace’ (field notes).

At the interview, Peter and Lola characterized the developments from the reform of 2014 as an ‘increased focus on subjects’, an ‘increase in testing and measuring learning outcomes’, and an overall deterioration in work conditions as a result of ‘increase in time and expectations pressure’. Peter called the development ‘quantity over quality’ and described it as ‘tests, tests, and more tests’. ‘And that *works* all

right!’ he sarcastically said: ‘It unavoidably fosters a striving and a focus [on learning outcomes]’. Lola added ‘Yes, exactly, I have told myself twenty times, don’t do teaching to the test, but I end up doing it anyway’.

I asked what the problem more specifically was with this time pressure, and they explained that something was ‘pushed out’ and ‘forgotten’. Lola further remarked that she used to have ‘more time’ for all sorts of issues outside the subjects:

In the years before the school reform, I was a teacher in the 8th grade. And sometimes it was almost like working in a psychiatric ward. I had students with borderline; I had cutters and students with bulimia and OCD and so on and so forth. Every time I entered the hall, somebody said ‘Lola can I speak to you please?’ And sometimes it was a little too much for me. I felt like a psychologist. But the point is, I *had* another time back then.

And she also stated:

I used to be able to prioritize time to handle these issues – also because I was the primary teacher of the class. I was the home group teacher, and now there is no home group teacher anymore, and I feel these issues sometimes fall between two stools.

Lola was referring here to an organizational change made possible with the school reform, which many municipalities have chosen to carry out. This was the abolition of the function ‘home group teacher’. Before, *one* or *two* teachers had the role as home group teacher and were responsible for the school life of the students in their class. But this role was subsequently split up between the team of teachers (the hours and resources previously allocated for the role were, however, *not* split between the team of teachers, but were simply terminated). This organizational change had, along with the time pressure, created a situation where sometimes things *fall between two stools*. I asked what kinds of things these were, and Lola answered:

Well, for example... making sure to talk with children who are not happy or not well for some reason. Who takes care of that? We don’t always know [...] we are under such huge pressure now due to expectations about results we must reach. Things – important things – are simply overlooked or not taken care of.

While the educational reforms focused solely and exclusively on outcomes in the school subjects, students' lives and reality – which we may refer to as something 'more' or 'other' than the school subjects – did not somehow disappear. Some children struggle with severe disorders like bulimia or cutting and self-injury, while others may just feel unwell or unhappy for some reason. But whether happy or struggling or not, every child *lives* a life. When Lola 'had another time back then', the conditions for her to encounter the children *in their lives* were better. I wish to suggest that the concern Lola expresses can be understood as a concern regarding the possibilities of how students can appear. The changes 'work alright' as Peter said. They 'unavoidably foster a striving and a focus'. Put differently, they alter the teachers' vision. Students have become harder to *see* and *perceive* as subjects of their own lives, but rather appear through dominant logics of education as 'learning outcome profiles'. The top priority is to 'get the profiles tuned'. As Lola says, even though she tells herself not to teach to the test, she ends up doing so anyway.

The mental health crisis in Denmark

I would like to situate what Peter and Lola said in a current debate in Denmark about children and young people's health conditions, which have become known as a 'mental health crisis'. A recent analysis made by the Danish Children's Rights National Association concludes that approximately *every third* child who experiences a life crisis (such as bullying, a high level of school absence, critical illness in the close family, divorce in the family) discovers that the adults at school do not speak to them about their crisis, even though the school was aware of the crisis (Children's Rights National Association, 2022). Every fourth child in the study reports that the teachers do not in general ask them how they are (Children's Rights National Association, 2022).

These conclusions are mirrored in a statement from the spokesperson of the Teachers' union, who says in an interview that the teachers' time to do 'relational work' has decreased with the school reform of 2014 (Folkeskolen.dk, 2022). The spokesperson emphasizes that teachers in general are attentive to and prioritize relational work, yet due to the reform they have become 'too busy with the wrong things' (Folkeskolen.dk, 2022). What is more, the chairperson of the Principals' union reports that the new generation of teachers (trained after 2013) is much more focused

on academic aspects of the teacher's job and in addition, the time available for 'talking with individual students' has decreased (Folkeskolen.dk, 2022).

Furthermore, in August 2022, more than one thousand psychologists working in the Danish elementary school system and daycare system wrote an open letter to the Danish Parliament. In the letter, they state that they are deeply concerned about young persons' increasing failure to thrive. They say that this trend manifests itself in an increasing pressure to refer children to the psychiatric system, in an increasing pressure to declare individual children as requiring support, as well as in meetings with frustrated and distraught parents. They encounter teachers who feel impotent and hopeless, and they see conditions that restrict adults' ability to meet children calmly and patiently. They see children reacting by isolating themselves, withdrawing from the class community and/or staying away from school. They see children who are restless, who disturb the classroom and who challenge the instructions and directions of adults, sometimes reacting with verbal or physical violence. They see an increase of children with stomachaches, sadness, and a lack of motivation. They see classrooms characterized by conflict and noise. When they support teachers and schools and call for what is needed, the most common response from principals is that no resources are available. Most often the only thing they can offer is stress and crisis management for teachers. What they can offer is to help teachers put up with the miserable conditions (Mølgaard & Jensen, 2022). In the same letter, the psychologists make a very stark comparison: working as psychologists in the Danish elementary school and day care system under the current conditions is like being 'caretakers in a house where the roof is on fire, the basement floods with water, the walls are covered with mold, and there is a dead body on the first floor'. The psychologists call for immediate action and argue that the well-being and mental health of a whole generation is at stake. If there are no fundamental structural changes, they say, they see no grounds for hope. Shortly after in October 2022, more than 2000 *Pædagoger* and teachers signed and published a statement of support for the psychologist's letter (XX).

Drawing on this debate, I argue that what Lola and Peter describe are not merely local circumstances, but an example of a larger tendency in Denmark. We may call this tendency an unintended side-effect of the dominant trends and logics of education.

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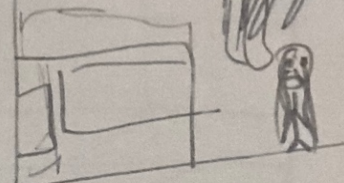
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up!



Home

Room

It is
one of
those days



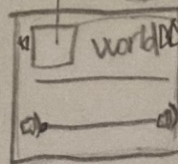
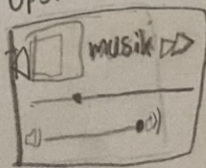
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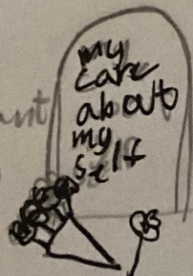


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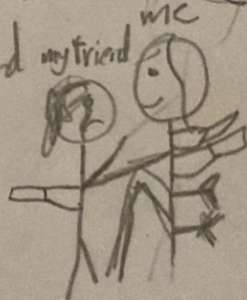
HELP
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Im Fine

The reason why i weep
my feelings to
my self
is because i cant
explain them



Im Sad and it hurts so bad my friend
but ~~no~~ ^{no}body knows
only me.



In the aftermath of the reform, many teachers left their jobs. A study that was conducted in 2016 aimed to investigate reasons *why* teachers left their jobs, and found that the most common reason was that teachers quit because they *wished to be* teachers. They left because they felt they were prohibited from doing that job adequately (Pedersen et al., 2016). The study concluded that many of these teachers suffered from ‘ethical and moral stress’ (Jameton, 1984), which is a kind of stress that ‘occurs when one knows what is the right thing to do but is prohibited from doing it’ (Pedersen et al., 2016, p. 48 my translation).

How is the world (re)presented?

Thinking with Biesta’s domain of socialization, I would like to discuss how the world may be (re)presented to the students through this new prioritization. As Biesta argues:

[I]t is not too difficult to see that even the simplest provision of knowledge and skills already provides a certain way of (re)presenting the world and presenting what is considered to be of value [...] Given that the world can never be (re)presented in its entirety, even the domain of knowledge and skills is already permeated with value-laden choices and selections [...] There is, therefore, always also socialisation going on’ (Biesta, 2021, p. 44).

According to Lola, things sometimes just ‘fall between two stools’. ‘Important things are simply overlooked or not taken care of’. This description, along with the excerpts from the current mental health crisis debate, give us a picture of how the world (re)presented to students is a world in which it is not considered to be of value to prioritize handling personal ‘issues’, or to support you when things are rough or when you do not feel well for some reason. It is a world where the things considered to be of value are your learning outcomes and your grade point average. It is a world in which *your life* and *your reality*, by which I wish to suggest the ‘you as subject’, is marginalized and subordinated to the ‘you as object’.

It is not only the students to whom the world is (re)presented in this way. The new configurations and priorities in education also send a ‘message’ to Lola and Peter (and Danish teachers in general): the *time* for teachers to prioritize such things is not considered to be of value, or put differently, it is not a valuable aspect of the teaching profession, which easily leads to the interpretation that it is not a necessary aspect of the teaching profession.

*‘Sometimes things just
fall between two stools’*



Excerpt: who sits where? what is fair?

To reflect more concretely on what is at stake when things fall between two stools, I wish to present a situation that precisely does *not* fall between two stools. Interestingly, it occurs on a day where we have plenty of time. We are going on a field trip. The class has participated in a local competition making little documentary movies, and they won first prize. The prize is tickets to a movie in the cinema. The spirits are high on this rather rare kind of school day where the only thing planned is a movie and popcorn.

It is 8:00 o' clock, and the school day has just begun. The movie begins at 9:30, so we do not have to leave for the train for another 45 minutes. After Lola has given the students some practical information, there is some time to play. Some students run out in the school yard; some sit in little groups in the classroom talking and laughing. I share small talk with Lola and Peter.

Suddenly a group of five girls approaches Lola with grave countenances. The girls are trying to figure out how to sit in the cinema. They all want to sit together in a row; however, the outermost seats in the row are not as good as the seats in the middle, and they try to negotiate who sits where. It is a difficult question to solve, and they have come to Lola for help.

In the beginning, Lola has a hard time figuring out the complexity of the problem. It turns out that there are several circumstances to balance and consider, which is why this question is rather complex for the girls. Who sat in the middle seats the last time they were on a field trip? Who sits together in class? Does sitting together in the gym hall at the school concert count as well? They do not agree on these parameters.

The girls move around to illustrate different combinations. The statements in the following, are reconstructed from my notes and memory. I reconstruct them with the intention of giving the reader a sense of the situation. What follows is therefore not a perfectly accurate restatement of what was said, but the overall meaning is faithfully conveyed:

Student: 'What if I sit here and Kate sits here? Then Kate has Emma on her left side and Mathilde on her right'.

Student: 'But Mathilde and Anna haven't sat together before, so we could maybe switch Emma and Anna?'

(The girls switch around)

Student: 'But then Emma gets the outermost seat, and she also sat there when we were at the theatre – maybe it is her time to sit in the middle'

(The girls switch again)

Student: 'But you just said that you were ok with the outermost seat, if Karla sits next to you'

(The girls switch back)

Lola pays close attention, and she repeats the information and makes proposals:

Lola: 'So, Emma also sat on the outermost seat when we were at the theatre... so it would be unfair... if she gets that seat again today? Because... the trip to the theatre weighs more than when we were at the concert in the gym hall?'

Lola: 'so when you make that suggestion... is it then also because you try to take care of Anna? ... and because Emma and Kate have already sat together for three weeks in the classroom?'

My sense is that the girls feel that Lola understands. I sense the situation calming down. After a while, they reach a solution that everyone agrees to. However, I sense that Lola is not convinced. She looks enquiringly at one of the girls.

Lola: 'But Isabel, I sense from the look on your face that you are maybe not really ok with this'.

Isabel reaffirms that she is fine, that it is no problem. However, Lola is still not convinced and says:

Lola: ‘But it might be fine...I see that... but is it fair? I mean, you sat on the outermost seat last time, and you are very often the one who volunteers to things for the greater good, aren’t you? You always take a lot of responsibility, and that is very good of course! But... you don’t have to take responsibility all the time’.

Tears come to Isabel’s eyes. I gather that Lola was right. Isabel was not really ok with the solution. Lola and the girls discuss new combinations again. Another girl volunteers to take the outermost seat instead of Isabel. Isabel wipes away tears and smiles gratefully. The puzzle seems resolved in an ok way for everybody, and the girls run to the playground again.

There are still a few minutes before we need to leave in order to catch the train. Lola turns to me and says ‘That sure was a difficult one. I’m glad we got it straightened out. It means so much to them. It could have ruined the whole day for them’ (field notes).

A question about where to sit at the cinema, which might seem insignificant from an adult perspective, is clearly of great significance to these girls. For these girls, this question is much more important than any academic matter. For these girls, this is *real*. Let us imagine for a moment that Lola did not have time to handle this situation in the way she did. After all, handling this situation took about 10-12 minutes of Lola’s time. Let us imagine that this issue had fallen between two stools or that the teacher had been obliged to dismiss the problem due to lack of time or due to a necessity to prioritize otherwise. What then? According to Lola, it could have ruined the whole day for the girls.

The description above can be interpreted as a concrete example of an ‘encounter with the reality’ (Biesta, 2020b). The girls exist in the world with each other, that is, other human beings from whom their initiatives sometimes meet resistance (Biesta, 2020b, p. 96). In this situation something real is at stake for the girls. As Lola says, ‘it means *so much* to them’. Figuring out collectively who sits where is not easy. We can say that they each meet some resistance that generates (different) degrees of frustration. What shall they do with this frustration?

We could try to push harder in order to overcome the resistance we encounter [...] but there is always the danger that if we push too hard, we may destroy the very world in which we seek to arrive. If then, at one end of the spectrum we encounter world-destruction, at the other end we find the existential risk of self-destruction: when confronted with the double-bind, out of frustration, we step back and withdraw ourselves from the situation. This suggests that the existential challenge is [...] that of trying to stay in the difficult “middle ground” in between world-destruction and self-destruction (Biesta, 2020b, pp. 96-97).

One way this group of children try to stay in the difficult middle ground is to come to Lola for help, and Lola’s help can be interpreted as an attempt to encourage, support, and provide sustenance for the girls to stay in the difficult middle ground – to resolve the matter *in* the difficult middle ground, so to speak. She listens, she takes them seriously, she attempts to form interpretations and to verify whether her interpretations are reasonable. She does not judge, and she does not decide how to sit for them. She pays close attention to all of them as if she tries to sense whether they are ‘balancing’ in the difficult middle ground. She senses that Isabel may have stepped back and with-drawn from the situation, and she may have been right. When Lola offers support, Isabel’s reaction reveals that she is not that fine after all. This, we may interpret, is a way in which Lola refers the children “back” to the middle ground’ (Biesta, 2020a, p. 98).

This is a tiny little everyday situation. It may seem trivial and insignificant, and soon we may have forgotten all about it. Situations like this occur *all the time*. What does it have to do with democratic dannelsen? Precisely because situations like this occur all the time, we experience the ‘resistance of the social world’ (Biesta, 2020a, p. 96) (as well as the resistance of the material world) all the time, and thus we also experience *how* we handle this resistance all the time. Of course, sometimes the resistance is overwhelming, while other times the resistance is minor. Is the resistance in a question about how to sit at the movies not a minor resistance? Well, who are we to judge what is experienced as minor or major in the lives of other human beings? According to Lola, it could have ruined the whole day for these children, from which I interpret that there were a lot at stake for these girls.

The point I wish to make is based on the assumption that democratic dannelsen is situated within the lives of children and young people (and everybody else). Our many everyday experiences influence our perception of the world and of ourselves in relation to the world, and further influence how we exist in the world – which includes how we ‘desire’ to exist in the world. My guess is that these children already have many experiences with staying in the middle ground. They come to Lola for help, which suggests that they anticipate support, which again suggests that they have experienced support from the adults in their lives many times before. My guess is that they desire (in this concrete situation) to exist in the world in the middle ground. They desire to exist in ‘the place – physically and metaphorically – where we try to be “at home in the world,” try to “reconcile ourselves to reality”’ (Hannah Arendt in Biesta, 2020a). They desire to exist in a non-ego-logical way. They desire to exist in a democratic way.

A ‘storage’ of experiences with staying in the difficult middle ground

To put it in a somewhat banal way, the more experiences we have with managing to stay in the difficult middle ground, which only we ourselves can do and ‘no one else can do for us’ (Biesta, 2020a, p. 93), the easier it is to anticipate that we can manage this again. The more we experience support and encouragement to stay in the difficult middle ground, the easier it is to anticipate that such support will be offered again. This is particularly important in the times where we encounter overwhelming resistance, or when we encounter resistance from what seems utterly different and other than ourselves. In such situations, I argue, all our little, tiny everyday experiences with staying in the middle ground are extremely valuable and helpful. We might consider them as our own ‘storage’, so to speak, of support, encouragement, and sustenance. With a ‘storage’ filled with experiences in which we have managed to stay in the middle ground we may almost be self-sufficient in terms of the support, encouragement, and sustenance with which we can refer ourselves back to the middle ground in future situations. And likewise, if the ‘storage’ contains many experiences of ending in world-destruction or self-destruction, we may be more likely to end in world-destruction or self-destruction again, and maybe even prefer this. What I want to say is that democratic dannelsen is situated within every little, tiny everyday situation, and resolving the matter of how to sit together fairly in the cinema was one more experience for the children’s ‘storages’ of managing to stay in the difficult middle ground.

Here I want to draw on the distinction between democratic dannelsen from the point of education and democratic dannelsen from the point of the student (which Biesta distinguishes in the terms *Erziehung* and *Bildung* (Biesta, 2021 chapter 3)). While only the students themselves individually can live their own lives and only themselves individually can attempt to stay in the difficult middle ground and attempt to exist in non-ego-logical ways, education's role is to provide sustenance, support, and encouragement for this. Thus, these are the work of the individual and the work of education. But what if education functions so fast and furiously that things – as Lola describes it – simply fall between two stools? What if education is instead focused on producing learning goals? What if education fails to do its part of the work in relation to democratic dannelsen? What if it fails to provide sustenance, support, and encouragement for the students to do *their* part of the work in relation to democratic dannelsen?

Seen in isolation, one tiny experience is insignificant. However, when thinking about the sum of experiences it is of great significance. This is why Lola and Peter's descriptions of recent years' changes – especially the lack of time for supporting and helping in little everyday situations – like solving a matter that is important for the students – are deeply worrying. What is alarming is not only the cost for individual children – as the psychologists' letter reveals – it is also alarming from the perspective of democratic dannelsen and the future of democracy.

How the logic of learning changes interpretations of the role of the teacher

So far, I have discussed the world (re)presented to the students through the domain of socialization and I have considered what might be at stake when education is forced to work in a 'fast and furious' manner. I have suggested that it has become more difficult to see and perceive the students as subjects, and through the example of Lola and the five girls, I have argued that what is also at stake are a range of relations to existence in the middle ground, including the desire to do so and related anticipations, trust, and encouragement.

However, the problem is not that Lola has lost her ability to recognize what is important and real for the students or her willingness to meet and support students in their lives or encourage and support students to stay in the difficult middle ground. Rather, the problem is that everything goes at such a rapid pace, and sometimes 'things

just fall between two stools’. To repeat a key phrase: ‘Things – important things – are simply overlooked or not taken care of’ (interview).

Excerpt: A waste of valuable learning time

I shall now turn my attention to another aspect of this situation, namely, how the logic of the educational reforms in question might influence teachers’ self-interpretations. To that end I draw on another situation from my field work. The school’s anniversary is coming up and Martin – who normally teaches natural science – must spend the day’s natural science double lesson helping the students prepare stalls for the birthday party. I call this example ‘a waste of valuable learning time’.

Martin has divided the students into small groups of 6-8 students, and the task before these groups is to come up with ideas for a class stall at the school’s anniversary.

One group seems to have some difficulties. I pay attention to what is going on in the group. It seems like one of the students, Erika, finds another student, Mette, too ‘bossy’. Erika says: ‘you always want to dictate everything’. Mette disagrees; she thinks Erika is too sensitive. A discussion unfolds in the whole group. The tension increases. Erika begins to cry. The children are frustrated.

Martin notices the trouble and comes to help. He asks what the problem is, and the students tell their different versions of the story. Martin listens and tries to resolve the issue, but it is my impression that not all the students feel heard and understood. Erika cries even more and turns away from the group and from Martin. The tension increases. Martin seems frustrated too, and he says: ‘Well, regardless of what has happened, we need to move forward now. There is nothing to cry about, Erika. All the time we spend on this discussion is a waste of valuable learning time’.

The group ‘moves on’. Erika stops crying, but for the next 15 minutes of the group work she remains passive; she does not suggest anything and does not participate in the discussion. She mainly looks out the window. The other students pay no visible attention to this and neither does Martin.

Drawing on Biesta's theoretical framework, I want to suggest the following interpretation of this episode. In the group work, Erika meets resistance and – out of frustration – she attempts to 'push' back: 'you always want to dictate everything'. Mette – out of frustration – 'pushes' back too by rejecting Erika's claim, and soon the whole group begins 'pushing' back. When Martin has entered the discussion, Erika – out of frustration over not being understood – cries harder and turns away from the group and Martin. Martin does not manage to encourage and support Erika to stay in the difficult middle ground. Martin dismisses what is *real* for Erika. He dismisses the fact that something is at stake: 'There is nothing to cry about', he says, and he offers the view that 'all the time we spend on this discussion is a waste of valuable learning time'. Erika stops crying and takes on a passive role – looking out the window. We may interpret this as meaning that she – out of frustration – ends up taking a step back and withdraws from the situation (Biesta, 2020b p. 97). We may interpret this as meaning that Martin himself – out of frustration – ends up 'pushing too hard', which also illustrates the uttermost importance of conditions that also support and provide sustenance for the teachers to stay in the difficult middle ground when they meet resistance in their teaching situations.

Surely, we could criticize the way Martin handled the situation. However, that is not my interest in the present analysis. What I want to highlight is the interesting interpretation that Martin makes of this situation when he declares it 'a waste of valuable learning time'. On the one hand, one could argue that such an interpretation is questionable. Learning to handle and manage the difficulties in cooperating is highly valuable and important for people who live together in a (democratic) society. Spending time on a situation like this is not a waste of (learning) time. On the other hand, if learning is primarily associated with that of reaching certain 'learning goals' measurable in tests and exams, or to put it another way, if the increased focus on learning outcomes has created a kind of 'hierarchy of learning' (if such framing even makes sense), in which the measurable elements are at the top of this hierarchy, and moreover, if the identity of the professional teacher is understood as one who prioritizes the goals at the top of the hierarchy, then Martin's interpretation of this situation is meaningful and even cogent.

Whether or not we – on the basis of my short description – would criticize Martin's interpretation of the problem as a waste of learning time, it remains a fact that the increased focus on learning outcomes in the recent years' development in the Danish school system (re)presents a world in which the elements that are possible to grasp as

measurable learning outcomes are valued over what cannot be measured. And whether or not Martin would have come up with such an interpretation before the reform of 2014, the fact is that the new priorities and (re)presentation of what is considered to be of value provides further support, legitimacy, and maybe even encouragement for Martin's interpretation. In other words, the reconfiguration of what 'kind of learning' is valued over other kinds also reconfigures interpretations of the teacher's role. What I have in mind is that if the primary task of teaching is to 'produce' certain learning outcomes, then the school's anniversary, and the activity of making stalls along with all the preparations, including the disagreements and conflicts that can occur in this process, are rightly deemed to be a waste of 'learning' time. However, as I hope to have made clear, what is also at stake is students' 'storages' of experiences of existing in the difficult middle ground. What is at stake is education's part of the work in relation to democratic dannelsen. Furthermore, it is one thing that 'things fall between two stools' due to pressures related to both time and expectations. It is something else when teachers' self-interpretations, including their interpretations of the role of education, begin to change.

While this was just a single example, I want to return to the statements of the chairperson of the Principals' union, who says that the new generation of teachers (i.e. those trained after 2014) are much more focused on academic aspects of the teacher's job (Folkeskolen.dk, 2022). Likewise, the Teachers' union experiences what they label as 'conflicts between the new generation and the old generation of teachers', because they 'simply disagree about what the role of a teacher is' (notes from conversation with the Teachers' union). These statements suggest that *something* is happening with the interpretation of the role of teaching and of the role of teachers.

My aim here is not to claim that all or most Danish teachers' self-interpretations have changed into the line of thinking represented by the example above. My aim is rather to show what might be at stake if or when they do. What is at stake is the 'storage' of experiences of existing in the world in the difficult 'middle ground', that is, the 'self-sufficiency' of encouragement, support, and desire to live one's life in the difficult 'middle ground', that is, the desire to live one's life democratically. This is at stake when we rush education, but it is even more so at stake, at a much higher and alarming level, if teachers begin to think of such matters – education's part of the work in relation to democratic dannelsen – as 'a waste of valuable learning time'.

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I'm fine

The ‘knuckleheads’ and the lack of encounters with the real

Though we ‘encounter the real’ and meet resistance from the world in everyday situations in school, there are other important encounters with the real that have become more difficult to make possible. This is exemplified through Peter’s criticism in the following.

Peter emphasizes that the time pressure and the increased focus on learning outcomes have decreased time for ‘things that are not embedded in the subjects and ‘things that cannot be measured as learning outcomes’. Furthermore, he finds it difficult to *legitimize* assigning a high priority to things that ‘we cannot put on the schedule’ or that ‘cannot be measured’. He believes that as a result we ‘miss out on a whole bunch of things’. I ask him what these things we miss out on could be and he says: ‘time to be together, time to wonder, time to look at society’. But there were intentions to strengthen exactly this, he emphasizes. He points to the element of the school reform called ‘Open School’. The idea with Open School was precisely to strengthen the connection between the school and the outside world. It was framed as follows: ‘bringing the world into the school and the school out in the world’, and the aim was to make education more practice-oriented (Ministry of Children and Education, n.d.). Peter was very positive and excited about the possibilities and opportunities he saw in Open School, but he has been utterly disappointed. The time required to carry out all his ideas just wasn’t there.

It just didn’t ... I mean it became something not even halfway there, you know. Because the time required for it isn’t prioritized, and at the same time they just increase the demands within math and literacy. Yet they tell us to go be creative and go visit the world outside and invite the world into the school ... It just doesn’t add up.

Peter calls for the need to work ‘with the principle of suspension’ (Biesta, 2020b, p. 98). ‘Time to wonder and time to look at society’, and ‘time to be together’ require, quite precisely, time. With the words of Biesta, Peter calls for the need to slow down, ‘giving time, so that students can meet the world, meet themselves in relation to the world, and “work through” all this’ (Biesta, 2020b p. 98). Open School was an initiative, which – at least on paper and in its idea – aimed for exactly that. However, according to Peter, Open School ended up as ‘something not even halfway there [...]

because the time required for it isn't prioritized'. To elaborate on the potential Peter sees in time to wonder and look at society, he exemplifies the point by referring to some of the students at the school whom he labels 'the knuckleheads':

The ones where you think: 'Come on behave yourself', you know. Those kids are not stupid. They are human beings. They realize when they stand in front of – for example in some company – they realize that here they should probably behave differently, or at least they will figure it out very fast.

In order to exemplify what he means by things that cannot be run on a schedule, or that cannot be measured, he tells a story from his private life where he was engaged with a youth organization. He speaks about an annual congress in the organization where they held a minute of silence for a deceased person:

At that moment it struck me – there were a lot of very young people there – and I thought; 'do they even know what a minute of silence is?' Well, if not, they certainly learned it there in that very moment. I mean, it is pretty obvious, right, but it is not obvious until you experience it and feel it. And then I thought: 'how does one learn things like that?' How do you learn that in this moment I stand here in respect, silent, I do nothing, I don't look at my phone. That is something students lack these days, something they are not very good at generally – we talk about it all the time. But how are they supposed to learn it if they don't get to experience it in real situations? You can't just talk your way through it. You can't tell them about it. My point is that there *are* things that you need to experience and realize yourself. But everything [in education] has just become so... everything is put into writing and is being manualized and put into systems and is being tested.

Education as subjectification 'asks from education that it makes encounters of the real possible' (Biesta, 2020b, p. 98). The real world puts limits on our actions and 'an important aspect of trying to exist as a subject is to figure out what these limits are, which limits should be taken into consideration, which limits are real, and which limits are the effect of arbitrary (ab)use of power' (Biesta, 2020b p. 96). When the

‘knuckleheads’ stand in front of a person in a company, they are put in a situation in which they must try to figure out some of the real world’s limits. When they – as Peter puts it, ‘realize that they should probably behave differently’, we can interpret this as the result of a consideration made by the ‘knuckleheads’ themselves – ‘those kids are not stupid’ – of which limits should be taken into account. The different behaviour suggests that the students have come to the conclusion that this limit is one of them.

Peter argues, as does Biesta, for the need for an education that does not remain purely conceptual (Biesta, 2020b p. 98). Surely, one can suggest to others how to behave when visiting some company or when holding a minute of silence, but ‘how are they supposed to learn it if they don’t get to experience it in real situations?’. Peter argues, as does Biesta, for the need for something real being at stake in order to give one’s desires, such as the desire to look at one’s phone, a ‘reality check’ (Biesta, 2020b p. 97). Peter argues for the need to make encounters with the real possible, in order to be able to ‘encourage an appetite’ and ‘arouse a desire’ in the student for ‘wanting to try to live one’s life in the world, without thinking of oneself in the center of the world’ (Biesta, 2020b p. 97), that is, trying to live one’s life in a non-ego-logical way – that is, in a democratic way. According to Peter ‘that is something students lack these days, something they are not very good at generally’. According to Peter, the problem is that ‘everything is put into writing and is being manualized and put into systems and is being tested’. The problem is that education has become more and more conceptual. According to Peter, ‘we miss out on a whole bunch of things’, which is to say that contemporary education deprives students of important ‘encounters with the real’.

I wish to suggest that Peter is frustrated about the limited possibilities for bringing ‘the subject-ness of the students into play’ (Biesta, 2021, p. 51). He can do this in ‘confrontational and moralizing ways’ (p. 51) (‘come on behave yourself’) but he knows that what is needed is to keep ‘children and young people “tuned” towards the world’ (p. 51), so they can figure out for themselves some of its limits, and ‘the question about democracy has everything to do with the limits that our living together poses to our freedom’ (Biesta, 2020a, p. 96).

Summing up the case of Vesterborg Elementary School

Lola and Peter describe how the changes following the reform have resulted in an increased time and expectation pressure, and how everything is put into writing and is being manualized and measured. Such measures unavoidably foster a striving and a focus, and it has become more difficult to prioritize and legitimize things that cannot

be put on the schedule and that cannot be measured. Sometimes things just fall between two stools. I have argued that the world (re)presented to the students through the domain of socialization is a world in which students' personal issues and lives are not valued. I have argued that the world (re)presented is a world in which the transformation of individual needs to collective matters is not valued.

I have suggested that what may be at stake are little everyday experiences of existing in the difficult middle ground and what I have labeled the 'storage' of such experiences. This 'storage' can also be understood as a 'storage' of (self)-encouragement, (self)-support, and (self)-sustenance for referring oneself back to the difficult middle ground in future situations. Furthermore, Peter emphasizes that 'we miss out on a whole bunch of things' such as 'time to wonder', 'time to look at society', and 'time to be together'. I have argued that what has become difficult is to make an 'encounter with the real' possible. Hence, in spite of the good intentions behind the reform, contemporary logics of education contribute to situations where students are deprived of important and essential opportunities for figuring out for themselves some of the limits of the world.

This was a case from a school in a municipality that has gone 'all in' on the new ideas and logics of education. The following case, the case of Greenhill elementary school, is a very different situation.

The case of Greenhill elementary school: Adam and Betty

Introducing Greenhill elementary school

I visit Adam and Betty, two 6th grade teachers at Greenhill elementary school (GES) and their four colleagues in Team 6. GES is split into two locations, one location for classes 0 – 5 and another location for classes 6 – 9. When students at GES shift location from 5th to 6th grade they are also mixed up in new classes. Hence each year Adam and Betty and their colleagues in Team 6 welcome three new groups of students who may know each other but are new as groups. Thus, a lot is new to the students when they begin the 6th grade. They have new classmates, new teachers, and a new location. Team 6 therefore prioritizes a lot of focus on what they call ‘relational work’. Moreover, organizationally the three 6th-grade classes are separated from the rest of the school (grades 7 – 9), and are based in a sort of solitary enclave at the school consisting of three classrooms and a common area. The students move around at the school when they have lessons in specialized classrooms, when they go to the school library, the canteen, or gym hall, etc., but they always return to their own little community where the students from grades 7 – 9 rarely come.

The teachers in Team 6 (six teachers in total) also have their own room in the enclave (unlike the rest of the teaching staff), which functions as their base. They use it as wardrobe, meeting room, preparation room, break room, and occasionally they enjoy a Friday after-work beer together. They also regularly go to the main lunchroom where the other staff sits during breaks but often – like the students – they too return to their own little Team 6 base. These organizational circumstances and their small close and friendly relationship foster a situation in which I almost get the feeling that we are a small school (with approximately 75 students, six teachers, and me). By the time of my visit (in November – three months into the school year) everybody (students and teachers in year group 6) seemed to know everybody.

The reason I elaborate on this is that Adam and Betty and their colleagues emphasize many times during my three weeks long visit that these circumstances are very ‘fortunate’ (field notes). The fact that everything is new to the 6th-grade students, combined with this location and organizational circumstance, explains why they have been able to keep a high degree of autonomy in terms of deciding how to organize, structure, and prioritize the school year, the activities, and their teaching. Not only

does it just seem like they have a little school of their own, they almost function like one.

Like Lola and Peter, the teachers in Team 6 have also felt changes in relation to the school reform of 2014. For example they have all taken courses in goal directed learning, and Adam has trained for a special role as ‘Learning supervisor’ – a function he does not, however, occupy much, because ‘it only makes sense if my colleagues themselves wish to use me for discussion and reflection on their practice. I don’t want to insist on it, even though the former school management wanted me to do that’ (field notes).

Betty and Adam also tell me that their fortunate circumstances play a role in the fact that they do not feel time pressure or expectation pressure. They are aware that this sort of pressure is felt by many colleagues outside Team 6, and indeed, by Danish teachers in general. Many times during my visit, I notice that they refer to themselves as ‘some of the lucky ones’ that have been able to ‘do what we find best’ (interview).

Furthermore, they have recently gotten a new principal, and they tell me that they sense a ‘new (which implies better) direction’ (field notes). The new principal is not as focused on learning outcomes and grade point averages as the former principal was. Instead, she is more oriented towards the value of the ‘unmeasurable aspects’ (field notes). Adam and Betty emphasize this new orientation as something that will make their prioritizations and choices easier to recognize as legitimate and valuable.

In this analysis, I want to highlight what Adam and Betty emphasize as ‘*the fundamental aspect*’ (interview) of education from the point of view of the educator: relational work [in Danish: ‘relationelt arbejde’]. I have structured what follows around the terms and descriptions that Adam and Betty use in the interview. These terms include ‘investment and humanization’, ‘challenging the culture of perfection’, ‘flexibility’, ‘humour’, and ‘relationship and academic learning’.

I ‘think with’ Biesta and his concept of subjectification about what Adam and Betty emphasize, and I argue that what they consider to be the most interesting, important, and valuable thing in education can be understood as ‘arousing and encouraging a desire in the student for wanting to try to live as subjects of their own life in a non-ego-logical way’ (Biesta, 2020b), that is, in a *democratic* way. According to Adam and Betty, to succeed with this purpose as educators working with children in elementary school (age 6 – 15) requires as the most fundamental element, relational work.

The fundamental aspect of the work of educators: relational work

It comes up the first day I visit GES: relational work. Adam and Betty emphasize to me on the first day and regularly across my three-week visit that relational work is their main priority. Focusing on building good relationship among students, between teachers and individual students, and between teacher and the group of students is what they consider to be *the* fundamental element of teaching, their most important responsibility. It is something they discuss and reflect about with each other in Team 6 daily, often in very concrete manners in relation to concrete situations and individual students. They consider such daily discussions and reflections extremely valuable for the realisation of their potential to ‘be good teachers’ (field notes). They help each other, they tell me. If one teacher does not feel successful building a good relationship to a particular student, they discuss and reflect on the concrete relationship and new perspectives arise. Sometimes another teacher takes on the responsibility of building a relationship to the student. Their aim is that every student has a good relationship with at least one adult in Team 6 and preferably with all the adults. In other words, not many ‘issues fall between two stools’ (as Lola from VES expressed it). And here the autonomy Team 6 enjoys, and the special room they occupy, play a crucial role.

Their daily reflections and discussions are for the most part not planned or scheduled. They just occur when they sit together in this room, and when they need to, they clear out everything else to discuss and handle urgent matters. It is so easy to make changes, they emphasize. ‘We are only six teachers, and we make nearly all decisions ourselves’ (field notes)’ and they add that ‘students’ well-being is our top priority’ (field notes).

With regard to the big question about what the purpose of education is in their view Adam and Betty put the students’ lives (individual as well as social) central. This was illustrated in the following excerpts from the beginning of our interview conversation:

Adam: To me... it is mostly... you know... about their life. The most interesting thing is not really to teach them something in maths. It is more that they... how should I put it... well yes, that they get a good education – that they become a good person.

Betty: you do it because you want to give them a good start in life (...) we are all marked by our life in school, and that is why I think it is so important with multiple considerations.

Adam: You can focus as much as you want on academic skills but if you don't see the social life in a class – the hierarchies for example... You must focus on creating a good class environment. We spend a lot of time talking about that.

Adam and Betty emphasize that they certainly find the teaching of academic skills important too. I must not misunderstand them, they say. But their point is that it 'can't stand alone'. I ask what these important 'multiple considerations' can be, and they reply:

Adam: 'well, who is a little down these days? We need to try to get some more contact with him'.

Betty: 'Yes, we need to keep an eye on him and make sure to support and encourage him and give him some credit'.

Adam: 'Or that girl... who struggles with anxiety. How can we support her? Because she is so fragile every day in school'.

Betty: 'and kids who are not feeling well at home or have an ill dad... We have children here who are losing a dad or a mom. I mean there are so many considerations that you make every day. It is just deep in you because these kids get under your skin'.

Interviewer: 'Yes, you talk a lot about your relationship with the students. Right from the beginning we have talked about relationship as something very important'.

Both: 'Yes'.

Betty: 'It is a completely fundamental element'.

Like Lola and Peter at VES emphasized, Betty and Adam emphasize the importance of 'keeping an eye' on the students and making sure to support them where support is needed. Betty and Adam acknowledge that education has more than just a qualifying effect. Rather, 'we are all marked by our life in school', and to give students a 'good start in life' requires 'multiple considerations'. Considerations, for example, regarding how to support children in difficult life circumstances.

After my visit at GES my impression is that not many issues ‘fall between two stools’ on Adam and Betty’s watch. For example, half a school day was allocated to resolving a conflict between two groups of students. The two groups had gotten into a fight in the school yard during a break. The teachers in Team 6 promptly reorganized the day for the three 6th-grade classes so that Adam and Betty’s lessons were covered by the other teachers in order for Adam and Betty to have time to try to get to the bottom of the conflict. From approximately 10:00 – 13:00 am, Adam and Betty talked with several students, one or two at a time. At the end of the day, they informed the rest of the teachers in Team 6 about the complexity of the conflict. Even though the conflict had mainly taken place after school time at locations where the teachers have little power to do anything, Team 6 nevertheless took responsibility for preventing the conflict from escalating. They made agreements on how to proceed the following days so that the students – in particular the students at the centre of the conflict – would get sufficient support. This included further talks with the students involved, a rescheduling of a volleyball tournament, and postponement of planned lessons.

Interpreting this within Biesta’s theoretical frame we might say that the teachers in Team 6 decided to ‘give up something temporarily in one or two domains to make something possible in a third domain’ (Biesta, 2017a). Furthermore, even though most of the students in the three 6th-grade classes had nothing to do with the conflict, lessons were postponed for them as well. Hence, we may say that the problem of a few is transformed into a collective issue. The conflict is not approached as an individual matter – though particular support is given to some individuals – but as a collective problem. The teachers approached the problem by working with the student’s social life and relations in the collective. The students who were not involved in the conflict at all, who had nothing to do with it and who were maybe even largely unaware of it, became involved in the solution as well – if not directly in terms of the social activities the teachers initiated, then indirectly where they contributed with their patience and acceptance of the fact that their personal needs and interests had to wait until this more urgent matter was resolved. With Biesta’s domain of socialization in mind we might say that the world (re)presented to the students through this situation is a world where individual issues are matters and responsibilities of the collective.

I do not know whether Adam and Betty and the other teachers of Team 6 managed to resolve the conflict in the long term. But if we think of such conflicts in terms of Biesta’s ideas, we can imagine that the students involved ‘met resistance’ from the world and were highly frustrated. Out of this frustration they ‘attempted to push back’

and ‘push harder’ – it turned violent, and students were fighting each other. The teachers managed to stop the violence (at least for a while) but they also acted with the purpose of solving the conflict – that is, with the purpose of encouraging the students and providing them with support and sustenance to ‘stay in the difficult middle ground’ rather than ending in ‘world-destruction’ (which I here interpret the violent fighting to be).

Of course, this is not to suggest that Lola and Peter (or any other teachers) would not have handled a violent conflict between groups of students in a similar way. The point I wish to make is that the ‘fortunate circumstances’ Adam and Betty work within, and the time and expectation pressure Lola and Peter feel, create two very different conditions for their respective ability to make professional judgements about what to do and how to respond to students’ immediate needs. Time and expectation pressure sometimes fosters a situation where there even is no professional judgement to make. Sometimes things ‘just fall between two stools’ and ‘no one really knows who takes care of it’.

Investment and humanization

I ask Adam and Betty what they more concretely mean by relational work. How do they *do* it? They tell me that there are no final and conclusive answers to this. They do not believe that there exists a formula or a standard prescription. Rather, they describe it as an *investment*. ‘We invest a lot’ they say. This could be, for example, an ‘investment of themselves’ such as what Adam describes in the following excerpt:

The students know that I have two children and that we play badminton in our free time and stuff like that, but there are some teachers who are much more reluctant and afraid to tell students about their personal life. But I become humanized in some way by letting them know me, Adam. I also – you saw that – tell them that I was actually an adult before I learned that fraction rule that we talked about in math. I didn’t know it before I was an adult. That is what is so good about our team [...] we are not afraid of revealing our flaws and making mistakes.

I was in the classroom when Adam told the students about a fraction rule he did not know before he was an adult. It was a situation that occurred on my first day. I wrote a lot of field notes about this lesson because I was actually rather touched by the

relationship between Adam and the students. I could *feel* the relation. It felt caring. I felt very comfortable in the room, and I remember laughing a lot.

Adam teaches the students about fractions. We see a video explanation, and suddenly Adam pauses the video and says that he just remembered a funny story about this particular fraction rule. He tells a story about how he was actually never that good at maths in elementary school, and that it is in fact a little peculiar that he ended up choosing maths as a main subject when he studied to become a teacher. Furthermore, it was not until maths lessons at the teacher's educational programme that he learned this fraction rule. There are a lot of funny details in his story, and he tells it very well. The students laugh. So do I.

'So, you see' he says. 'I didn't know this until I was at the teacher's school, and I think I am a fairly ok maths teacher – of course I don't know what you think about that ha ha, you must judge whether I am a good teacher or not, but if I must say so myself, I think I am ok at maths'.

His point is that no one knows everything, and it is not that big a deal if you do not have every maths rule under control.

Shortly thereafter, the students are doing fractions in their books, and Adam walks around in the class helping and assisting. Suddenly, he calls out in the room:

'Hey, I did it again. Hey everybody listens up. I just did it again. I said it wrong to Johan, right Johan?' Johan nods and laughs. Adam puts his hand on Johan's shoulder, and they laugh together. 'Johan was the one who got it right. He had to correct me ha ha. Apparently, I still get it wrong, you see. We all make mistakes all the time' (field notes).

At the interview, Adam remarks that he is 'humanized in some way' through these sorts of 'investments'. He invests himself as a person. He involves the students in his personal life and in his own mistakes. In a humorous way, he portrays his younger self as clumsy and nerdy, full of flaws, and rather inattentive. And yet everything worked out ok anyway. He is fairly good at maths. And as he demonstrates perfectly, he still makes the same mistake from time to time. With Biesta, we can maybe say that the 'humanization' of Adam is also an attempt to make an encounter with the 'real

Adam' possible. In my reading of Biesta, I have mainly thought of the argument for avoiding education remaining merely conceptual in relation to the curriculum. However, my reflections on Adam's description of how he attempts to 'humanize' himself, expanded my view on this. After all, both Adam and the students are aware of the fact that Adam is a human being. His attempt to 'humanize' himself in relation to the students may be an attempt to avoid remaining merely conceptual as a teacher. Put differently, Adam attempts to make the students' encounters with education real, and to do that he puts himself at stake.

I have later reflected upon whether this 'humanization' also worked on me. In my field notes I have written that I felt comfortable in the room, that I sensed the caring and warm relationship between Adam and his students, and I have also written that I myself would appreciate having a teacher like Adam. There is something immeasurable and maybe even indescribable at stake. I just *feel* it sitting there in the room, it moves me, and I try to write some notes about it. Did I also in some way encounter the 'real Adam' and not just the conceptualization of a teacher?

The method of forms of knowing through emotionality

I wish to dwell briefly here on a methodological topic. At the end of the chapter, I return to this theory of Adam (and Betty) about investing oneself and 'humanizing' oneself. One of the reasons why I pay particular interest to this is that my methodological approach is informed by Law (2004), who argues that in order to 'know' some of the complex and messy phenomena of the world, 'we're going to teach ourselves to think, to practice, to relate, and to know in new ways' (Law, 2004, p. 2). This is to be achieved, for example, through 'forms of knowing as emotionality or apprehension' (p. 3), such as "'private' emotions that open us up to the worlds of sensibilities, passions, intuitions, fears and betrayals' (p. 3).

The situation described above where Adam teaches fraction rules is imprinted clearly in my memory. Or rather it is the *feeling* that is imprinted in my memory, whereas the detailed descriptions of what was said and done are thanks to the field notes I wrote during and immediately after the situation.

During the interview Adam (and Betty) connect this situation with the concept of 'humanization'. I did not bring up the fraction rule lesson in the interview. Rather it was brought up by Adam as an explanation of what he means by 'humanizing' himself. Thus, when Adam used the fraction rule situation as an example of humanization, the feeling I had about what happened in that situation got a name,

‘humanization’. Moreover, it is obvious to me from my fieldwork at GES that Adam and Betty strongly believe in their theory about relationality being *the* fundamental aspect of teaching. It is their embodied and emotional knowledge. They feel it. Hence I pursue relationality conceptualized as humanization further as a result of my methodological choice to take seriously the theories held by the participants, and my corresponding decision to ‘listen’ and pay attention to ‘embodied and emotional knowledge’ (Law, 2004) – my own as well as those of the participants in the study.

Challenging the culture of perfection

Showing their own flaws and mistakes also relates to another important idea emphasized by Adam and Betty. They wish to ‘challenge the culture of perfection’, which they think is a widespread problematic characteristic of contemporary education and society in general. As a countermove, they tell me, they specifically try to foster a ‘mistake-culture’ in their classroom. They do this to ‘make the room safe’ (interview). One of the ways in which they do this is by showing their own mistakes and imperfection, as Adam did in the above-mentioned example. Another example is that they emphasize errors in the textbooks. There are errors all the time, they say, ‘but that is actually very convenient’ because it becomes an opportunity to demonstrate to the students that even textbooks that are supposed to give correct answers make mistakes. In a ‘safe class culture’, they tell me, more students dare to participate and dare to engage with the content.



A big part of the intention with education is of course to give students knowledge, skills, and understanding; it is important, as Biesta formulates it, ‘that students ‘get it’ and that they get it ‘right’ (Biesta, 2020b p. 102). He adds, however:

[M]ost students do not immediately ‘get it,’ let alone get it ‘right,’ and one could say that the whole educational endeavor is geared toward getting students closer to getting it right. This is an open process precisely because there are students in the room, so to speak, and in this way, education always entails a risk, specifically the risk that students won’t get it or won’t get it sufficiently right. A huge part of educational research and policy nowadays is aimed at reducing this risk, and at one level this emphasis is entirely justified, because getting it right matters. But there is a tipping point in the ambition to reduce this particular risk. This is the point where education becomes nothing but perfect reproduction and thus turns into indoctrination. It is the point where there is no longer an opportunity for the student to exist as subject (Biesta, 2020b p. 102-103).

Adam and Betty recognize the tendency of education aiming at reducing the risk of students not getting it sufficiently right. They call it a culture of perfection. They seem to recognize what Biesta labels as the ‘tipping point’ at which students no longer can exist as subjects. It is when the room and class culture is not ‘safe’. When the ideal is perfect reproduction. This contributes to a situation where not all students ‘dare to participate’ and ‘dare to engage with the content’. The culture of perfection strives to make students get it sufficiently right, because getting it right matters, but this ambition comes with a risk. It risks putting a tremendous pressure on students (and we could maybe add teachers, school leaders, and parents as well). The resulting pressure may force students ‘into modes of self-management where they need to monitor and regulate themselves and their behavior, thus basically turning *themselves* into an object of their own control and management’ (Biesta, 2021, p. 53). This ‘self-objectification’ (p. 53) may be understood as an ‘inner force’ conditioned by an ‘outer force’, or to put it with Foucault, as a process of governmentality where the students begin to internalize the pressure to ‘get it right’. However, such pressure, whether stemming from ‘the outside’ or ‘the inside’, may create frustration (can one ever live up to ‘perfection’?), and out of this frustration students might end up withdrawing

from the situation with the risk of ending in self-destruction, or they might try to push back, with the risk of ending in world-destruction.

In Biesta's formulation we might say that Adam and Betty are 'orientated towards and motivated by giving the new generation a fair chance at their own existence as subjects in the light of all the natural and societal forces that try to undermine and prevent this possibility' (Biesta, 2021, p. 46). One of the societal forces being the 'culture of perfection'. They do this by endorsing a 'mistake culture', by 'humanizing themselves' and by 'investing a lot' as a way of inviting students to real encounters with education. They encourage an engagement with education in the difficult middle ground between self-destruction and world-destruction. There is no formula or standard prescription with regard to how to do this. Adam does it one way and Betty another. They both feel successful.

Flexibility

Another important aspect here is *flexibility*. During my visit, Adam and Betty often deviate from what is planned and prepared for in the lessons. This happened in the serious incident with fighting children described above. But flexibility also characterizes Adam and Betty's approach to teaching. An example of what this flexibility enables can be illustrated from the following description of one of Betty's lessons.

The theme of the lesson is 'navigating on social media'. Betty has planned activities and discussions, but halfway into the lesson some of the students ask if they can make a movie about it. Other students express enthusiasm about the suggestion. Betty thinks for a moment and then seizes the opportunity and tells the students what a great idea that is. In that lesson, Betty puts aside what she had planned, and instead she and the students brainstorm on how to make movies. What do they need, how are they to proceed from here, what should the movies be about, what are the difficulties navigating on social media? What can go wrong? etc. They also discuss what is important in terms of lines, light, filming angles, and acting convincingly. Betty rearranges what was planned for the forthcoming lessons, she provides technical equipment, and the students make scripts and shoot movies in little groups. Five days later, we watch the results with great pleasure and lots of laughs.

Betty tells me that she likes to seize the initiatives of the students both because students are often much more motivated by their own initiatives and ideas, but also because it is a value in itself that students take initiatives. Sometimes, she says, the students' ideas are not the best and they take time away from other important things, and she must decide whether to go with it anyway. Other times they simply have really good ideas.

Again, I want to emphasize that Lola and Peter also prioritize students' initiatives. The point I wish to make here, is that while this little example of Betty changing plans and allowing the students to take the initiative may – when seen in isolation – seem as something teachers should obviously do – and it is common for Danish education policymakers to emphasize that teachers are free to choose and are trusted to make professional judgments about how to teach. However, the logics informing the educational system, including teachers' work conditions influence teachers' ability to follow students' initiatives.

Lola from VES expressed how she felt 'stressed' and 'in a hurry' from time pressure and expectation pressure, and how this made her end up doing 'teaching to the test' even though she tells herself not to. Thus those who are supposed to be 'free to and trusted to choose and make professional judgments are not – even if intended – so free after all. What is at stake when teachers' professional judgement is (indirectly) reduced?

The students in Betty's class took the initiative to engage with the content presented to them in a manner that was meaningful and motivating for them. To use Biesta's terms, the students took initiative to 'meet themselves in relation to the world' (Biesta, 2020b p. 98). Betty prioritized giving them time for it. She prioritized 'slowing down' (Biesta, 2020b p. 98). The filmmaking project took many more lessons than Betty had planned and thus pressed something else out. And Betty did not even achieve what she wanted, as she told me: 'I suspect the students may be more interested in making movies than in engaging with the question on how to navigate on social media' (field notes). However, this is beside the point, and Betty did not mind. In fact, she seemed to enjoy the students' enthusiasm and the fact that they had changed the agenda.

While lessons like this can be interpreted as a situation in which the teacher 'loses control' of what students learn, and thus 'fails to produce' the prescribed learning

outcomes (which might then be interpreted as a ‘waste of valuable learning time’ in the ‘learnification’ logic), I want to suggest that we could also interpret it as a situation in which the teacher prioritizes (and *is able to* prioritize) making room for ‘students’ sense-making’ (Biesta, 2021, p. 55). Here I do not think of sense-making in relation to the content presented to the students (since the primary focus seemed to shift to that of acting and filming), but rather students’ sense-making of themselves and of themselves in relation to the world, ‘exploring the unknown or the not-yet-known’ (Biesta, 2021, p. 55). Who knows, maybe some of the students go on to become an editor, an actor, a film director, a scriptwriter, a project manager, a negotiator, or something else encouraged or inspired by experiences like this.

After all, teachers who think that they can state at the start of a lesson what the students will have experienced, encountered and achieved at the end of the lesson, could as well be teaching without any students in their classroom (Biesta, 2021, pp. 55-56).

I believe that both Lola from VES and Betty could agree on the value of prioritizing students’ initiatives also when (and maybe *especially* when) it moves in directions we did not plan. But their respective conditions for making this prioritization are very different. Education and educators’ ability to work with the ‘principle of suspension’ (Biesta, 2020b p. 98) is of course influenced by the aspect of *time*, and Betty is ‘one of the lucky ones’ whose conditions make it easier to suspend time. I will add that also Betty’s students are some of the lucky ones.

Humour

Adam and Betty tell me that they use humour deliberately in their relational work, but again this is no prescription. It is just, as Betty says: ‘coincidental that we are a bunch of humorous and happy people in Team 6’ (interview). Adam mentions a situation, which I witnessed, in which he deliberately uses humour. He jokes with one of the students, Oscar, who had told Adam at the beginning of 6th grade that he could only do 4th grade level maths, and hence he asked for a 4th grade level maths book. Adam used this in a humorous way in the following situation:

The students are on their way out to the school yard when Adam grabs Oscar by the arm. The situation is loving and caring, and Adam is being ironic.

Adam: 'Hey! You have fooled me'.

Oscar: 'What?'

Adam: 'You said to me that you could only do 4th grade maths'.

Oscar : 'Yeah?'

Adam: 'Yeah! You fooled me. You can do 6th grade level maths perfectly well'.

Oscar: 'No I can't!'

Adam: 'Argh! Now you are trying to fool me again. It is unbelievable what I have to put up with as a teacher!'

Oscar laughs: 'But I am serious. I can't do it'.

Adam 'Oh my God, now you also lie right in my face'.

Oscar: (laughing harder) 'No, really I am at 4th grade level maths'.

Adam: 'Oscar! You can't fool me anymore. I have figured you out. You are such a clever boy who can do all sort of things with maths. I was just stupid enough to be fooled by your attempt to avoid working hard. But you can't fool me anymore. So just so you know it, I will demand more from you from now on'.

Oscar laughs, Adam laughs, and Oscar says: 'Ok ok'. Adam claps Oscar on his shoulder and lets him go.

When Adam mentions this situation in the interview, he explains to me that his intention was to show Oscar that he *sees* him and that he *believes in* him. However, from situations in which I have sat next to Oscar, I can tell that he struggles quite a bit with maths. My point is that I do not think that Adam has 'gotten proof' that Oscar can do '6th grade level maths', by which I mean that it is not exceptional maths skills that Adam *sees*. Adam is not praising Oscar for his maths skills even though at first glance it might seem that way. Rather, what Adam does in this situation, which he himself articulates as 'showing Oscar that he sees him and believes in him', is to speak

‘to the one being educated as a subject’ (Biesta, 2021, p. 46). He speaks from the assumption that there is a ‘you there’ (Biesta, 2021, p. 46), just as parents speak to their newborn babies:

Not because they assume that their babies will be able to understand what they are saying, but because in speaking to them they address their babies as subject. And precisely in doing so they open up the possibility for their child to exist as subject, in and with the world (Biesta, 2021, p. 46).

Adam has not gotten ‘proof’ of Oscar’s maths skills, but he does not wait for any such proof and may not even care about that. Oscar’s maths skills are not the point. As Adam mentioned at the beginning of the interview ‘the most interesting thing is not really to teach them something in maths’, rather it is ‘about their life’. Adam addresses Oscar as a subject deliberately to ‘open up the possibility for [Oscar] to exist as subject, in and with the world’ (Biesta, 2021, p. 46). This has nothing to do with maths in particular. Rather maths, and Oscar’s relation to maths (which is not that good) is just an opportunity for Adam to ‘act upon the assumption of the subject-ness’ (p. 46) of Oscar. And this assumption is nothing more than an assumption. ‘Yet acting on the basis of this assumption is perhaps the most fundamental educational “gesture”’ (p. 46), a gesture Biesta has characterized as ‘counterfactual’ as it may go against all evidence (p. 46):

This, however, is the whole point of this educational gesture. It is not that we first ask from our children or students that they provide us with proof that they are subjects and that, only after they have convinced us education can take off. On the contrary, if, as educators, we don’t act upon the assumption of the subject-ness of those we address, nothing may happen at all or, more strongly: nothing will happen (Biesta, 2021, p. 46).

Adam tries to arouse a desire in Oscar to exist as a subject of his own life (Biesta, 2021, p. 47). He helps Oscar not to forget that it is a possibility to exist as a subject and he attempts to encourage him to exist in a non-ego-logical way, where Oscar does not have to judge and perceive himself as poor at maths – which we may interpret as a self-destructive way of existing with maths. Adam uses humour and banter, and he

may only be able to use humour and banter in this way because he has ‘invested’ himself and has ‘humanized’ himself. He has already put himself at stake.

Must one ‘invest’ something before being able to address the ‘you’ in the other?

The interpretation I make here suggests a slightly revision or expansion of Biesta’s theory. Perhaps it is not possible to act upon the subject-ness of the student as such. Perhaps one cannot ‘merely’ address the ‘you’ in the student *without* also ‘investing’ oneself. I reflect more on this interpretation by the end of the chapter, and in the concluding chapter I discuss what it may mean for the theory of education as subjectification. Here I will proceed with the theories of Adam and Betty.

Academic learning and relationship go hand in hand

In the interview, Adam and Betty reassure me on several occasions that all their focus on relational work (which we talk a lot about in the interview) is not to be understood as implying they are not interested in the skills the students should acquire. However, they construct the relational work as a foundation for academic development, as is illustrated in the following excerpt from the interview:

Betty: ‘If you want to stuff something academic into the students, it only works if they want to themselves. And they really want to learn it if they have a good relationship with the teacher’.

Interviewer: ‘Then they want to?’

Betty: ‘Those two things are connected’.

Adam: ‘That’s our experience’.

Betty: ‘That’s our experience. We don’t even think it is a hypothesis, because we have gotten so many proofs of it’

From my observations I know that the class acts completely differently according to which teacher is in the room. As the reader can maybe imagine from my descriptions so far, when Adam or Betty are teaching, there is a lot of concentration, participation, and what I interpret to be a good, calm, funny, and safe atmosphere. Both Adam and Betty seem very attentive towards all the students in the class. In the interview, they tell me that they focus a lot on how they distribute their attention during class. It is

important, they say, that they do not only teach the 5-6 students who always raise their hands. As Adam says:

That is some of what I speak the most about... with teacher trainees. It is funny to see how difficult... I mean, it is so natural for the teacher, or I guess for human beings to respond to the first who raises his or her hand. When you pose a question, and someone answers – then you talk with them [...] And often it is just that 5-6 students who run the entire lesson, and it is not because you are a bad teacher. I just don't think people think about it [...] I have begun thinking a lot about this within the last five years. For example, Nana doesn't say much. I need to create some kind of relationship with her and make sure she experiences little successes that may lead her to open up, because she has so many good things to contribute.

I ask Adam what he does to create these little successes, and he explains as follows:

When I pose a question in the classroom for example (...) then some students will automatically respond right away, and it is natural that I then respond to that right away. But I try to let the question stay in the air for a little while – and you have heard me say: who haven't I spoken to today? And every time I say it, four more students raise their hands. You show them that you don't just listen to the same 6-7 students who always speak.

I noticed that in my observations – Adam's little trick. Saying out loud 'who haven't I spoken to today', and rightly so, every time he says it a couple more students raise their hands. He also specifically turns to some of the quieter students. Not necessarily in the meeting of the group as a whole, but he pays attention to them during group work or individual tasks. His intention is, he says, to show the students that 'you don't just listen to the same 6-7 students who always speak'. His intention is to show Nana, for example, that he knows that she has 'so many good things to contribute'. Thinking with Biesta, we may interpret this as the educational gesture in which Adam assumes that the students *have* something to say and 'have so many good things to contribute'. He does not wait for the proof (which we may here interpret as students raising their hands). He assumes that there are 'yous' in students who do not immediately raise

their hands, and this assumption makes *something* happen. As Adam says: ‘every time I say it, four more students raise their hands’.

Excerpt: closet-crawling

When Adam and Betty teach the class, the students are generally very attentive even though they sometimes give expression to exhaustion or a lack of interest. They participate, though sometimes hesitantly, and there is always a fairly good atmosphere in the room. But this changes completely when the history teacher is teaching. This teacher is not in Team 6, but he is responsible for the history and religion lessons in the class, and he teaches the class twice a week. The following is a description of these lessons constructed from my field notes.

I observe five of his lessons during my stay and each time it is the same. Some students (6-7 students) sit quietly and listen, they participate in terms of answering questions, engaging in discussion, and doing the tasks they are given. But the rest of the students do something else. A group of 5-6 students sit passively and quietly. They may listen, they may not. Some look out the window, some play with their pencils, some lie with their head on the table and eyes closed. Another group of students (8-9 students) engage in small talk with each other, they laugh (rather loudly), throw little things at each other, and pay little or no attention to the teacher or the discussions. In fact, in three of the five lessons I observe, some students leave the room in the middle of the lesson. One time I followed them to see what they were doing. They (three students) sit outside in the common area and talk. I ask them what they are doing, and they answer that it is intolerable to sit in the classroom and ‘as you can see’, they tell me, ‘he [the teacher] doesn’t care anyway’ (field notes).

In one lesson, a student crawls into a closet in the classroom. The teacher does not pay attention. He continues his talk about kings and sacrifices in the Middle Ages with the 6-7 students who participate in the discussion. These 6-7 students do not pay attention to the closet-crawling either. But other students find it amusing, so they laugh and incite the student to crawl into another closet. She does – successfully – meaning the teacher does not notice anything or chooses to ignore it. The closet-crawling student smiles at me, I smile back. It seems wrong

to ignore her, but smiling also feels like endorsing her actions, and that feels wrong too. I feel stressed by the situation. I feel stressed by the fact that the teacher does not take charge. One student has put his hood on and lies with his forehead on the table. In my notes, I write that I would like to do the same and hence manage to stay in this intolerable situation and yet escape it. I feel very uncomfortable, and when the lesson has finally come to an end, I am exhausted. By the last week of my visit, I have come to have negative expectations just before the history and religion lessons. My body reacts to the prospect of a stressful lesson, and I actually skip the last history lesson with the excuse that I have to make an important phone call. This is my privilege as a visitor and as an adult.

It is easy to criticize this teacher on the basis of the short description provided above, but that is not my interest. What I wish to emphasize is that Betty's claim about relational work, the 'investment' going hand in hand with students' engagement in the academic content, becomes very visible and concrete when we look at how very differently students respond to what is on offer. As Biesta argues:

Education always comes to the student as an act of power, even if it is well-intended and even if what is at the heart of this intention is interest in the student's freedom, in his or her existence as subject in and with the world. We should not hide this fact by suggesting, for example, that, as teacher, we are 'just' a facilitator, or 'just' a coach, or 'just' a fellow learner. In all cases, we give something that students didn't ask for. Our hope is that, at some point, students may turn back to us and tell us that what we tried to give them was actually quite helpful, meaningful, even if, initially, it was difficult to receive. At that point we can say that the exercise of power transforms into a relationship of authority, where what intervened from the outside is authorized by the student — is 'allowed' to be an author, is 'allowed' to speak and have a voice (Biesta, 2020b p. 103-104).

The relational work that Adam and Betty are so focused on can be understood as an attempt to bring about a situation where the power they exercise over the students transforms into a relationship of authority. This attempt is not only a pursuit of academic results merely because the school is obligated to pursue such results — instead, it is also motivated by an interest in the students' freedom, in their existence as subjects in and with the world, that is, an interest in reminding the students that

they certainly *can* engage with the academic content regardless of level, and an interest in reminding the students that they have ‘so much to contribute’. As Betty said at the beginning of our interview: ‘you do it because you want to give them a good start in life’, which we can interpret, in the words of Biesta, as an interest in arousing a desire in the students to want to try to live one’s life in a non-ego-logical way, to encourage them to stay in the difficult ‘middle ground’ (Biesta, 2020b).

Whether or how Adam and Betty succeed in this ambition is something that only the students can tell us, and maybe only many years from now. However, judging from the engagement with which Oscar participates in the maths lessons I observe, it seems fair to suggest that at least for now, he has decided to give Adam authority in their relationship. The intervention from the outside – posed by Adam and the world of mathematics, which Oscar did not ask for – seems to have been authorized by Oscar, seems to have been ‘allowed’ to be an author, seems to have been ‘allowed’ to speak and have a voice. Or put differently, maybe Adam has succeeded (for the time being) in encouraging an appetite and arousing a desire in Oscar to want to try stay in the difficult middle ground in relation to this frustrating relationship with mathematics, to ‘be at home in the world’ (Biesta, 2020b, p. 97) (in this case a world in which mathematics in school is currently unavoidable). Maybe Adam has managed to call upon Oscar as a subject. Can this be understood as an *interruption* (Biesta, 2020b p. 98)? I would like to suggest that it can. From the assumption that Oscar’s self-interpretation as a 4th grade level maths student can be understood as self-objectification taking place, or maybe as a ‘withdrawal’ from the world as a protection from the resistance and frustration he experiences, the calling upon the subject may appear as an interruption of this. He was allowed a ‘reality check’ of this self-interpretation. Oscar is reminded that there is another option. He is reminded of his freedom to exist as a subject of his own life and not ‘as an object of all the forces that “come” to [him]’ (Biesta, 2021, p. 47). He is reminded that he can say no to the identity as a ‘4th level maths student’.

Summing up the case of Greenhill elementary school

Adam and Betty use humour in their relational work, but one can presumably also do relational work quite well without the element of humour. According to Betty, it is just ‘coincidental that they are a bunch of humorous and happy people in Team 6’. However, they also consider themselves to be ‘some of the lucky ones’ to have been able to keep a high degree of autonomy regarding how to do their work, and I wonder,

how humorous and happy they would have been had they not been lucky and instead, like Lola, had felt stressed by the pressures of time and expectation?

Relational work is, according to Adam and Betty, *the* fundamental aspect of teaching. They do not even think of this as a hypothesis, they say, because they have gotten so many proofs. This relational work goes hand in hand with academic learning. ‘If you want to stuff something ‘academic’ into the students, it only works if they want to themselves’, that is, if the students ‘authorize’ the intervention (the stuffing) from the outside. But even though academic learning and ‘getting it sufficiently right’ matter, and matter a lot, they cannot stand alone, and the most important (and to Betty and Adam, the most interesting) thing is the students’ lives. It is about supporting students where support is needed – not only as individuals, but also with regard to collective matters. It is about showing the students that they have ‘so many good things to contribute’. It is about trying to arouse a desire in the students to want to try to live their lives in a non-ego-logical way, for wanting to try to stay in the difficult middle ground. It is about trying to arouse a desire in the students to want to try to live their lives in a democratic way.

Doing relational work is not something which, according to Adam and Betty, can be standardized or couched in terms of some collection of highly general prescriptions. One can use humour, and one can have little tricks like leaving a question hanging in the air for a little longer than what one would ‘naturally’ do. One must make ‘so many considerations’ regarding each student every day and try to ‘keep an eye’ on how they are and what they may need. The character and quality of a relationship might be difficult to describe, but it most certainly is possible to *feel*.

Adam and Betty emphasize the idea that this is something many teachers presumably are aware of and would ‘naturally prioritize’. They are concerned, however, regarding the conditions for prioritizing this in the contemporary focus in education. They describe their focus on relational work as something unmeasurable and therefore – ‘in these times’ – as something difficult to legitimize and sometimes difficult even to talk about. The value of relational work is under pressure, as Betty says, ‘so all these things that we [focus on] maybe those things are the uttermost important – but it is not what we measure’ (interview).

The 'lucky ones' enjoy conditions that allow an orientation towards the subject-ness of students

I wish to suggest that Adam and Betty are oriented towards education as subjectification. They are oriented towards the subject-ness of the students. With the analogy of 'storage', I wish to suggest that Adam and Betty are oriented towards supporting students' 'storages' to be filled with experiences of existing as subjects in non-ego-logical ways, which is also to say that Adam and Betty are oriented towards supporting experiences of existing in a democratic way. I wish to suggest that when Adam and Betty declare at the outset of our interview that the most important and maybe also the most interesting thing regarding their roles as teachers concerns the 'students' life' and to 'give them a good start in life', they say that the most important and maybe most interesting thing regarding their role as teachers is education's part of the work in relation to democratic dannelsen.

My descriptions and reflections in this analysis might suggest that Adam and Betty indeed succeed in doing 'their part of the work in relation to democratic dannelsen'. However, I do not claim that. I have no idea how these students will exist in the world, what they think of Adam and Betty and their relationship with them, how they desire to exist, or what kind of experiences they each have in their individual 'storages'. My aim is to discuss how the presence of particular policy trends and logics on education practice in a Danish context comprise a condition for democratic dannelsen. This, however, can never be simplified or reduced to a causal explanation. But what I want to emphasize about this analysis is that Adam and Betty describe themselves as 'some of the lucky ones' whose work conditions allow them to be 'good teachers', which I here presume on the basis of this analysis to be better conditions for democratic dannelsen as the work of education than those of Lola and Peter. However, before I reflect further on this, I first want to introduce Catherine, the principal of GES.

The case of Greenhill elementary school: Catherine

Challenging the very strict education discourse

Catherine is the newly appointed school principal of Greenhill elementary school (GES). According to Adam and Betty, Catherine's leadership priorities portend a new direction for the school, a direction in which Adam and Betty sense a new 'management style' (interview) with a broader (which implies better) focus. Adam phrases it as follows:

The former principal was a little more... I mean more focused on whatever was the current trend [...] it was much more whether our average grade point was better than the neighbour-school's average grade point. That was what mattered. And now we sense new winds blowing (interview).

At my interview with Catherine, I also noticed what I will refer to as a notably different discourse than that of the dominant educational discourse. In fact, Catherine explicitly says early in the interview that her ambition is to challenge the existing educational discourse that she refers to as 'a very strict education discourse'. She criticizes it for having a narrow-minded focus on measurable achievements and for putting too little emphasis on what she labels 'the social' and 'the personal'. She uses the concept of dannelsen to explain her critique of the 'very strict educational discourse':

I know that academic development takes place here. But I also know that we are dealing with children here. They attend school at a very early age – they are only 5-6 years old... So, they are very young when we get them here and I would like to challenge... or I would like to get some balance in education versus dannelsen.

She elaborates on what she means by 'balance in education versus dannelsen in the following way:

Roughly speaking, you have the academic aspect which is about academic development [...] but there is also the social and the personal.

I think that those are very very important aspects too. Especially because they [the students] are so little. They are children. We are shaping them. We are with them for so much of their time. I mean, we are with them during daytime much more than the parents are, so no matter what, we have an important role to fill [...] and the social and personal competencies – this is where we have a huge task. [...] That is what I translate into dannelsen – and it is a little inadequate, but anyway – it is the social and the personal aspects of the student or of the child that I think we have a huge influence on. And I think we should do that differently than we do today.

In order to get some ‘balance in education versus dannelsen’, Catherine wants to make the social and the personal more concrete:

We know what the students must learn [academically] in the 2nd grade, 3rd grade, and 4th grade, and we know which methods to use. But how can we build on the ladder of social and personal competencies? I don’t have the answer but that is the question I would like to reflect on with the professionals [the staff].

When I ask what she means by being more concrete and *how* concrete she thinks it can get, she points to a problem with the current language available:

My goal is not – like in five years – that we have a concrete ladder of progression for social and personal competencies and then students get a star for being curious and concentrated... [we laugh] ... It is not like that at all. But I want to push the boundaries. (...). We must – if we are going to push the boundaries and if we are to become better at these aspects, then we must make it tangible in some way. So, we can say: does this work? Does it have the effect we want it to? Well... it is a rather unfortunate to speak about it as something measurable, which might be the very thinking we should dissociate ourselves from in this strict education discourse. But to talk about it, we need to comprehend it in the first place. And I don’t have the answer to it. I just know that I very much want to put processes in motion.

And

I just want to focus on it, because I don't think it is good enough now (...). We mustn't go blind in this discourse [the strict education discourse] and just adopt everything unquestionably just because that is the way it is. I **want** to question it – this that I call the very strict education discourse that we just walk around doing – and by the way we are actually upset and frustrated about it. We have students who are in a bad place, who are not feeling well, some of whom have diagnoses that we have no idea of what to do about. But they still must be given grades, and it is still: are you 'education-ready'⁴¹ or are you not? How **dare** we treat them this way? I **want** to challenge it.

Catherine's perspectives in these quotes seem to resonate quite well with Biesta's critique of the inadequacy of the language of learning. Catherine speaks about three aspects of education: the academic, the social, and the personal, and calls for a better balance between them. She criticizes 'the very strict education discourse' for prioritizing 'the academic' and neglecting 'the social' and 'the personal', which 'we have a huge influence on'. Although she uses words like 'competence' and 'ladder of progression', which could be argued are key terms in the vocabulary of 'the very strict education discourse', she concedes that it may be 'rather unfortunate' to speak about 'the social' and 'the personal' aspects 'as something measurable', because it 'might be the very thinking we should dissociate ourselves from'. However, to be able to talk about it, 'we must make it tangible in some way'. Hence, Catherine expresses herself with the language available although she senses its inadequacy, or as Biesta puts it:

[A] discourse of powerful but nonetheless rather unhelpful ideas, theories, framings, and assumptions of what education is about, what the task of education supposedly is, of how education works, and what this means for the administration, leadership, and improvement of education (Biesta, 2017a, p. 15).

Left with the language available in the 'very strict education discourse', Catherine wishes to restore a balance between the three aspects: the academic, the social, and the personal, or to put it in the words of Biesta; she wishes to restore an 'educationally meaningful balance' (Biesta, 2017a p. 20) between 'what we seek to achieve in each

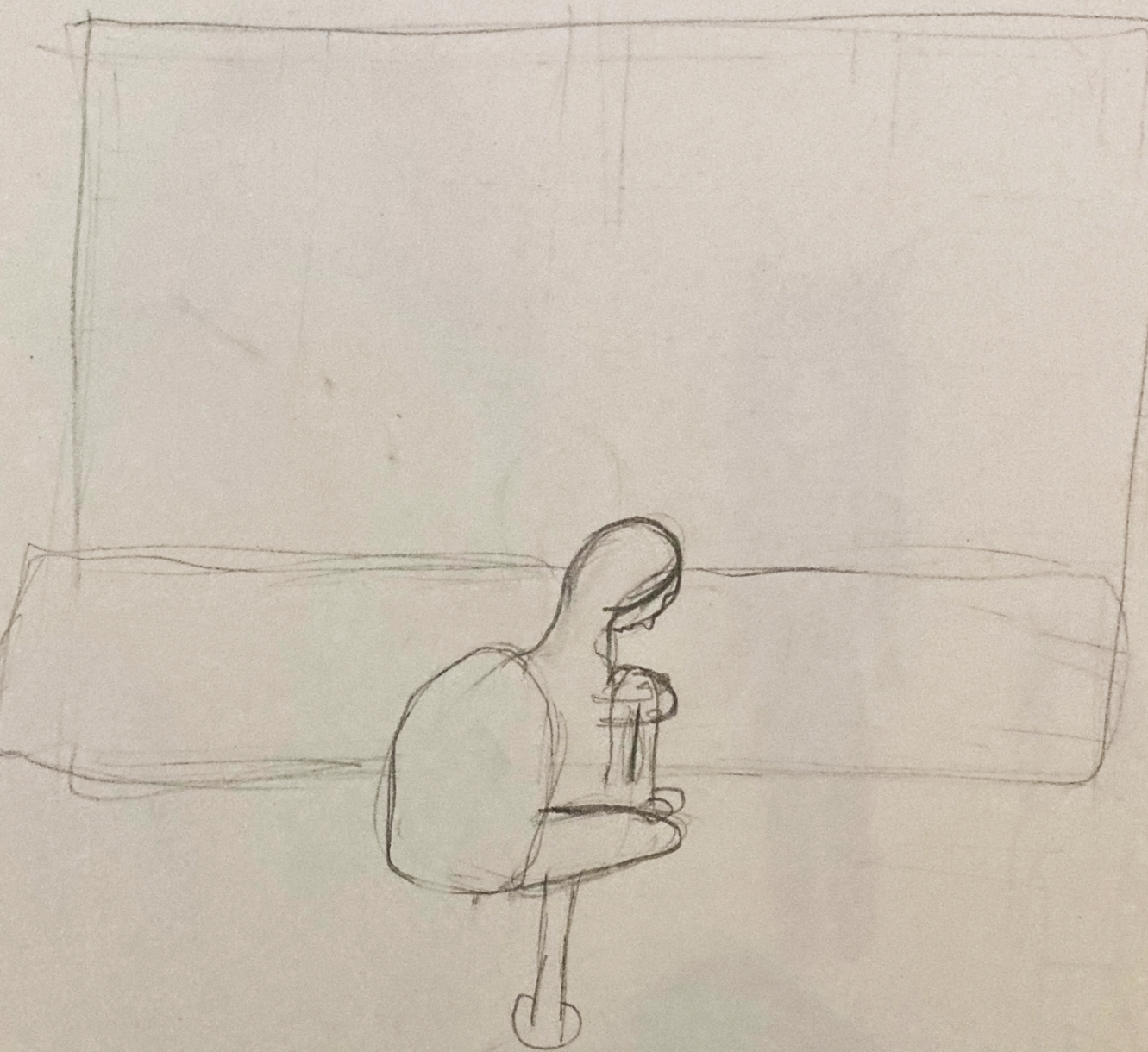
⁴¹ Catherine here refers to a technology in the Danish elementary school system: the 'education-readiness evaluation'. [In Danish: uddannelsesparathedsvurdering].

of the three domains' (Biesta, 2017a p. 20). According to Catherine, 'it is not good enough now', and she thinks, that 'we should do that differently than we do today'. Furthermore, I want to emphasize Catherine's claim: 'and by the way, we are actually upset and frustrated about it'. She exemplifies this frustration with students who are 'in a bad place' and 'do not feel well', or who have diagnoses. I interpret this to be a frustration regarding teachers very well being able to recognize the needs and complex situation of individual students yet being compelled to operate through the lens of evaluation tools and technologies such as grading and the Education-readiness-evaluation. These are technologies that portray the student through the domains of qualification and socialization and reduce the student to a grade and an object of interventions with the aim of achieving the status of 'education-ready'. We may interpret Catherine's frustration as 'how dare we' *objectify* students and disregard them as subjects? As Biesta argues, the question about what we seek to achieve with regard to each of the three domains:

...is not just an abstract question that can be resolved at the highest level of policy and curriculum development – although it has to be taken into consideration there as well – but is also a question that poses itself again and again in the everyday practice of education and also in relation to each individual student (Biesta, 2017a p. 20).

Hence, Catherine and the teachers encounter this question again and again in relation to each individual student, and they may very well be able to make judgements about what an educationally meaningful balance would be in each specific situation, but they find themselves to be in a position where they do not have the power to act on their judgements. Rather, they are compelled to act on a *general one-size-fits-all judgement* made at a policy level, in which aims within the domain of qualification and socialization are prioritized exclusively.

The frustration appears as teachers and school principals may recognize the undesirable costs of this general judgement, this favoritism of qualification and socialization, the rigidity of the 'balance' (or lack of balance) already decided. These are costs they *see* and *feel* in relation to individual students for whom they are responsible – and perhaps also care for.



I suggest that Catherine would agree with Biesta, when he argues that:

As educators, we know that it makes good sense to focus our educational endeavors and the efforts of our students on particular aspects of the educational spectrum – sometimes they have to focus on particular skills or knowledge; sometimes they need to focus on their relationships with fellow students. But such one-sidedness always comes at a price, so the key question is to what degree it is reasonable to limit our efforts in one or two domains in order to make something in another domain possible. It is here that we encounter a tipping point that shifts education out of balance – (and the current systematic drive on academic achievement reveals a system that runs a serious risk of being out of balance) (Biesta, 2017a p. 20).

According to Catherine, she experiences the system to be out of balance, and I wish to suggest that what is at stake in this imbalance is the students' 'subject-nesses', that is, the experiences, the encouragement, and the desire to exist in the world as subjects in non-ego-logical ways. What is at stake are the experiences, the encouragement, and the desire to exist in the world democratically. What is at stake is democratic dannelsen.

When Catherine tells me more about what she intends to do to 'push the boundaries', it becomes clear that she pursues this despite what purports to be useful in the 'very strict education discourse'. Several times, she refers to her ambition as an 'ego-project', as in the following quote:

I challenge it by ... how should I put it... by independently saying: I want dannelsen on the agenda, and I want it to be clearer and more concrete than what I can get support for – or maybe even worse – what I am being measured on. [...] So, there is an ego-project in this [...]. I now have responsibility for a school with 800 students. What are my goals and dreams for these children? Without of course compromising the legal requirements. But that doesn't mean that I don't both want to and desire to challenge what I call the very strict education discourse. So, my question is how do I do that?

To Catherine, this is something she does independently. Her strategy is to get her management at the school as well as the teachers on board with her ambition and in collaboration with them, figure out what it means to put the social and the personal on the agenda. But she does not expect support for this ambition from the municipal administrative level, and certainly not from the means by which she is held accountable – what she is being measured on in the current educational governance system. Her ambition is to push the boundaries ‘without compromising the legal requirements’.

The relationship between ‘the social’ and ‘the personal’ and democratic dannelse

To describe what she wishes to achieve by ‘the social’ and ‘the personal’, Catherine uses terms and phrases like ‘vitality’, ‘whole human beings’, ‘happy and harmonic’, ‘considerate’, ‘curious’, ‘able to be immersed’, ‘co-creative’, ‘dealing with conflict in peaceful manners’, and ‘critical thinking’. At one point in the interview, I ask her if it is possible to disagree with such positive traits, and if it is not possible to imagine the children and young people of Hitlerjugend as being happy and harmonic – at least in their own perception – being taught (or indoctrinated into) believing in and endorsing the idea of National Socialism. I ask her, how we can know whether our version of ‘happy and harmonic’ is in fact a desirable goal? In Catherine’s response, she connects the ‘happy and harmonic’ with the ‘common good’ as a criterion.

Yes, and what are our blind spots right now in our own discourse and in our own legislation [...]. Absolutely right! But I think that we can never know that, but we can keep asking questions about our current world [...]. What are true happy and harmonic people? Because... for what? What should be the purpose? Isn’t that to live in a sustainable world? I mean... where the responsibility is larger than just me being happy. It is not enough that we talk about the individual feeling of happiness – just because I manage well [...]. If the common good isn’t part of being a happy and harmonic human being... I mean, I can answer it so far. That that must be a criterion.

Interpreting Catherine’s criteria of the happy and harmonic with the ideas of Biesta, we see that Catherine rejects a ‘disregard for what is real’ (Biesta, 2020b, p. 97). ‘Individual feeling of happiness’ is not sufficient. Catherine’s idea of ‘happy and

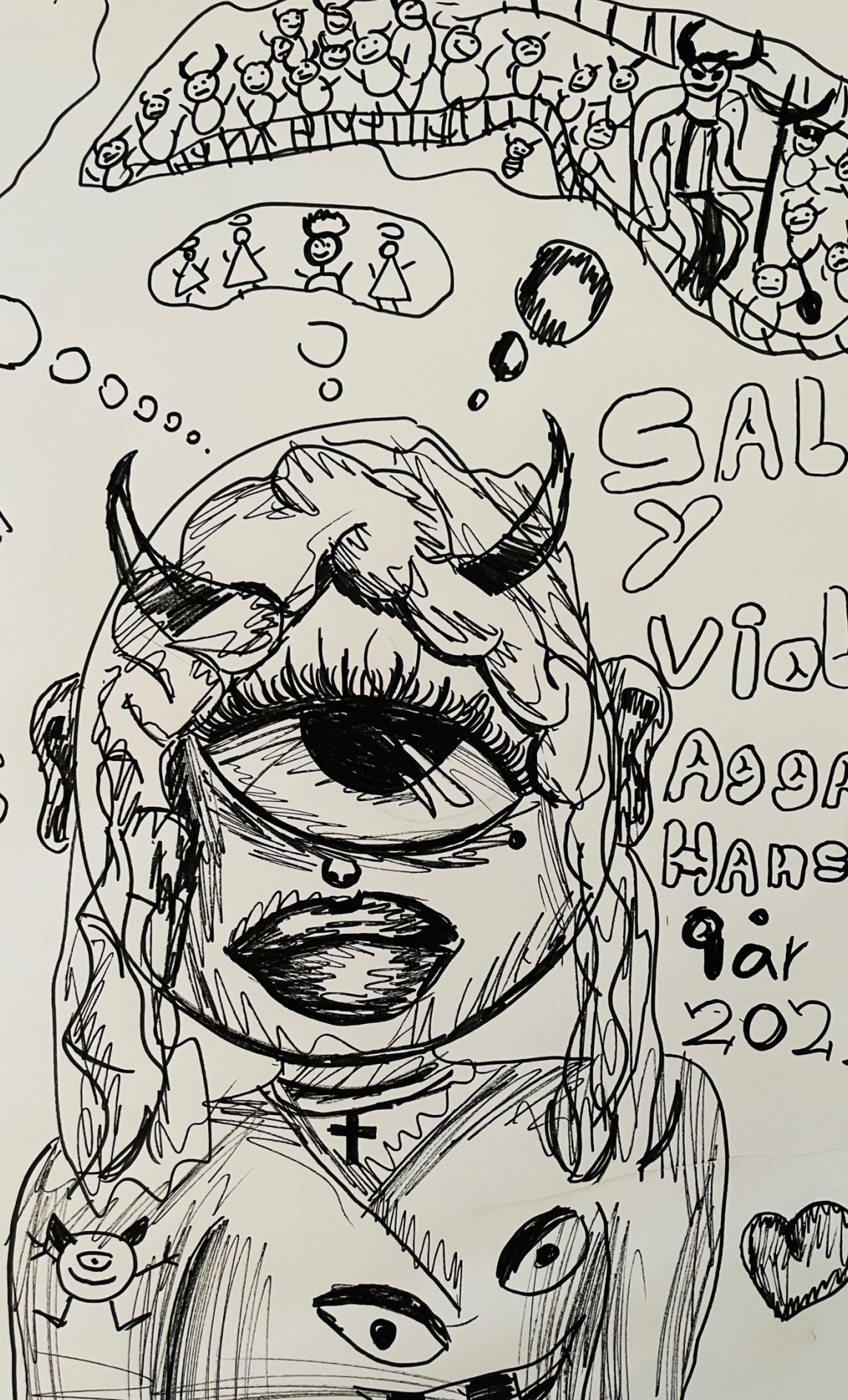
harmonic' includes a 'responsibility larger than just *me* being happy'. The 'happy and harmonic' cannot just be about 'pursuing one's own desires, just doing what one wants to do' (Biesta, 2020b, p. 97). Catherine connects the 'happy and harmonic' with a 'sustainable world', which means that she distinguishes the 'happy and harmonic' from the ego-logical way of existing, which is:

[E]ntirely generated by the desires of the ego, without asking [...] whether, how or to what extent such desires are desirable, both for the ego's existence in and with the world and for the world in and with which the ego seeks to exist (Biesta, 2017c, p. 16).

Rather, I interpret Catherine's desire to pursue 'happy and harmonic' students as pursuing students who desire to try 'be at home in the world,' where we try to 'reconcile ourselves with reality' (Hannah Arendt in Biesta, 2021, p. 49).

I interpret Catherine's wish to focus more on 'the personal' and 'the social' as a wish to focus more on encouraging and supporting non-ego-logical ways of existing (Biesta, 2017c, p. 16). I hold that Catherine believes education should have an interest in the student's subjectification. That is to say that Catherine wants to put democratic dannelsen on the agenda. Her feeling regarding not being able to get support for her ambition, and her feeling about this being an 'ego-project' is alarming, because it suggests that the 'strict education discourse' restricts support for education as subjectification; it restricts education oriented towards encouraging and supporting non-ego-logical ways of existing, it restricts education with an orientation towards democratic ways of existing. Not only is there a price to pay for specific students: 'how dare we treat them this way?' There is a price to pay for all students and for the general project of democracy if it's up to individual people like Catherine (of whom I believe there fortunately are many) to 'push the boundaries' and 'challenge the strict education discourse'.

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Concluding reflections on the exploration of democratic dannelsen as a practice

The aspiration in this chapter was to explore and produce knowledge about democratic dannelsen as a practice. What more precisely *is* the democratic role of education in terms of concrete everyday life in classrooms and schools, and in terms of concrete everyday beings, doings and sayings? What must teachers and education *actually do* or perhaps not do?

In the conceptual framework, I argued that dannelsen theories so far have been (democratically) inappropriate because of what I refer to as historically ingrained colonizing tendencies, which is why we need of a *childist* theory of democratic dannelsen. I argued that I find such childist potential in Biesta's theory of education as subjectification because of its political perception of the democratic subject and hence its emphasis on *acting* rather than on *becoming*. Thus, informed by Biesta, this analysis has drawn attention to democratic dannelsen as that of 'acting as a subject' and furthermore on the conditions under which such actions can take place (Biesta, 2007). To produce knowledge about democratic dannelsen as a micro-interactional phenomenon, the analysis was focused on attempting to bring Biesta's theory into some kind of relationship with the 'world of practice', which includes taking into consideration the theories held by the participants in the study (Maxwell, 2013).

The aim was on the one hand to explore the possibilities of Biesta's theory as a childist theory of democratic dannelsen and to be open to how the theories held by the participants might revise or expand Biesta's theory, and on the other hand to interpret educational practice through Biesta's theoretical frame, that is, to bring a practical dimension to Biesta's theory. I pursued this by presenting excerpts of interviews and vignettes from the detailed thick descriptions of classroom and school life.

I begin with a brief summary of the findings of the analysis. I thereafter put forward a seemingly paradox that suggests that we are missing something important. I argue that adultism is an aspect which we tend to largely overlook, which is why this dissertation puts a strong emphasis on precisely this. Furthermore, drawing on the theory held by the participants in the study, I present some reflections about relationality, and I put forward the question of whether democratic dannelsen is perhaps better understood as a relational phenomenon. These reflections and this question will

be discussed in the following, concluding chapter, where I also discuss the possibilities and limitations of Biesta's theory and provide an argument for the need to move our thinking *towards a childist theory of democratic dannelsen*.

Brief summary of the analyses of chapter six

In different ways the teachers and the school principal in this analysis raise a concern regarding something important, something fundamental being 'pushed out' of education, given a lower priority, being harder to prioritize and legitimately focus on as a result of recent developments in Danish education, in particular since the reform of 2014. Drawing on Biesta's concepts, I have suggested that what the participants say in different ways is that education is moving away from an orientation towards the subjectification of the students.

Biesta has already made such an argument and it is therefore not new or surprising to 'discover' these conclusions. But the analysis adds further detail to this 'movement' in terms of concrete and empirical examples of what it means to move away from education as subjectification. It tells some of the concrete stories, and often these stories can awake and engage our *feelings*. I have only provided a few examples in this analysis. It is but a tiny fragment of very many stories. However, I suggested that we consider these examples in the context of the debate on the mental health crisis among children and young people in Denmark, where one thousand Danish psychologists declare that they see an increase in children who react violently physically and verbally, or who withdraw into themselves and lack motivation and an inclination for school. This declaration was subsequently publicly supported by more than two thousand teachers and *Pædagogerne*. I suggested that what we witness may be an increase of children who do not manage to stay in the difficult middle ground when they meet resistance from the world. This can perhaps point to the fact that the resistance they experience is too overwhelming. It can indicate that the support, encouragement, and sustenance they need are not provided.

The psychologists claim that the well-being of a whole generation is at stake as a result of what they refer to as a lack of a 'child-friendly environment' (Mølgaard & Jensen, 2022), and from this analysis, we can add that maybe it is what I have referred to as the 'storage' of experiences with managing to balance in the difficult middle ground that are at stake. By this I also mean to argue that in the longer-term it is the 'storage' of (self)-support, (self)-encouragement, and (self)-sustenance, and maybe along with it *the desire* to exist in the difficult middle-ground which is at stake. It is

the ‘storage’ of a ‘whole generation’ (cf. the psychologists’ call) that is at stake, which – to put it even more strongly – suggests that it may be ‘existence in non-ego-logical ways’ that is at stake. It is democratic existence that is at stake. Under the influence of particular education policy trends and logics on educational practice in Denmark, Danish education, I argue, seems to push too hard.

A paradox

In the aftermath of this analysis, it has puzzled me that the story the analysis tells seems to be a narrative we have heard so many times before already. Let me explain. The teachers and the principal in this analysis are rather critical towards the conditions and logics under which the Danish school currently operates. Catherine says; ‘how dare we?’ and ‘by the way we are actually upset and frustrated about it’. Lola states that ‘things – important things – are simply overlooked or not taken care of’ and ‘I have told myself twenty times, don’t do teaching to the test, but I end up doing it anyway’. Peter calls the development ‘quantity over quality’ and as ‘tests, tests, and more tests’ which he says, ‘*works* all right!’ They ‘unavoidably foster a striving and a focus’. Betty problematizes that the uttermost important things are precisely not what is being measured and considered within the idea of educational ‘quality’.

These, however, are not new insights. In the conceptual framework, I presented a range of critical literature that in different ways problematize contemporary educational trends and logics. For example, according to policy researchers Moos & Wubbels, the ‘Outcome Discourse’ is accompanied with more social technologies than ever seen before in the history of education and educational theory (Moos et al., 2015; Moos & Wubbels, 2018). The types of social technologies are many but among other it is technologies such as the Education-readiness-evaluation, which Catherine is frustrated about and which I have argued portrays the student through the domains of qualification and socialization and thus reduces the student to an object of interventions. It is also technologies such as the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture, which I analyzed in chapter five and concluded is an instrument to domesticate rather than emancipate.

Biesta argues that education becomes uneducational if it only seeks to insert students into the existing world. This is in danger of happening at the critical tipping point in which students can no longer appear as subjects of initiative and responsibility but merely as objects of educational intervention (Biesta, 2020a, p. 41). But *where* or *when* exactly is the critical tipping point? Do the considerations introduced above

indicate that the tipping point is getting closer? Or are we already there? How many more social technologies based on objectifying logics are needed to reach the tipping point?

My point is that there is evidently not exactly a shortage of critical research and critical literature regarding recent decades of educational trends and logics both in a Danish and international context. There is seemingly also not a shortage of Danish critical practitioners – some are even frustrated and as Catherine puts it ‘want to challenge the strict education discourse’, some co-write public statements of concern to the Danish Parliament (cf. Mølgaard & Jensen, 2022) and some get ‘ethical and moral stress’ and leave their jobs (cf. Pedersen et al., 2016). Again and again, the increasing number of mental problems, psychiatric diagnoses, school refusal etc. of Danish children and young people are mentioned and worriedly discussed in the public debate. And *yet* there seems to be no particular deviation from the course and logics of contemporary education policy trends that so many educational scholars and practitioners seem to agree are a substantial part of the problem. This has puzzled me. It has created what Benozzo and Gherardi label a ‘disorientation that arise when facing uncanny realities’ (Benozzo & Gherardi, 2020, p. 145). A wonder is, as Maggie MacLure puts it, ‘an untapped potential in qualitative research’ (MacLure, 2013, p. 228). ‘Thinking with’ (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) Foucault, the question I have wondered about has become;

What story, which ‘truth’, which discourse (Foucault, 1972/2013) is convincing enough to overrule the massive critique and to uphold and reproduce the seemingly problematic logics under which education is currently operating?

Of course, the answer to such a question is not simple. There are many interrelated and intertwined discourses and ‘truths’ at play. However, along with my continuously deeper engagement with the perspective of childism, I have discovered a *childist* answer to this paradox and I consider the perspective of childism a so far ‘untapped potential’ (MacLure, 2013). There is one story which has not gotten much attention. In fact, I too did not pay it (enough) attention in this analysis either. It largely goes unnoticed in both research and practice and is hardly ever put into question. It is *that* ‘true’. It is the story about the fully human adult and the sub-human child, that is, the most prolific and culturally powerful tropes of ‘natural’ subjugation that can be traced back as far as we have recorded history. It is the logic of adultism. The prototype of

coloniality. The figure of the child *is at the centre* of the colonial logic (Duane, 2017b; Rollo, 2018a).

One of the reasons I did not pay much attention to this in the analysis is, as already emphasized elsewhere, that I conducted the fieldwork in 2019 and produced the analysis throughout 2020 and 2021 (interrupted by Covid19 related issues as was mentioned in the methodological chapter), and at that time adultism simply went under my radar too. But in the aftermath of the analysis, the paradox – why do we continue the same path when there is such a sizable agreement in both research and practice of the problems of this path – kept me puzzled. Perhaps childism is precisely the ‘untapped potential’ critical education research needs.

The theories held by the participants in the study highlight *relationality*

The theories held by the participants in this study regarding what is going on and what is important highlight relationality, that is, the importance of teachers being able to be in, or maybe it is more precise to say come into a relationship with the students that allows them to recognize what is *important* for the students, what is *real* for the students, what *matters* for the students, what students *experience*, etc. in order to be able respond appropriately and to be ‘allowed to be a voice’.

This relationship is conditioned partly by the logics under which education is operating. The participants in this study mentioned time and expectation pressure as a condition that allows things – important things – to simply ‘fall between two stools’. According to the participants we are talking about, for example, children who are unhappy or unwell for some reason, who are a little down these days, who are in a bad place or who have more severe mental problems such as anxiety, bulimia, OCD and self-harm. It could even be a matter of students whose parents are divorcing or are terminally ill. Interpreting this through the perspective of childism, we can say that when ‘things fall between two stools’ or when what is real and important for children can be rejected as a ‘waste of valuable learning time’, it is also to say that children and young people’s lived experiences and needs are marginalized and disregarded. It is a *devaluation* of children’s lived experiences and needs. It is a (further) *dehumanization* of children and young people.

I did not consider such a perspective when I conducted the field work and produced the initial analysis. Why not? Because of my own unacknowledged adultist norms and interpretations and because of adultist elements embedded in and shaping the theory with which I was thinking (I shall elaborate more on that topic in the concluding

chapter). A devaluation of children's lived experiences and needs is precisely what easily allows for education to 'push harder' without recognizing it as pushing *too* hard. It is almost too convenient that Adam happens to use the phrase that he 'humanizes himself', and furthermore tells me the day after the interview that he is surprised by his own choice of words and that he has never before thought about it as a 'humanization' but that he actually finds that term rather precise. Adam and Betty emphasize that they 'invest themselves' to establish the kind of relationship with the students they believe is 'fundamental' in an educational setting. For Adam and Betty this involves for example exposing their own flaws and disclosing information about their personal life, but this is not a formula or standard prescription. Betty does it one way, Adam another, which seems to suggest that 'humanization' involves some of the uniqueness of the person humanizing itself. Perhaps there is an emotional aspect to it too. Adam explains that his purpose is to let students know '*me*, Adam', which presumably only Adam can attempt to do. Betty can attempt to let students know '*me*, Betty'. This – letting students know the '*me*' in the teacher – they experience, is something that some other teachers are 'much more reluctant and afraid' to do. Why? What is there to be afraid of?

The emphasis on relationality raises the question of whether democratic dannelsen is better grasped as a relational phenomenon, that is, something which involves 'humanization' of *both* or *all* parties in the relation. I elaborate and discuss these reflections in more detail in the concluding chapter, where I also discuss the possibilities and limitations of Biesta's theory and provide an argument for the need of expanding our thinking *towards a childist theory of democratic dannelsen*.



7

CONCLUDING CHAPTER

In this concluding chapter, I look back on the thesis, highlighting the results it has yielded and how it has done so. I follow up on the focus on relationality that emerged in chapter six and discuss how democratic dannelsen should perhaps be understood as *the movement of relationships between things*. I also make some remarks to what I towards the end of the project have come to interpret as adultist elements that obstruct the childist potential of Biesta's theory, and I reflect on the implications for the findings and arguments of this dissertation of the fact that I did not discover this earlier. I conclude with reflections on the word 'dannelsen' itself and ask whether it is or can become an appropriate term with which to theorize the democratic role of education. Finally I emphasize what is the most important argument of the dissertation, namely, the need for a childist theory.

Towards a childist theory of democratic dannelsen

Aspiring to study the democratic quality of everyday school life

The idea for this dissertation arose at a time of increasing global concern regarding what is perceived as an escalating crisis in global democracy. The need to understand what has happened and is still happening, and further, the request for answers with regard to what to do about it and how to 'save' liberal democracy, have become increasingly urgent and have gained a great deal of political attention. Democracy and education have historically been closely related and it is therefore not surprising that

education as well as children and young people are positioned as the solution to the democratic crisis.

In a European and Danish context, the response is primarily focused on providing *more* citizenship lessons and on strengthening the teaching *about* democracy, where the idea is to ‘infuse’ children and young people with values, belief, knowledge, and competence – an approach I have characterized as *external* initiatives – while everyday experiences with democracy and democratic acting and being – what we could call *internal* initiatives – seem to slide out of focus.

This (im)balance also seems to be mirrored in research on the democratic role of education. Much of the literature is either focused on activities that are usually considered specific democratic activities, or it is of more philosophical nature that seems remarkably remote from everyday aspects of school, as if schools were not embodied and inhabited by real human beings (children and adults alike) who have real life experiences. Furthermore, in the contemporary educational political climate the contributions of especially the philosophical and theoretical literature have been put in question and disregarded as overly theoretical, too little interested in empirical reality and of little relevance to concrete educational practice and policymaking.

Given this political and research landscape, the aspiration of this dissertation was to bring the ‘everyday’ practices and processes of school into focus, and to investigate and produce knowledge about the *democratic quality* of everyday life in school. Furthermore, the goal was to investigate what kind of conditions for this everyday school life contemporary educational trends and logics comprise. The aspiration was to bring disciplinary knowledge into a relationship with the world of practice, to explore and produce knowledge to illuminate the practical dimension and relevance of philosophical and theoretical contributions.

The dissertation investigated the case of Denmark, where the democratic role has traditionally been conceptualized in terms of the concept of democratic *dannelse*. The research questions of the dissertation were:

How can we understand the phenomenon of democratic dannelsen as a practice? How do contemporary educational trends and logics in the Danish context produce conditions of possibility for democratic dannelsen?

Creating a conceptual framework to inform the study

In chapter two, I developed a conceptual framework with the purpose of informing the focus and design of the study. In part one of my presentation of the conceptual framework, I examined the theories dominating the traditionally defined field of the dissertation's topic, democratic dannelsen & democratic education, which broadly speaking can be said to be *Western philosophy*. Part one placed an emphasis on critically analyzing the literature and possibly identifying weaknesses or missing perspectives. Furthermore, I attempted to look for relevant perspectives outside the traditionally defined field of the dissertation's topic with the aim of developing the dissertation's 'model of phenomena' (Maxwell, 2006, p. 30) and 'an *imaginative* approach to research' (Hart, 2018, p. 19).

I included insights from postcolonial and feminist philosophy and a relatively new community of researchers from the field of childhood studies, the most general point being that theories of Western philosophy are conceptually biased. This literature highlighted the fact that the history of the concepts of dannelsen and democracy are also histories of sexism, imperialism, colonialism, and even straightforward misogyny, racism, domination and exploitation, as well as adultism and misopedy. I problematized the fact that in contemporary mainstream *pädagogical* and educational discussions, these aspects seem largely ignored or downplayed as something belonging to a problematic 'spirit of the past', which we no longer subscribe to and thus are not 'worthy of serious attention'. But such position is challenged by feminist, postcolonial, and childist perspectives that argue that the theories and concepts are in fact not universal, gender-less, race-less or age-less and timeless issues. Biases are not left in the past but remain built into the theories and concepts themselves and can therefore not merely be considered as a sort of detachable appendage. Ignoring the biases will entail that theorizing with these theories will continue to privilege those they were initially developed for and inhibit important scholarly advances.

Informed by feminist and postcolonial philosophy and drawing on the childist critique, I argued that the field of *Pädagogik* is adultized and evasive about adult domination which has resulted in an adultist discursive scientific framework that sets up interpretive frames that make it difficult to think outside these frames. I have argued that it calls for reflection on the democratic potential of one of the foundational concepts in *Pädagogik*, the concept of dannelsen.

Dannelsen theories can be summed up as theories about '*becoming* a subject in a culture' (Straume, 2013a), and the main problem here is that the starting point is an

adultist deficit perception of the child (Wall, 2010). Put differently, when drawing on this scientific framework the child is always already understood as a ‘not-yet’ and thus cannot be made to fit the identity of a (fully) political subject. It cannot occupy the identity as a *knower* (Fricker, 2009). The ‘age of reason’ which still influences contemporary education in both theory and practice is conceptualized in *explicit opposition* to the child (Rollo, 2018).

Informed by the conceptual framework, I took the position that any version or theory of *dannelse* until this point is problematic and inappropriate for theorizing and thinking with about the democratic role of education. With adultism running beneath the radar structuring and shaping theories, every theory of democratic *dannelse*⁴² so far paves the way for a discriminatory (against children) conceptualization of the democratic role of education. Democratizing through discriminating practices seems paradoxical and is nevertheless a violation of the rights and integrity of the child. Therefore, I argued that we need a *childist* theory.

The question, furthermore, was whether we must abandon the concept of *dannelse* entirely, or whether it is possible to rewrite its philosophical foundations, that is, to de-adultize or ‘childize’, so to speak, its philosophical foundation and move *towards a childist theory of democratic dannelse*. This dissertation aspired to do the latter.

Choosing a research approach and a theoretical framework

Informed by the conceptual framework, the main challenge for the dissertation was the historical philosophical foundations that depict and restrain the figure of the child in a ‘lesser-than-adult’ identity. Educational practice is not ‘free’ of philosophical ideas. It is not merely practical. It is always already informed by certain assumptions (perhaps implicit) of the human being, the child, society, and the role of education, and it is these naturalized underlying assumptions – where the figure of the child is the most central for this dissertation – that render other imaginations almost impossible, and it was thus the philosophical foundation this dissertation had to challenge. Therefore, the dissertation adopted a research approach described by Jackson & Mazzei (2012) as thinking with theory.

Thinking with theory takes as starting point that research should be guided by philosophy. It is a sort of embodied philosophy that enables a more nuanced

⁴² I here speak generally about theories dominating the traditionally defined field of democratic *dannelse* and I do not deny that there may exist exceptions.

conceptual engagement with the empirical material, where theory is not simply ‘applied’ but where the aim is to enable the empirical material to speak *through* the concepts.

The dissertation’s theoretical framework was comprised of 1) a Foucauldian discursive approach, 2) Gert Biesta’s theory of education as subjectification, and 3) the perspective of childism.

To think with Foucault is largely speaking about thinking differently or as Foucault puts it ‘to imagine another system is to extend our participation in the present system’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 230). Thinking with Foucault’s concept of discourse enables a denaturalization and problematization of what appears as natural and true knowledge with the purpose of enabling other understandings to be possible. The Foucauldian discursive approach allows us to go beyond what appears as conventional wisdom and to challenge what is taken for granted. As Hardy puts it: ‘Studies that interrogate dominant discourses help to disabuse readers of the idea that they are inevitable or natural’ (Hardy, 2022, p. 7). One of the challenges this dissertation faced was to illustrate the ‘epistemic injustice’ (Fricker, 2009) inflicted on the child – in theory and practice – on the basis of structural prejudice regarding its ‘naturalized’ ontological identity, that is, its naturalized ‘lack of’ capacity as a *knower* (Fricker, 2009). This type of injustice is particularly hard to detect because it operates ‘beneath the radar of our ordinary doxastic self-scrutiny’ (Fricker, 2009, p. 40). It was necessary to challenge adultist norms and to argue for the need of – and perhaps reconstruct – more age-inclusive educational research and practice.

With the Foucauldian approach I thus also placed the dissertation within a post-structuralist framework that understands knowledge as situated and thus always infiltrated with societal, socio-material, and discursive constructions. ‘Reality’ is therefore not stable but is instead constantly negotiated and transformed, which also implies that no version of democracy or democratic dannelsen (or any scientific knowledge about democracy or democratic dannelsen) is either definitive or neutral. Any version of democracy and democratic dannelsen – as well as knowledge of it – is shaped by social, cultural, and historical conditions. This also concerns the knowledge that this dissertation produces, which is neither neutral nor definitive but can enable new and perhaps better and more democratic ways of theorizing and studying the democratic role of education.

To theorize democratic dannelsen I used educational theorist Gert Biesta’s theory about education as subjectification. Biesta problematizes the tendency in educational

theory and practice to think of the democratic role of education as that of *producing* democratic subjects and in that way, Biesta levels a critique of the emphasis on *becoming* in existing dannelsen theories. Instead, he suggests a *political* perception of the democratic subject, that is, he argues for an age-less perception of the political subject. Education as subjectification puts an emphasis on *acting* rather than *becoming*. Biesta's theory thus challenges the pervasive developmental discourse that dominates educational theory and practice, which I interpret to be an argument for the need of leaving behind the adultism that dominates educational theory and practice. Thus, in my interpretation of Biesta's theory, there is a childist potential in the idea of education as subjectification.

Biesta seems to have abandoned the concept of *Bildung*. But this dissertation aspired to explore whether it is possible to rewrite the foundation of dannelsen rather than to abandon it. It attempted to explore the possibilities of understanding dannelsen through subjectification and thus aspired to expand our understanding of what dannelsen theories can be, from theories about '*becoming* a subject in a culture' (Straume, 2013a) to a theory – drawing on Biesta – about '*acting* as a subject in a world of difference'.

But even though there is a childist potential in Biesta's theory it also suffers from adultist biases. This is illustrated, for example, in the choice and usage of the terms 'infantile' and 'grown-up'. I argued the need to abandon these terms and to instead use Biesta's suggestion of what he calls 'slightly better terms', namely 'ego-logical' and 'non-ego-logical'. However, towards the end of the project, I have come to realise that 'cleansing' the vocabulary is not enough. The theory is also shaped by adultist elements and involves characteristics that allow adultism to sneak in through the back door, so to speak, and hence this limits the theory's childist potential. In other words, the theory cannot achieve what it aims for because adultism blocks the way. In this concluding chapter, I therefore make some remarks about what I have come to interpret as limitations that obstruct the childist potential. I return to that topic below. Finally, I included in the theoretical framework, the lens of childism(s) (Biswas & Wall, 2023; Biswas, Wall, et al., 2023; Wall, 2019). Childism offers a critical lens for deconstructing the ingrained adultism that still largely dominates the social scientific and humanistic disciplines (Wall, 2019). Childism has the potential to shed light on human life and society more broadly and thereby potentially help to revise existing theories (Warming in Biswas, Wall, et al., 2023), and it can reconstruct more age-inclusive scholarly and social imaginations (Wall, 2019).

Developing a research design based on ethnographic approaches

To ‘access’ the everyday messiness of educational practice and bring it into some kind of relationship with disciplinary knowledge, I developed a research design based on ethnographic approaches.

As a discipline and research method, ethnography is interested in and appreciates the complexities of everyday settings and everyday lived experiences of people, and the qualitative methods I have employed to produce detailed and contextually rich ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) of ‘lived lives’ in schools include multi-sited fieldwork involving variations of participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, and informal conversations at two Danish elementary schools.

The post-structuralist framework takes as its starting point the idea that discourses run across micro-interactional, meso-institutional and macro-social levels – not as discrete territories but rather on a continuum – where they ‘systematically form the object of which they speak’ (Foucault, 1972/2013, p. 54). Thus the dissertation’s interest in democratic dannelsen as a micro-interactional phenomenon is understood as always complexly intertwined with meso-institutional and macro-social aspects. Therefore empirical material is furthermore produced from various sources, such as democracy discourses in the general public, a range of education policy documents, education political initiatives and investments and the distribution of the public national budget, etc.

With empirical material from both micro-interactional, meso-institutional and macro-social levels the dissertation thus aspired to produce knowledge about 1) democratic dannelsen as a practice and about 2) how contemporary educational trends and logics in a Danish context comprise conditions for this democratic dannelsen. To accompany the ‘thinking with theory’ approach, I applied a rhizomatic analytical strategy (Deleuze & Guattari, 2000; Khawaja, 2018) to make sense of the welter of constantly moving and changing data material (Benozzo & Gherardi, 2020)

Contributions of the dissertation

An argument for the need of engagement with potentially embedded biases in the theories and concepts with which we theorize

One of the contributions of the dissertation is an emphasis on weaknesses and missing perspectives in the theories dominating the traditionally defined field of democratic dannelsse & democratic education. This dissertation has of course in no way provided an exhaustive or comprehensive interrogation of every single influential theory in the field, but rather presented relevant feminist, postcolonial, and childist critiques that have served to problematize the fact that the Scandinavian field of (democratic) dannelsse has not addressed, responded to, discussed and (perhaps) refuted these critiques. And to the extent that such discussions in fact have occurred it is problematic that they are not to be found at a more central position in the field – in the mainstream, so to speak, of *pädagogical* and educational discussions. The dissertation has problematized the fact that such important discussions are not represented in textbooks and reference works, and that we must find them ‘tucked away’ in more marginalized positions in the dominant academic landscape, that is, if we even think to look for any such perspectives or discussions in the first place. It is problematic because readers risk having the impression that potentially ingrained biases are not ‘worthy of our serious attention’. Put differently, there is the risk of ‘muting signals’ (Kleingeld, 2022) that would otherwise invite readers to critically scrutinize how biases potentially shaped the theories.

The dissertation has particularly put emphasis on historically ingrained adultist biases and has thus contributed with an argument for the need for a childist lens to critically scrutinize the theories and concepts with which we theorize (if not *all* aspects of education, then at least) democratic education.

An important question here is of course whether the conceptual framework of the dissertation exaggerates the flaws and missing perspectives of *Pädagogik*. After all, the immensely small part of the entire field of two and a half thousand years of Western philosophy that this conceptual framework has dug into, is of course not the whole story. It could be argued that the conceptual framework neglects to pay attention to ways in which the concept of dannelsse has played a role in the improvement of human life. In this dissertation, I acknowledge that there are also positive stories to be told. However, it is my position that such stories are told already,

and the aim has therefore been to draw attention to continued inequalities and violence to invoke change and unsettle the dominant paradigm.

An analysis that illuminates how dominant democracy discourses foster discriminatory practices

Another contribution made by this dissertation is its analysis of dominant democracy discourses (chapter five). This analysis provide answers to the second part of the research question regarding the conditions for democratic dannelse by interrogating how dominant democracy discourses condition what can be thought, said, and done regarding democratic dannelse and just as importantly, if not more so from both an explanatory and political viewpoint (cf. Fairclough, 1992), what *cannot* be thought, said or done.

By collecting and constructing patterns from a varied range of sources – such as transnational and national education policy documents, distribution of national budget, informal conversations, media coverage, excerpts from field notes, etc. – the analysis presents three dominant democracy discourses: Defense democracy, Campaign democracy and Competence democracy.

Some of the ways in which coloniality is embedded in these discourses are identified, and the analysis thus adds to the theorizing of Biesta and Rancière (Biesta, 2009; Rancière, 1999) who argue that the tendency to think of democratization as a process of inclusion is basically a colonial way of understanding democratization. The dissertation further adds by demonstrating *how* colonial thinking is not only uphold and reproduced but also strengthened and intensified through social technologies and accountability systems with relation to contemporary educational trends and logics, such as the focus on ‘active citizenship’ (Danish Ministry of Children and Education, 2021; OECD, 2019), the idea of competence-based education (Mausethagen, 2013) and governing through standards (Brogger, 2019) etc.

The analysis further demonstrates that the condition for democratic dannelse as ‘acting as a subject’ *depends* on one’s ‘naturalized’ ontological identity. For example, it demonstrated how the non-white body is (still) presumed less democratic than the white body and how the child and the young are (still) presumed and constructed as inadequate and inferior, which illustrates some of the ways in which coloniality is still very much at play (Duane, 2017b; Rollo, 2018a, 2021) but also *intensified* through European and Danish education policy and initiatives. For example, by analyzing excerpts from the Council of Europe’s Reference Framework of Competences for

Democratic Culture, the dissertation illuminated the powerful and domesticating work done by, and at the same time hidden behind the discourse of ‘necessary democratic competences’. The analysis demonstrated that a tool such as the RFCDC is a tool that measures so-called ‘democratic competences’ by an always transcending yardstick whose command is obedience to the ‘adultist contract’ (cf. Mills, 1997/2022). Furthermore, the analysis highlighted that although it is not *exclusively* children and young people who experience the effects of this powerful and domesticating work, it is *especially* children and young people.

The analysis provides a problematization of *the* most prevailing democracy discourse in educational practice, Campaign democracy discourse, and demonstrates how this discourse fosters discriminatory practices. Campaign democracy discourse provides rationales for an orientation towards thinking democratic dannels as that of enabling students to effectively navigate and operate within the existing system, and this is ultimately an adultist way of thinking about or conceiving of the democratic role of education. Much-cherished phenomena evoked by such terms as ‘the democratic conversation’, ‘critical thinking’, ‘participation’, ‘agency’, ‘voice’, etc. are in the Campaign democracy discourse defined entirely on the grounds of adulthood, and thus the role of democratic dannels becomes to ‘remove barriers’ for children to ‘become’ democratic citizens by teaching and training them in speaking and behaving in certain ways, or by waiting for the barriers to ‘naturally’ disappear e.g., as the child becomes old enough to be (assumed) capable of ‘participating’ and speaking its mind. The extent to which initiatives based on rationalities of the Campaign democracy discourse are strengthened is also the extent to which ‘dividing practices’ (Foucault, 1982) that separate the democratic from the undemocratic are strengthened, and furthermore the extent to which a whole range of perfectly capable ‘voices’, as well as those perfectly capable of ‘independent critical thinking’, are disqualified, marginalized, and excluded.

I characterized dominant democracy discourses as involving *the violence of kindness and correctness*, which is an epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2009) that violates the integrity of the individual by claiming that the individual is not a *knower*, that its lived experiences are not ‘real’ or ‘worthy of our serious attention’. It is a claim that the individual is not a political subject.

Thus, dominant democracy discourses are shrouded with discriminatory elements, the most prevailing of which is adultism, and as such they constitute rather poor (and

arguably undemocratic) conditions for what can be thought, said, and done with regard to democratic dannelsen.

The dissertation contributes to the discussion of democratic dannelsen by arguing for a childist approach. Whereas the adultist approach, embedded in the dominant democracy discourses, is oriented towards teaching students to enact what is already considered to be a (democratic) ‘voice’, ‘agency’, ‘participation’, ‘conversation’, ‘critical thinking’, etc., the childist approach is oriented towards transforming such notions themselves. It is about critiquing and reconstructing what ‘voice’, for example, can be, and it is oriented towards the *responsiveness* of the students’ environment rather than the (presumed capacity of the) individual student. It is about making sure that marginalized perspectives are actively welcomed, heard, and responded to, which – in relation to all social groups but arguably especially in relation to children – also implies welcoming, listening, and responding to non-verbal expressions such as embodied and emotional knowledge, whether sweet and kind or aggressive and violent. *That* is supporting the child as a political subject (Østrem, 2012) because it acknowledges the child as a *knower*. It acknowledges the child’s experiences as ‘real’ and ‘worthy of our serious attention’. It acknowledges that the child is not separate from but in fact is always already *participating in* and experiencing the world where it thinks and about which it has opinions and ideas. The dissertation contributes insights on what a childist approach to democratic dannelsen can be.

Democratic dannelsen is perhaps better grasped as *the movement of relationships between things*

The dissertation furthermore contributes with knowledge about democratic dannelsen as a practice. In the analysis presented in chapter six, the dissertation demonstrated through vignettes of everyday situations in school, and through interview excerpts with teachers and one principal, how democratic dannelsen is ‘enacted’ in living pedagogical relationships. The analysis attempted to bring Biesta’s theory into a relationship with the educational practice and to interpret this practice through the theoretical frame and thus explore a practical dimension of Biesta’s theory. The analysis has contributed with reference to practical examples from everyday school life of what it may mean to call upon the subject-ness in the student, or what it may mean to make it possible for students to have what Biesta calls ‘encounters with the real’ (Biesta, 2020b).

The analysis furthermore aspired to take into consideration the theories held by the participants, which could perhaps serve to revise or expand the theory. The findings of the analysis put an emphasis on relationality, and I have suggested that democratic dannelsen as a practice should perhaps be understood as a relational phenomenon.

As such this is not a new suggestion. Dannelsen can be said to be about ‘the connection between the human being and the world’ (Rømer, 2019). Straume (2013a) likewise emphasizes that a common structure in every dannelsen theory is that there cannot be any dannelsen without a relation between the individual and the ‘outside’ world. In other words, dannelsen is already considered a relational phenomenon. Also, Biesta’s concept of subjectification is about our existence *in* and *with* the world (Biesta, 2020b). But as it is clear, even though existing dannelsen theories (which I lump together here due to Straume’s description of their common structure) and Biesta’s theory have a focus on a relational aspect in common, they mean very different things. Whereas existing dannelsen theories put an emphasis on *becoming*, Biesta’s theory emphasizes *acting*, and this thus ‘form[s] the object of which they speak’ (Foucault, 1972/2013, p. 54) very differently.

What I mean to get across when I suggest that democratic dannelsen is better grasped as a relational phenomenon lies much closer to what Biesta proposes than to what is generally articulated in dannelsen theories (cf. Straume, 2013a). But from a childist perspective, it is a slightly, but importantly different perception of the relational aspect. In the following, I shall elaborate on what I mean in making this suggestion and how it differs from Biesta’s theory of education as subjectification.

As I interpret Biesta’s theory, it seems to put an emphasis on what education and educators must *do*. But the theoretical assumptions held by the participants in my study seem to slightly relocate the focus onto what happens *between* education/educators and students, which is also to say that power relations or the mechanism of power (Foucault, 1982) is reconfigured⁴³. Where Biesta speaks about arousing a desire in the student and addressing the ‘you’, and thus seems to assume that teacher and education *have the power* to do so, the participants’ theory seems to add that something comes *before* the arousal and the addressing of the ‘you’.

⁴³ Power should here not be mistaken for responsibility.

The teachers Adam and Betty report that they ‘invest themselves’. Adam calls it a ‘humanization’. And they speak about it as if they must invest and humanize themselves *before* or perhaps *in order to* be authorized by the students⁴⁴. As Betty says: ‘it only works if they [the students] want to themselves. And they really want to if they have a good relationship with the teacher’, and ‘that’s our experience. We don’t even think it is a hypothesis, because we have gotten so many proofs of it’. In other word, this is a matter of these teachers’ embodied and emotionally experienced knowledge.

This, I argue, suggests that more is more needed than ‘just’ to address the students as subjects or ‘merely’ to act upon their subject-ness. It suggests that the teacher does not hold the power alone to do the ‘addressing’. Instead, the addressing of the ‘you’ is a *constantly negotiated, shifting, and moving relational phenomenon*.

A reflection of mine is that perhaps one can only address the other’s ‘you’ from one’s own ‘I’. If addressing another ‘you’ can be considered a sort of humanization of the other, then this perhaps involves humanizing oneself first or simultaneously. Perhaps this is what Adam attempts to articulate when he speaks about the importance of letting students know ‘*me, Adam*’.

An important aspect of childism is that to dehumanize the other one must first dehumanize oneself. To oppress the ‘irrationality/child-like/whatever’ in the other, one must also oppress this in oneself. Likewise, Rancière speaks of the stultification of the supposedly inferior as at the same time being a stultification of the supposedly superior (Rancière, 1991). This leads me to suggest that a childist theory of democratic dannelse should put more emphasis on the *relation between* education and students – more emphasis than I find in Biesta’s theory, at least in the way it is formulated. I wish to suggest that democratic dannelse is not something that ‘happens’ in a one-way direction from education to the student, but is rather something that exists ‘both ways’, so to speak, in a relation that makes demands on the *type* or *character* of the mechanism of power (Foucault, 1982) in the relationship.

The teachers say they must ‘invest themselves’, which I interpret as meaning they must invest in challenging the currently dominant (presumed natural) power balance, that is, they must challenge adultism. The teacher Adam holds that not all teachers are comfortable with letting students know them. Some are ‘afraid’, he says. My

⁴⁴ Biesta pays this attention elsewhere, where he discusses authority as a relational phenomenon.

reflection is that perhaps it is frightening to abandon one's supposedly 'natural' superior identity precisely because one 'is' superior.

Studying democratic dannelsen should then perhaps focus more, than what I have done in this dissertation, on the 'in between' rather than on education's 'doing'. Perhaps democratic dannelsen can better be studied by focusing on the *movement of relationships between things*⁴⁵ rather than focusing on the acting and doing of the things themselves. Education's role in democratic dannelsen should perhaps not be distinguished between 'the work of the self' and 'the work of education' (cf. Biesta, 2021; Straume, 2013a) but is perhaps better grasped as an orientation towards the *interdependence* of human beings (other animals as well as nature).

Contemporary educational trends and logics are a movement away from an orientation towards the interdependence of human beings (and animals and nature)

This leads me to the second part of the research question. How do contemporary educational trends and logics in the Danish context produce conditions of possibility for democratic dannelsen? In the analysis of chapter six, I highlighted ways in which contemporary educational logics challenge teachers' possibilities of focusing on the relational aspect of their job. The teachers Lola and Peter describe how things – 'important things' – such as talking to students who are not well for some reason or who suffer from more severe mental issues, such as depression, anxiety, and self-harm, simply 'fall between two stools' because of an increased time and expectation pressure. The teacher Martin interprets the time he must spend on a disagreement among a group of students as a 'waste of valuable learning time'. With regard to these and other excerpts, I highlighted how the reformulation of education as an undertaking entirely devoted to producing certain learning outcomes not only results in 'important things falling between two stools' but also yields new interpretations of the role of education and of the teacher, where what is experienced as important and 'real' to students can be overruled and disregarded as 'a waste of valuable learning time'. These are developments, I wish to suggest, that move away from an orientation towards the relationships between human beings, away from an orientation towards the interdependence of human beings (and other animals and nature as well).

⁴⁵ By the term 'things' I mean to denote the relation between the human being and the 'outside world', which can be, I presume, any *thing*.

Biesta has argued how questions regarding themes such as purpose, content, and relationships have been made invisible, or it is assumed that the answers are already clear and decided upon (e.g., Biesta, 2010). However, where Biesta sees the question of *purpose* as the most important topic to bring into the discussion, I argue, based on this dissertation, that we should first and foremost focus on the question of relationships. We should do so because our perception of the relationship between education and students – which more often than not involves the relationship between adults and children/young people – structures the ‘system of thought’ (Foucault, 1981), the ‘interpretive frame’ (Mbembe, 2016) within which we can grapple with the question of the purpose of education. As Foucault would have it, the truth value of a statement is always conditioned by how it is positioned in relation to what is already considered to be true knowledge, thus the truth value of any statement regarding the purpose of education is always conditioned by what is already considered to be true knowledge about the child and the adult and the *relation* between them. An adultist perception of that relationship will entail – as it has done so for at least two and a half thousand years (cf. e.g., Rollo, 2018a; Wall, 2010) – adultist answers to the question of the purpose of education.

One example of this is illustrated in the widespread ‘obsessiveness’ in educational literature with taking as starting point the observation that the word ‘school’ derives from (ancient) Greek and means ‘free time’. This is an interpretation that may have had some ‘truth’ to it in a historical period where children were considered the property of fathers or slave owners and where it was common to buy, sell, or loan out children as slaves for labour or sexual exploitation (Laes, 2011; Rollo, 2018a). Today however, the interpretation of school as ‘free time’ is predominantly an adult(ist) interpretation that perhaps derives from, to use the words of Mills (1997/2022) ignorance of basic political realities. (See, for example, the picture on the last page of the dissertation; p. 328).

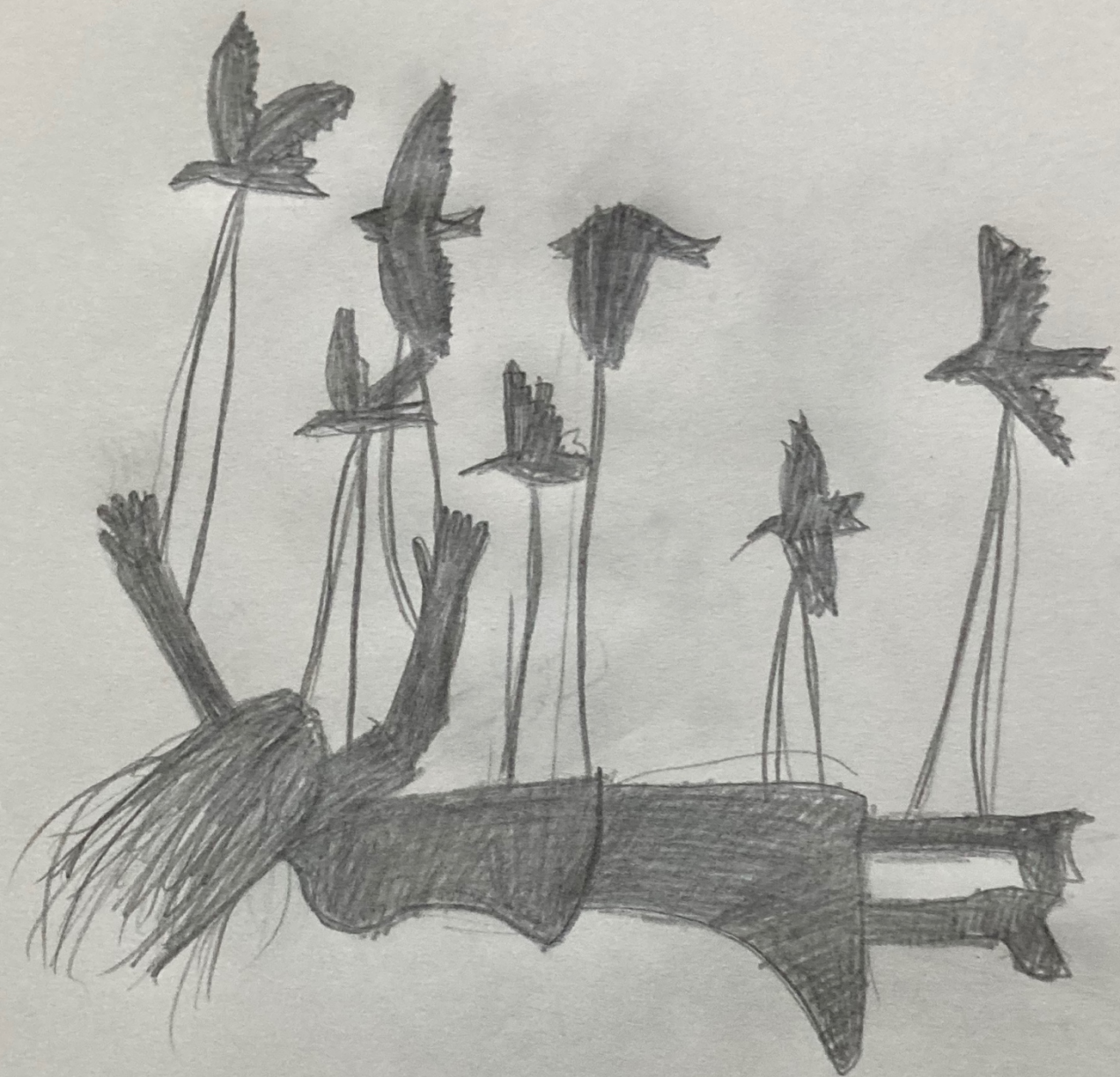
One contribution made by this dissertation is thus a challenging of contemporary educational trends and logics as a movement away from an orientation to the interdependence of human beings (as well as other animals and nature) and therefore also an argument for putting the question of relationship *before* the question of purpose – at the centre of the discussion.

Educational trends and logics involve a (further) dehumanization

The dissertation contributes to a large body of literature that has already problematized contemporary educational trends and logics in various ways. The dissertation adds to this literature by providing a childist interpretation of contemporary educational trends and logics in a Danish context as a (further) *dehumanization* of children and young people which is at the same time a dehumanization of us all.

For example, the increased political concern with the so-called ‘social and emotional learning’ of students (Williamson, 2021) (which is not very different from what we have seen in our analysis of the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture in chapter five), which has become a lucrative international market for educational technology developers (Nemorin, 2017), commercial providers (Hogan et al., 2018) and an investment opportunity for venture capital firms (Belfield et al., 2015) – also labeled ‘the concern industry’ (Pettersvold & Østrem, 2019) – benefits *hugely economically* from the construction of the ‘problem child’ (Prins, 2021; Seeland, 2017; Sigsgaard, 2014; Vik, 2014, 2015; Aabro, 2016). This dissertation adds that what this industry benefits from is an increased dehumanization of children and young people, which is also to say that there is an enormous economic potential in the dehumanization of human beings in general. There is an economic potential in the reinforcement of coloniality. There is an economic potential in preserving, affirming, and further intensifying and institutionalizing the most prolific and culturally powerful tropes of ‘natural’ subjugation – the ‘truth’ about the fully human adult and the sub-human child, because it can effectively blackmail us into ‘the very problematic position of affirming some exclusions as natural while arguing that [we] do not belong in the category of natural exclusion’ (Rollo, 2021, p. 318). This is what can provide a convincing ‘natural’ hierarchy that can be applied to human beings and relegate some of them to a lesser order, and it is, I argue, a very profound part of what keeps providing justification and rationales that enable the development of educational policies and education systems pushing harder and harder and successfully averting critiques.

The dissertation thus contributes an argument for the need for a childist lens in research on the topic of democratic dannelselse & democratic education, but perhaps also more broadly in educational research. Childism is a lens that not only generates knowledge about children’s perspectives and experiences, but also transforms adult-child *relations* and *intergenerational orders*, which can potentially shed light on human life and society more broadly, including the purposes and effects of education.



Adultist elements obstruct the childist potential of Biesta's theory

As I have emphasized already, my project did not begin with the perspective of childism. My discovery of childism and the work of childist scholars, and its relevance for the research interest of this dissertation, emerged along the way. Moreover, concurrently with my continuously deeper engagement with childism, my 'childist lens' has become stronger and more 'effective', so to speak. This means that towards the end of the project I came to realize that there are adultist elements in Biesta's theory which obstruct its childist potential. A contribution of the dissertation is thus also to make some remarks on these elements in order to open up a discussion about what potential adjustments or further development – from a childist and thus also, I contend, a democratic perspective – are needed for this theory to comprise a childist theory of democratic dannelsen. Since my reflections on this have occurred rather late in the process these remarks also imply a critique of the dissertation's initial engagement with the theory, which furthermore calls for reflections on potential weaknesses of the findings and arguments of the dissertation. I will discuss this topic at the end of this section. I begin with two childist perspectives on Biesta's theory.

Too seemingly disembodied and universal

The concepts and ideas in Biesta's theory appear to be disembodied and universal. This on the one hand makes the theory very attractive and it is easy to interpret it as being successfully applicable to almost anything. At least that was my initial interpretation. But on the other hand, the appearance of disembodiment and universality is also what makes the theory problematic. The point is that what can be understood regarding Biesta's notions of 'encounters' that can enable 'reality checks' and of the 'difficult middle ground' between 'withdrawing' and 'pushing too hard' are always infiltrated by societal, socio-material, and discursive conditions. So-called 'reality checks' are always conditioned by what is already considered to be 'true' and 'real' (Foucault, 1972). They are conditioned by 'truths' regarding ontological identities (Fricker, 2009). A possible reconsideration of one's own position is always judged and perceived as plausible or implausible on the basis of how it sits (or not) within the regularity with which the phenomena are articulated (Foucault, 1972, p. 145). Furthermore, the 'naturalized' 'legitimate' dominant position is allowed *much wider* authority for actions than the 'natural' subordinate before it can plausibly be perceived as 'pushing too hard' or 'to overrule'. The 'natural' superior does not think of its own dominant position as problematic. It is experienced as *natural*. It is

experienced as *inevitable*. The subordinate may have internalized such a perception as well. The ‘natural’ dominant position does not think of its domination of the subordinate as ‘pushing too hard’ or as ‘overruling’ even though the ‘natural’ subordinate position may experience being overruled or pushed too hard.

The appearance of disembodiment and universality in Biesta’s theory allows for undetected biases to ‘sneak in through the back door’. Existing inequalities and prejudices are allowed to structure and condition ‘reality checks’. They are allowed to structure and condition how the seemingly disembodied and universal concepts and ideas can be understood and interpreted. The appearance of disembodiment and universality allow our prejudices to operate ‘beneath the radar of our ordinary doxastic self-scrutiny’ (Fricker, 2009, p. 40).

Considering, for example, that the ‘entire edifice of human societies, cultures, language, rights, law, relationships, narratives, and norms [are] built upon a powerful bedrock of adultism’ (Wall, 2019, p. 4), it follows that what can be interpreted as ‘pushing too hard’ and as ‘overruling’ will tilt towards favouring adults over children. This is, moreover, evident in the fact that what can legitimately and ‘naturally’ be said and done about and to children would appear outrageous if said and done about and to adults. The example I mentioned in chapter four about teachers rewarding children with Good cards in schools when they live up to expected behaviour is a good example on this. Just consider husbands rewarding wives with Good cards when they ‘live up to expected behaviour’ or consider a boss rewarding employees with a Good card when they ‘live up to expected behaviour’.

The problem of Biesta’s theory is that it is *likely* and *allowed* to be interpreted through a historical ingrained adultist interpretative framework (cf. Mbembe, 2016; Wall, 2019). The appearance of disembodiment and universality is one of the elements that stands in the way of the childist potential in Biesta’s theory.

Education appears to be the ‘doer’

Another element that prohibits the childist potential from developing in the theory is the way in which the theory tends to be formulated, a way which involves drawing on adultist norms. As hinted above, I interpret the predominant focus in the theory to be oriented towards a direction that goes from education and educators towards the student. One easily gets the impression – particularly when interpreting through an adultist interpretive frame – that education is the ‘doer’ and the student the (passive) recipient. According to Wall the active/passive dichotomy is a typical dominant line

of adultist thought in *Pädagogik* and education (cf. Wall 2010). Biesta emphasizes the ‘question as to whether there is space for students to exist within educational situations and settings’ (Biesta, 2020 p. 103) and the need for making ‘room for students’ sense-making’ (Biesta, 2020, p. 103). Formulations like this, I argue, not only risk paving the way for the (mis)interpretation that education ‘naturally’ and legitimately holds the power to students’ *existence*, but it also renders important aspects invisible and thereby risks distorting the theory.

What is made invisible is what happens in the opposite direction. It is not only education that ‘always comes to the students as an act of power’ (Biesta, 2020b, p. 103). It is not only education that gives students something they did not ask for (Biesta, 2020b, p. 103). What students bring to education is also an act of power, and they too give education something education did not ask for. Teachers and schools do not ask for the students they get. Nor do they ask for everything in the range of students’ responses and reactions to what is offered, required, requested, and demanded through the configuration and organization of the school. When students respond with stomachache, sadness, or restlessness or by disturbing the teaching, or when they react violently physically and verbally, or withdraw into themselves and lack motivation or a positive attitude or inclination regarding school (e.g., Mølgaard & Jensen, 2022), this is also ‘an act of power’.

Danish scholar Frederikke Skaaning Knage (2023) studies school absence and interestingly challenges the predominate (adultist) way of perceiving absent children as passive and powerless victims. Instead Knage suggests that we could also understand the increase of long-term school absence in Denmark as a sort of youth revolt. Just consider, Knage notes, how these children and young people have 1) managed to resist the enormous pressure to return to school, 2) how they have managed to make politicians, researchers, and practitioners discover a Danish education system in crisis, and 3) how they have managed to move this topic to the absolute centre of public attention (Knage, 2023). That surely is an act of power, and like educators, students also hope that ‘what they tried to give’ teachers and education ‘was actually quite helpful, meaningful, even if, initially, it was difficult to receive’ (Biesta, 2020 p. 103-104). They too wish to be “‘allowed” to be an author, [...] “allowed” to speak and have a voice’ (Biesta, 2020 p. 103).

My point is, students demonstrate in various ways *all the time* that they *are* in fact by nature *knowers*, that they *are* political subjects, that they *are always already* participating in the world about which they think and have opinions and ideas. In other

words, the fact that there is a ‘you’ in the student is *never* ‘counterfactual’ (Biesta, 2017b chapter five). The problem is rather that adults tend to overlook this because they are looking at children and young people through their adultist interpretive frame.

As I interpret Biesta’s theory, it allows for and welcomes this ‘other direction’ that is unfortunately made invisible by the way in which the theory is formulated. I believe it to be one of the central points of the theory. As Biesta, for example, argues ‘teachers who think that they can state at the start of a lesson what the students will have experienced, encountered and achieved at the end of the lesson, could as well be teaching without any students in their classroom’ (Biesta, 2021, pp. 55-56). However, the theory, I contend, is formulated in ways and it draws on words and norms that *invite* adultist interpretations. Arguing that education ‘must make room’ for students to exist and ‘allow’ for students’ ‘sense-making’, and further describing this as a ‘risk’ (however beautiful) and as education’s ‘weakness’ (e.g., Biesta, 2013a), illustrates that this is formulated chiefly from the perspective of adults.

Even if the theory is formulated in this particular way so as to acknowledge the facts, that is, the basic political reality that children are more vulnerable to exploitation and marginalization than adults due to the unequal power relation with adults and the inequality of experiences and resources, the effect is nevertheless that the theory ends up affirming rather than challenging adultism and adult domination, and that, I wish to suggest, is at least part of the reason why subjectification ‘is the most difficult of the three domains to conceive of and perhaps the one that has been most misunderstood’ (Biesta, 2020b, pp. 101-102).

How may adultist biases have shaped the study?

I have pointed to two elements in Biesta’s theory that arguably obstruct its childist and thus its *democratic* potential. Adultist elements block the way for the theory to achieve its aims. We cannot bring forward an orientation towards the freedom of the student (Biesta, 2020b). With adultism structuring what we think, see, and do, or with Foucault, structuring the regularity with which the phenomenon, *an interest* in the student’s freedom, is articulated (Foucault, 1972, p. 145), we risk focusing on a pseudo-interest in the freedom of the student, or to put it differently, we risk focusing on an interest in the pseudo-freedom of students. My argument is therefore that we must attempt to ‘de-adultize’ the theory, which – we could say – is a task I have tried to take up towards the end of this project.

But this, then, also raises the question about the dissertation's engagement with the chosen theoretical framework. Roughly put, the objection could amount to saying that all I did was to 'cleanse' Biesta's vocabulary of adultist words. I did in fact endorse his replacing the terms 'infantile' and 'grown up' with 'ego-logical' and 'non-ego-logical'. I did myself (initially) what feminist and postcolonial literature criticize Western philosophy for doing, and which I then criticized the field of *Pädagogik* for doing. That is, cleansing the vocabulary (Mbembe, 2016), 'muting signals' (Kleingeld, 2022) and failing to critically scrutinize how adultist biases had potentially shaped the theory and how that would perhaps influence my theoretical thinking, the design of the study, the methods I chose, and the dissertation's findings and arguments.

For example, perhaps I should have paid more attention to the direction from students to adults in my field work. Perhaps I should have been more curious about how the student Oscar interprets his relationship with the teacher Adam, rather than privileging Adam's perspective of it (along with *my* interpretation). Perhaps I would have thereby discovered something (other) in the relationship between them.

Perhaps I should have been more attentive to how my own possible adultist biases potentially influenced what caught my attention, the excerpts I chose to highlight and the interpretations I made. For example, I included an excerpt in this dissertation where three students leave the classroom in the middle of the lesson. I follow them and ask them what they are doing. They say that it is intolerable to stay in the classroom and as I can see, they tell me, the teacher does not care anyway. If I at the time had had a more polished and focused childist lens, I would perhaps have pursued this matter further or differently. I might have looked more deeply into this experience of being ignored, of being a nonentity, where it does not even matter whether one is present or not.

In my field notes there is also a description of a situation where a boy is shamed for his actions. I shall not go into the details of this situation but what I want to emphasize here is that I actually made what I now recognize as a rather thorough *childist* analysis of this situation. I eventually decided not to include this material in the dissertation. Furthermore, I have a whole chapter that targets the increasing interest in students' so-called 'social and emotional learning' and the strategy of expanding education's domesticating 'field of operation' into the students' private homes by 'activating' parents on this agenda. This was a chapter that emphasizes ways

in which students resist, which I now recognize as a childist critique. However, this chapter was also passed over in favour of other perspectives.

With regard to research design, a more developed childist lens would perhaps have been less interested in interviews with adults and more interested in methods that could allow me to have access to the perspectives of children. I wish to mention here that I actually did conduct recorded interviews with students, but I ended up deeming these useless because of what I retrospectively interpret as my failure to scrutinize issues of power, my adultist perception of ‘voice’ and what it means to speak, and my neglect of taking into consideration the interactional context of the interviews (cf. e.g., Jackson & Mazzei, 2009; Komulainen, 2007; Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Spyrou, 2011; Warming & Fahnøe, 2017). I believe that my childist lens (at the time as an emotional and embodied awareness) recognized these interviews as problematic. Such experience and recognition are part of the further development of the childist lens. However, had the childist lens been more developed at this early stage of the project, it would perhaps have enabled the imagination and development of more child-inclusive methods – as well as qualified my skills within such methods – to study democratic dannelsen as a practice.

I do not have final and conclusive answers to all the choices I made, but it is important here to emphasize that I started out from a more adultist position than where I have ended. I started out to be more oriented towards democratic dannelsen from the perspective of education (which implies an adult perspective). Were I to begin again from where I stand now, things would undoubtedly proceed differently.

An important question is, therefore, is it then reasonable to argue that this dissertation has employed a childist lens? Has it added to the research field of democratic dannelsen with more child-inclusive knowledge? Has it made an argument for the need for the childist lens to produce more child-inclusive scholarly understandings? And has it provided a convincing argument for moving towards a childist theory of democratic dannelsen?

I believe a positive response to these questions to be reasonable. The childist lens, I contend, has been a part of my thinking from the beginning. The childist lens partly originates from my reading and interpretation of Biesta’s theoretical work and, as was briefly mentioned elsewhere, my engagement with Jacques Rancière’s ‘equality of intelligences’ (Rancière, 1991). This is work that inspired me, aroused my curiosity, and made it possible for me to begin this study in the first place. What I refer to as the childist potential in Biesta’s theory, I believe, is what resonated so well with me.

However, at first it was there as an embodied and emotional awareness, and along the way it was further clarified and qualified by my engagement with, in particular, the work of the community of childist researchers (particularly Biswas, 2021, 2022; Biswas & Mattheis, 2022; Biswas & Wall, 2023; Biswas, Wall, et al., 2023; Wall, 2010, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2019, 2021, 2023). Towards the end of the project, the childist lens went from being an embodied and emotional knowledge to an intellectually articulated idea with which I can now discuss the childist potential of Biesta's theory and ways in which the theory can possibly be improved upon.

Towards a childist theory that reminds adults of children and young people's freedom

As we seek to develop an adequate childist theory of democratic dannelsen, we of course encounter the question of whether 'dannelsen' is in fact the right word to use. This dissertation had the goal of detaching dannelsen from what I have labeled its colonizing and dehumanizing tendencies, but even if it is possible to challenge and reformulate the philosophical foundation of dannelsen theories – moving from *becoming* to (a childist perception of) *acting* – there still seems to be a problem with the word itself. To 'danne', or in English to form, seems to persistently insist on the *becoming* and rather inhibit or be in direct opposition to *acting*. The word itself seems to be a colonizing word that needs someone to perform the 'doer' and someone to perform the 'not-yet' who are to be 'shaped' (cf. Straume's, 2013a), and thus the word itself perhaps allows for or invites the 'white noise' of adultism.

Biesta's use of the word 'subjectification' does not have this problem. However, as I argued above, the theory is not without adultist elements, which is part of why the concept risks continuously to be 'hijacked' into adultist (mis)interpretations. Moreover, the theory is widely adopted and translated into many other languages, and thus the concept of subjectification may already have an adultist life of its own, as I argued might be the case with the Danish translation of the term 'grown-up' into 'voksen' (adult).

Since no other word or concept has occurred to me to be 'better' or (more) appropriate, I end up sticking with the word 'dannelsen' despite its potentially entrenched and perhaps undetachable colonial logic. On the one hand, the concept has

historically been an enduring source of both philosophical and practical scrutiny, and a focus point for social transformation (Straume, 2020; Sæverot & Lomsdalen, 2023). Perhaps it is flexible and transformable enough. On the other hand, insights from the feminist and postcolonial critiques suggests that the concept will keep tilting towards favouring the adult body. So, what should we do?

I believe that the cost of abandoning *dannelse* at this particular moment in time risks being too big. Given the ‘new educational order’ (Field, 2008) and contemporary trends and logics, abandoning *dannelse* would leave the scene for the much more problematic terms of *competence* and *learning*, not to mention an educational industry which I have argued benefits from increasing and intensifying the colonial project. *Dannelse* currently serves as a concept of resistance (Kristensen, 2017a) and so far it has managed to maintain its position in Denmark as necessary based on – among other – the argument that the logics and concepts of contemporary educational policy are either not capable of addressing the new conditions, challenges, and crises of society, or they are simply part of the problem (Kristensen, 2017a). In other word, abandoning *dannelse* without replacing it with something else (and better) risks weakening the resistance.

Perhaps it is our luck then that *dannelse* currently suffers from a semantic and normative overload (Kristensen, 2017a), that is, it is our luck that *dannelse* currently *enjoys* a semantic and normative overload. To put it with Foucault, the regularity (Foucault, 1972) with which the phenomenon of *dannelse* is articulated is currently inconsistent, which means that it may be a fruitful opportunity to render the adultist power that circulates in dominant discourses of *dannelse* ‘fragile’. It might be a fruitful opportunity to produce ‘a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy’ (Foucault, 1978, p. 101). Concurrently with the dissertation’s increasing engagement with the perspective of childism, the aspiration has become to bring about an awareness of how dominant discourses of *dannelse* as well as of democracy are fundamentally based on a powerful bedrock of adultism. Such consciousness is a starting point for a joined effort to develop an opposing strategy.

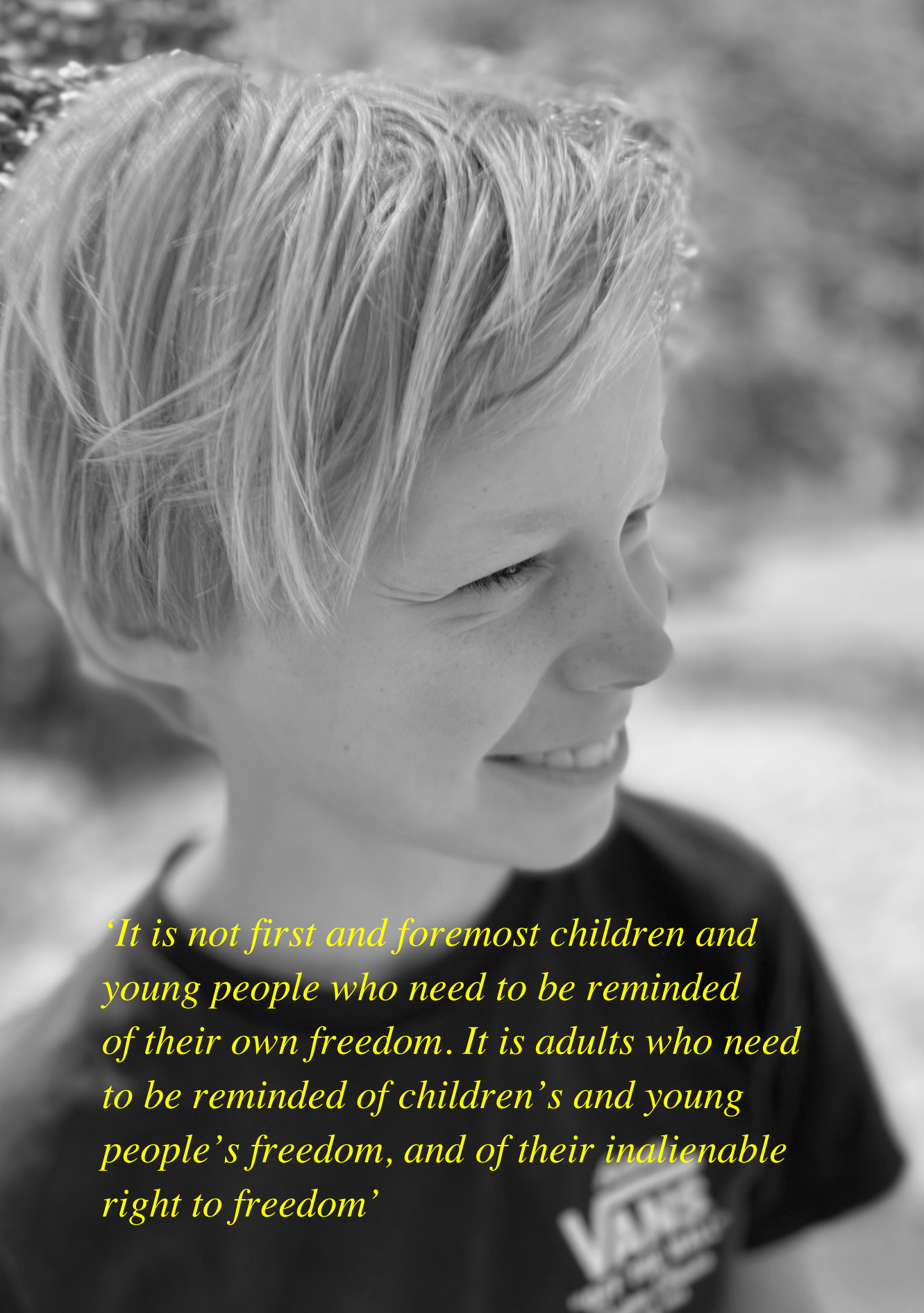
As I emphasized in chapter three, the dissertation is informed by Biesta’s thoughts on *Bildung* (Biesta, 2002) to work with the idea of democratic *dannelse* as an educational answer to a political question. The question about what role democratic *dannelse* should play is to ask ‘what kind of educational response would be

appropriate in our time' (Biesta, 2002, p. 343), and the answer to that question depends on today's 'diagnosis'. Furthermore, if education should play a part, this implies that it is not already a part of the problem (Biesta, 2002, p. 349).

This dissertation offers a 'diagnosis' from one particular perspective that should of course not be mistaken for the whole story. However, it is an important perspective to bring about an awareness of because it is a perspective that has been historically marginalized. This is the *childist* perspective. The dissertation draws attention to *how* the fundamental naturalized 'deficit' perception of the child plays a role in upholding and reproducing a colonial logic that continues providing rationales and justifications for a 'natural' hierarchy that can be applied to human beings and relegate some of them to a lesser order. The contribution of this dissertation suggests that education *is* a part of the problem, since educational practice and theory are pervaded by *adultism*. Thus, I argue that whether or not it is the term 'dannelse', 'subjectification', or something else that is the most appropriate to articulate a theory about the educational answer to the political question of our time (Biesta, 2002), such a theory must be a *childist* theory.

The 'diagnose' is that *adultism* is a 'basic political reality'. Thus, in a *childist* theory capable of providing an educational answer to the political question of our time – presuming the political ideal is to be centred around the ideas of freedom, equality, and solidarity – I argue that it is not first and foremost children and young people who need to be reminded of their own freedom. It is *adults* who need to be reminded of children's and young people's freedom, and of their inalienable *right to freedom*.





'It is not first and foremost children and young people who need to be reminded of their own freedom. It is adults who need to be reminded of children's and young people's freedom, and of their inalienable right to freedom'



SUMMARY

In contemporary times, there is a lot of concern regarding the state of democracy. The need to understand what has happened and is still happening, and further, the search for effective ways to ‘save’ liberal democracy, have become increasingly urgent and have attracted a great deal of political attention. Education and democracy have historically been closely connected. Educational discussions have always centred around questions about what kind of education can best prepare citizens to contribute to society. It is, therefore, not surprising that education is positioned as the core instrument with which governments seek to respond to the democratic crisis.

However, political efforts to strengthen democracy through education tend to focus on providing ‘more’ lessons in citizenship and on promoting what is perceived as ‘democratic competences’, whereas little attention is given to everyday life at school and children’s and young people’s *lived experiences* of democratic ways of acting and being. This dissertation brings the *democratic quality*, so to speak, of everyday life into focus. The case investigated here is the Danish state school [*Folkeskolen*] where the democratic task has traditionally been conceived of in terms of the concept of ‘democratic *dannelse*’.⁴⁶ The research questions of the dissertation are:

How can we understand the phenomenon of democratic dannelse as a practice? How do contemporary educational trends and logics in the Danish context produce conditions of possibility for democratic dannelse?

In both educational theory and practice, the democratic role of education has historically been thought of as *producing* democratic individuals and *preparing* students for democratic life. This line of thought is ultimately based on an adultist,⁴⁷ ‘deficit’-perception of the child. Closely intertwined with a colonial logic, it is thus fundamentally irreconcilable with democratic ideals pertaining to freedom, equality, and solidarity. It is simply paradoxical and counterproductive to attempt to

⁴⁶ *Dannelse* is the Danish version of the internationally more well-known concept of *Bildung*.

⁴⁷ Adultism is analogous to terms such as ‘sexism’ and ‘racism’.

democratize relations through discrimination, marginalization, and subordination. This dissertation takes as its point of departure the thesis that if we understand the child in a non-adultist way, we will understand the democratic role of education better. It therefore sets out to move *towards a childist⁴⁸ theory of democratic dannelsen*.

The dissertation is situated within a post-structuralist framework and works with a ‘thinking with theory’-approach. The theoretical framework is based on 1) a Foucauldian discursive approach, 2) educational theorist Gert Biesta’s theory of education as subjectification, and 3) the perspective of childism.

The research design is based on ethnographic approaches. The qualitative methods employed to produce ‘thick description’ of school life include multi-sited fieldwork involving variations of participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, and informal conversations at two Danish elementary schools. Furthermore, the post-structuralist theorizing understands knowledge as situated and thus as shaped by societal, socio-material and discursive conditions, and therefore empirical material is furthermore derived from a varied range of micro-interactional, meso-institutional, and macro-social level sources, such as dominant democracy discourses in the general public, education policy documents, political initiatives, investments and distribution of the public national budget, and media coverage of national elections. The dissertation applies a rhizomatic analytical strategy to make sense of the welter of constantly moving and changing data material.

The dissertation makes four main contributions. Firstly, it provides an argument for the need to critique historically entrenched adultism in research on democratic dannelsen, in part because that discourse produces as ‘truth’ the proposition that a child is a ‘not-yet-political’ subject.

Secondly, it contributes an analysis of dominant democracy discourses that illustrates ways in which coloniality functions and is reproduced. It also sheds light on ways in which the colonial project is strengthened by contemporary educational trends and logics. The analysis illuminates some nuances regarding how the conditions for democratic dannelsen (understood as *acting* as a subject) *depend* on

⁴⁸ Childism is a term analogous to terms such as ‘feminism’ and ‘decolonialism’ and it seeks to empower children by transforming norms and structures, and it works to develop child- inclusive imaginations.

one's 'naturalized' ontological identity. For example, the non-white body is presumed to be 'at risk' and in (particular) need of democratic 'training', and the younger a child is, the lesser a *knower* it is presumed to be, and thus the more invisible its perspectives and lived experiences are. The analysis also problematizes the most prevalent democracy discourse in educational practice. This discourse produces a reductionist perception of the democratic role of education, where the primary aim is to teach students to behave in ways presumed to be democratic. Such a discourse by the same token produces other actions and ways of being that are presumed undemocratic. The effect is a 'violence of kindness and correctness' that not only violates the integrity of the individual who is subjected to this violence, but that also has implications for what we usually cherish and consider of great value for democratic life, for example, democratic conversation, independent critical thinking, and fruitful and productive disagreement.

Thirdly, the dissertation produces knowledge about democratic dannels as a practice. By linking the theoretical concepts of Biesta with everyday situations in school, and adding to it a childist lens, the dissertation on the one hand explores a practical dimension of Biesta's theory and provides a sort of 'theory in use'-contribution, and on the other hand, it draws upon knowledge of educational practice to revise Biesta's theory. The emphasis here is on *relationality*.

Finally, the dissertation contributes a childist reading of Biesta's theory of education as subjectification and opens up a discussion about the ways in which adultist elements obstruct the childist potential – which is also the *democratic* potential – of that theory. These adultist elements seem to affirm rather than challenge adultist norms, and therefore the theory cannot achieve what it aims for, which – in alignment with the purpose of childism – ultimately has to do with an interest in students' freedom.

Overall, the contribution of the dissertation is an attempt to move the research field of democratic education forward by thinking more critically through the childist lens and thereby producing a more age-inclusive and imaginative approach to educational scholarship.

RESUME

De seneste årtiers stadig stigende ustabilitet i demokratier verden over har være et wake-up call for mange lande. Der er et stigende presserende ønske om at forstå, hvad der er sket og fortsat sker samt om at få svar på, hvad vi skal stille op med krisen, og hvordan vi 'redder' demokratiet. Uddannelse og demokrati har historisk været tæt relateret. Pædagogiske diskussioner har centreret omkring spørgsmålet om, hvilken uddannelse og dannelse der bedst forbereder eleverne til et hvert givent tidspunkts forestilling om 'det gode samfund'. Det er derfor heller ikke overraskende, at børn og unge er positioneret som løsningen på den demokratiske krise, og at uddannelse tænkes som det primære instrument, gennem hvilket regeringer forsøger at styrke demokratiet.

De politiske initiativer tenderer dog til at fokusere på (mere) undervisning i demokrati og på at fremme bestemte (formodede) demokratiske værdier og kompetencer gennem en række (formodede) iboende demokratiske eller demokratifremmende aktiviteter. Skolens hverdagsliv og det, man kunne kalde den *demokratiske kvalitet* af dette hverdagsliv, synes at glide ud af fokus. Denne afhandling bringer skolens hverdagsliv i fokus. Casen er den danske Folkeskole, og afhandlingens forskningsspørgsmål lyder:

Hvordan kan vi forstå demokratisk dannelse som en (hverdags)praksis? Og hvordan producerer aktuelle trends og logikker om uddannelse mulighedsbetingelser for demokratisk dannelse?

Skolens demokratisk rolle har historisk, i både teori og praksis, været tænkt som det at *producere* demokratiske individer og som det at *forberede* elever til et demokratisk liv. Denne tænkning er dybest set et udtryk for en adultistisk⁴⁹ mangel-tænkning om barnet, og den er endvidere tæt forbundet med en kolonialismens logik. Denne tænkning er derfor problematisk i og med, at den er i direkte modstrid med demokratiske idealer centeret omkring temaer såsom frihed, lighed og solidaritet. Sagt

⁴⁹ Adultism er en parallel til begreber som sexism og racisme og referer til diskrimination af børn og unge.

på en anden måde, det er et paradoks at demokratisere gennem diskrimination, marginalisering og subordination. Denne afhandling tager som udgangspunkt, at hvis vi forstår barnet på en ikke-adultistisk måde, kan vi forstå skolens demokratiske rolle bedre. Afhandlingen stræber derfor mod at komme tættere på en *childist*⁵⁰ teori om demokratisk dannelse. Afhandlingen er baseret indenfor en poststrukturalistisk ramme og arbejder med en 'thinking with theory'-forskningstilgang. Den teoretiske ramme er udgjort af 1) en Foucauldiansk diskursteoretisk tilgang, 2) uddannelsesteoretiker Gert Biestas teori om subjektifikation og 3) childism.

Forskningsdesignet er baseret på etnografi, og de kvalitative metoder der anvendes for at producere 'thick description' af skolens hverdagsliv er multi-sided feltarbejde med variationer af deltagende observation, semistrukturerede interviews og uformelle samtaler på to danske folkeskoler. Den poststrukturalistiske teoretisering forstår viden som situeret og dermed altid infiltreret med samfundsmæssige, sociomaterielle og diskursive strukturer. Derfor producerer afhandlingen også empirisk datamateriale fra en række andre vidt forskellige datakilder fra både mikro-, meso- og makroniveau. Dette er fx uddannelsespolitiske dokumenter, demokratidiskurser, den 'offentlige debat', politiske investeringer og distribution af offentlige midler, mediedækning af Folketingsvalg osv. For at understøtte og ledsage afhandlingens 'thinking with theory' forskningstilgang, anvendes der en rhizomatisk analysestrategi for at skabe mening i virvaret af konstant 'skiftende og bevægeligt' datamateriale.

Afhandlingen producerer i alt fire bidrag til forskningen i demokratisk dannelse & demokratisk uddannelse. Den tilvejebringer først og fremmest et argument for nødvendigheden af at dekonstruere historisk rodfæstet adultisme i både praksis og teori angående demokratisk dannelse, der producerer som barnet som en 'endnu-ikke-politisk' subjekt.

Dernæst bidrager afhandlingen med en analyse af dominerende demokratidiskurser. Analysen demonstrerer forskellige måder, hvorpå den koloniale logik virker og reproducere i demokratidiskurser, og hvordan det 'koloniale projekt' ydermere forstærkes gennem aktuelle trends og logikker i uddannelse. Analysen viser,

⁵⁰ Childism er en parallel til begreber som feminisme, anti-racisme og postkolonialisme. Den sigter mod at opnå ligestilling for børn og unge ved at dekonstruere og transformere undertrykkende og diskriminerende normer og strukturer.

at betingelserne for demokratisk dannelse, forstået som det at handle som subjekt, *afhænger* af ens 'naturaliserede' ontologiske identitet. For eksempel er den ikke-hvide krop betragtet som en 'naturlig' 'risiko' for demokratiet og dermed som en, der har *særligt* behov for demokratisk dannelse (forstået som 'træning'). Et andet eksempel er, at jo yngre et barn er desto mindre antages det som en *knower* (som en der *ved*), hvilket betyder at desto mere er dets perspektiver og meninger om verden usynliggjort og marginaliseret. Analysen problematiserer desuden den allermest udbredte demokratidiskurs i skolen for at producere en reduktionistisk opfattelse af demokratisk dannelse. Her risikerer demokratisk dannelse at blive til det at lære børn og unge at opføre sig på bestemte (formodede demokratiske) måder. Dette producerer samtidig en opfattelse af en række andre måder at opføre sig på som udemokratiske. Effekten bliver en form for 'venlighedens og korrekthedens vold', som har store konsekvenser – ikke bare for dem, der udsættes for denne vold, men også for de fænomener, vi typisk i en dansk kontekst hylder som særligt vigtige for demokratiet; fx den demokratiske samtale, selvstændig kritisk tænkning og det givende og frugtbare i uenighed.

Afhandlingens tredje bidrag er viden om demokratisk dannelse som en (hverdags)praksis. Ved at forbinde de teoretiske begreber fra Biesta med hverdagssituationer i skolen og tilføje et childist perspektiv, udforsker afhandlingen på den ene side en praktisk dimension af Biestas teori og leverer en form for "teori-i-praksis"-bidrag, og på den anden side trækker afhandlingen på praksisviden for at revidere eller udvide Biestas teori. Vægten ligger her på relationer, hvilket antyder, at demokratisk dannelse måske bedre forstås som bevægelsen af relationer mellem ting. Endelig bidrager afhandlingen med en childist læsning af Biestas teori om uddannelse som subjectifikation og åbner en diskussion om de måder, hvorpå adultistiske elementer i Biestas teori forhindrer det childist potentiale – som også er det *demokratiske* potentiale – i teorien. Disse adultistiske elementer synes at bekræfte snarere end udfordre adultistiske normer, og derfor kan teorien ikke opnå, hvad den sigter efter, hvilket – ligesom formålet med childism – i sidste ende har at gøre med en interesse i elevernes frihed.

Samlet set er afhandlingens bidrag et forsøg på at bringe forskningsfeltet for demokratisk uddannelse videre ved at fungere mere kritisk gennem et childist perspektiv og dermed producere mere 'age-inclusive' videnskabelig forskning.

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APPENDIX A: TOTAL DATA SET

As elaborated in chapter four, it is difficult to account adequately for the total data set given that data is also produced from what is absent, or is retrieved from my own project application, memories of conversation I have had or from emotional and embodied knowledge, which did not ‘glow’ as data until long after they occurred, so to speak. That said, the list below is meant to give the reader insight into an estimated account of the ‘total’ data set.

Observations during fieldwork at VES

- 6 Agent team meeting and learning walks
- 4 team meeting
- 1 staff meeting
- 2 teaching courses (John Biggs’ Solo taxonomy)
- 1 municipal workshop (6 hours)
- 1 field trip (5 hours)
- Approx. 77 lessons
- 19 playtime breaks in the schoolyard.
- 12 breaks at the staffroom
- 2 afternoons in the after-school activity club
- Approx. 300 informal conversations (an estimation of approx. 20 per day)

Observations during fieldwork at GES

- 3 team meetings
- 1 volleyball tournament (approx. 4 hours)
- 88 lessons
- 1 afternoon in the after-school activity club
- 13 breaks with students in the ‘hanging out’-area
- 4 breaks with the teachers in Team 6 in the ‘hanging out’-area
- 6 breaks with the teachers in Team 6
- 4 breaks at the staff room
- Approx. 300 informal conversations (an estimation of approx. 20 per day)

Interviews (se also illustration at page 140 in the dissertation)

- 4 group interviews with teachers and school managements
- 1 single interview with a principal
- 7 group interviews with students (the data produced from these interviews is – as also described in chapter seven – among other things the fact that I sensed that they were problematic).

Policy texts

- *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture*, Volume 1, 2 and 3 (CoE, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c).
- *Declaration on promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education*. (European Commission, 2015)
- *Promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education : overview of education policy developments in Europe following the Paris Declaration of 17 March 2015* (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2016)
- *Informal meeting of European Union Education Ministers, Paris, Tuesday 17 March 2015. Declaration on Promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education* (European Union Education Ministers, 2015)
- *Four-dimensional education* (Fadel et al., 2018)
- *About the project Competences for Democratic Culture and intercultural Dialogue* (CoE, 2013)
- *Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education*. (CoE, 2010)
- *PALS: Positiv Adfærd i Læring og Samspil* (Danish National Board of Health and Welfare, 2020).
- *Aftale om udmøntning af satspuljen for 2017 på integrationsområdet* (The Danish Government, 2017)
- *Aftale mellem regeringen (Socialdemokraterne, Radikal Venstre og Socialistisk Folkeparti), Venstre og Dansk Folkeparti om et fagligt løft af folkeskolen* (Agreement, 2013)
- *Kompetencer til aktivt medborgerskab. Analyse af de nordiske landes skolelovgivninger og læreplaner for samfundsfag* (Department of Teaching and Quality, 2021)
- *Læringsmålstyret undervisning i folkeskolen : vejledning* (Ministry of Children and Education, 2014)
- *Film skal være med til at skabe debat om danske værdier i undervisningen* (Ministry of Children and Education, 2018a)
- *Kommissorium for rådgivningsgruppe om demokratisk dannelse på ungdomsuddannelserne* (Ministry of Children and Education, 2018b)
- *Om demokrati under udvikling* (Ministry of Children and Education, n.d.-c)

- *Demokrati under udvikling* (Ministry of Children and Education, n.d.-b)
- *Demokrati og medborgerskab* (Ministry of Children and Education, n.d.-a)
- *Projektets formål og målgrupper* (Ministry of Children and Education, n.d.-d)
- *Denmark Canon - what makes us who we are* (Ministry of Culture, n.d.)
- *Kompetencer til aktivt medborgerskab* (Danish Ministry of Children and Education, 2021)
- *School-wide Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support (SWPBIS)*
<https://crimesolutions.ojp.gov/ratedprograms/385>
- Approx. 20 sites from the website of Hedensted Kommune. Project: *Klar til læring*. <http://klartillaering.dk/de-7-kompetencer>
- Approx. 30 sites from the website of the Danish Democracy campaign (e.g., Ministry of Children and Education, n.d.-a, n.d.-b; Ministry of Children and Education, n.d.-c, n.d.-d)
- 21st century skills and competences for new millennium learners in countries. education working papers, no. 41 OECD, 2019)
- *Opdragelsesdebatten*
<https://www.information.dk/debat/2018/02/opdragelsesdebatten-brud-klassiske-borgerlige-idealer-familiers-selvbestemmelse>
- *Københavns Kommunes indsatser til forebyggelse af radikaliserings* (Copenhagen municipality, 2016)
- *Forebyggelse af ekstremisme* (Copenhagen municipality, n.d.)
- *Se vores undervisningstilbud* (Mellemfolkeligt samvirke, n.d.)
- Approx. 50 sites from the website of the Danish Ministry of children and Education <https://www.uvm.dk> (data is *also* produced by what is absent from the website). Approx. 50 sites from various website of municipal school administrations 5 phone call to the Danish Ministry of Children and Education
- Approx. 30 utterances and perspectives stated from various Danish politicians Correspondence (published in the Media) between the Danish Ministry of Children and Education and the board on Ørestad High school after the then Minister of Education visited the high school and were booed at e.g., <https://www.information.dk/indland/2019/04/buhraab-gymnasieelever-skyndsom-minister>

Public discourse ('the world')

- Approx. 50 utterances/perspectives/titles/incidents etc. in various Media (television programmes, newspaper articles, radio programmes).
- Approx. 50 informal conversations with friends, neighbours, acquaintances etc.
- Approx. 30 'situations', utterances, informal conversations from PhD courses, seminars, presentations etc.

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This dissertation uses the case of the Danish state school to study the democratic aspect of education – in Danish referred to as ‘demokratisk dannelse’. Drawing on a poststructuralist framework and the concept of childism, the dissertation draws attention to how a historically ingrained deficit-perception of the child underlies democratic dannelse in both theory and practice. This is fundamentally a marginalizing and colonizing starting point in that it involves the claim that the child cannot speak as a political subject before it has learned to speak in the ‘right’ (presumed democratic) way.

The dissertation draws together two different types of analysis (one focused on discourse, the other on practices in schools) through multiple conceptual lenses and discusses how the lens of childism can potentially widen the epistemological space through which the democratic aspect of education can be understood. Rather than focusing on ‘preparing’ children and young people for (future) democratic life, childism allows for concepts like ‘voice’, ‘participation’, ‘rights’, ‘politics’ and ‘democracy’ etc. to be reimagined in more age-inclusive ways.

From a childist perspective, the democratic task of education becomes that of supporting and responding to the student as the political subject it already is. This, the dissertation argues, has a radical and far more democratic potential.



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