



Addressing Democracy and Its Threats in Education: Exploring a Pluralist Perspective in Light of Finnish Social Studies Textbooks

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Abstract

Democracy is increasingly being challenged, by disengagement and by anti-pluralist movements (Levitsky and Ziblatt in *How Democracies Die: What History Reveals About Our Future*, Viking, New York, 2018; Wikforss in *Därför demokrati. Om kunskapen och folkstyret* [Because of this, democracy. On knowledge and people's rule] Fri Tanke, 2021; Svolik et al. in *J Democr* 34(1):5–20, 2023). This article draws upon a theoretical discussion about democracy, pluralism, and threats to democracy. Departing from Dewey, Laclau, Mouffe, Young and Allen, we address democracy as an ideology that centers around pluralism, or an ever-increasing inclusion of voices from the margins as its goal. We argue that perceiving democracy pedagogically as a pluralistic ideology would support students' democratic citizenship and equip them for a world where threats to democracy are being reported. Employing a case study on Finnish social studies textbooks, we analyze how democracy as well as threats to democracy are discursively portrayed. Our study shows that the textbooks present democracy as predominantly institutional and static. We also find that while disengagement is portrayed as a problem for democracy, anti-pluralist movements are generally not referred to as a threat. Additionally, we examine a discourse in the textbooks that connects freedom of speech with democracy in a way that favors a multitude of opinions, even antidemocratic ones, over creating space for marginalized voices. Drawing on the theoretical discussion and the results of the analysis, we argue that a focus on pluralism as the core of democracy makes the opposition between restricting hate speech and advocating for democracy redundant.

Keywords Democracy · Anti-democratic threats · Education · Pluralism · Social studies · Textbooks

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Introduction

Anti-democratic threats impose a challenge on education. Dewey's pioneering study *Democracy and education* (1916/2001) started an ongoing debate on how to make education more child-centered and ensure that it includes critical and intercultural pedagogies (Sant 2019; Östlund 2014). Considering the importance of the family and the school for the formation and growth of "attitudes and dispositions, emotional, intellectual and moral," Dewey (1937/2010, 88) mentions the possibility of a "non-democratic way" of this educative process. He further develops this notion with references to political apathy (1927/2016; Jackson 2014). A century later, democracy is reportedly under serious threat, as described by the V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) Institute, which conducted an empirically-based global study (Papada et al. 2023, 6) confirming that "advances in global levels of democracy made over the last 35 years have been wiped out." While democracy cannot be taken for granted in any society or at any time, Diamond (2022) suggests that from the standpoint of democracy, we are currently living in the darkest moment in half a century. Democracy is increasingly being challenged by voices advocating expert rule in times of emergency, ranging from pandemics to climate crisis (Wikforss 2021). Importantly, apathetic attitudes among people towards democratic institutions are on the rise even in traditionally stable countries (Papada et al. 2023; Wikforss 2021; Müller 2021). The threatened nature of democracy poses further challenges for education for democracy. Many analyses about the threats to democracy stem from a critique of neoliberalism or capitalism. Paradoxically, even liberal capitalism can be a threat to democracy, since it means that though people have the right to vote, voting has increasingly less significance (Eskelinen 2020). Meanwhile, a neoliberalist view on education stands in stark contrast to the *Bildung* ideal that is vital for democracy (Brown 2015).

To counter anti-democratic threats, it is important for education to be aware of what these are. Empirical studies show that when democracy is threatened, it is by democratically elected rulers who choose to erode democratic norms once in power (Lührmann et al. 2021). According to Lührmann et al. (2021), the first step towards autocratization (movement away from democracy) tends to be increasing discontent with democratic institutions and parties. Anti-pluralist movements, which lack a commitment to democratic norms, exploit this discontent and rise to power, in the second step of autocratization. The third step away from democracy is a weakening of accountability mechanisms and opposition actors. The V-dem study explicitly identifies anti-pluralist movements as the main threat to democracy. Based on empiric research done in seven European countries, Svobik et al. (2023, 7) argue that threats to democracy stem from two "reservoirs of tolerance for authoritarianism": disengagement and the illiberal right, both of which include citizens who support parties on the extreme, populist, radical, or nationalist right. According to the study, such disengaged citizens have become, in several countries, dormant supporters of the illiberal right. These groups of citizens proved more likely than others to accept candidates who disregarded democratic principles. The conclusion of the study is that in Europe, democracy erodes from the right. One specific finding of the study is that it is particularly in stable democracies, such as contemporary Germany and Sweden, that the disengaged accepted authoritarianism to a larger degree. The study suggests two conditions that must occur for democracy to erode: politicians who are willing to act undemocratically and enough voters to tolerate their actions.

In a world where many movements call themselves democratic, there is a need to distinguish movements for democracy from those who threaten it. Levisky and Ziblatt (2018)

have identified anti-democratic indicators that are prevalent in many societies today. These include key political players who downplay the constitution, disregard the legitimacy of political opponents, tolerate or encourage violence, and suggest restricting the rights of the media or political opponents. Ironically, these anti-democratic measures are often portrayed as necessary to defend democracy itself. In Müller's (2021) opinion, populism presents the most evident threat to democracy. Populist methods of delegitimizing political opponents aim to question who the "real people" are in a society. Populist criticism of identity politics, is, according to Müller, an example of how calls for basic rights and concrete redistribution are downplayed. Yet, when populists refer to themselves as the silent majority, which has had to take a step back and watch groups of minorities, such as immigrants and gender minorities, claim space, they do not recognize differences in experiences and wills even amongst themselves (Näsström 2021). Not all populists are rightwing supporters. However, Bernhard and Edgell (2022) find that "rightwing anti-system movements" tend to constitute the greatest threat to democracy. Anti-system movements can also be leftwing movements, though, but they are not proven to pose a threat to democracy. Below, we argue for the need to address inclusion and pluralism as key concepts for democracy. According to this perspective, anti-pluralism becomes a designator of movements posing a threat.

In this article, the focus is on democratic education in a time when democracy is under threat. Democracy is a prime example of a floating signifier (Laclau & Mouffe 1985/2001; Mannion, Biesta, Priestley, and Ross 2011). As Moraes (2014) shows, the meanings of floating signifiers fluctuate depending on the meaning that different groups link to it. School classrooms are examples of places where this struggle over the meaning of democracy takes place (Sousa and Oxley 2022; Mårdh and Tryggvason 2017). This article draws on a theoretical discussion about democracy, pluralism, and notions of threats. As a case study, we analyze discourses on democracy and its threats in Finnish social studies textbooks. We pose the following questions: How does a theoretical framing of pluralism as an ideal for democracy respond to anti-democratic threats in education for democracy? and: What are the prevalent discourses on democracy and threats to democracy, as presented in Finnish social studies textbooks?

Pluralism and Democracy in Education

In theoretical discussion on democracy and democratic education, pluralistic ideas can be discerned in different forms. In this section, we trace the ideological and pluralist view of democracy, linking the ideas of Dewey, Laclau, and Mouffe with those of Young (1990/2022) and Allen (2023). We then view the threats towards democracy from a pluralistic viewpoint, highlighting the tension between the notion of pluralism and the current threats—a tension that education must address. If pluralism is taken as the point of departure in democratic education, the threats that democracy faces can be seen more clearly and also addressed pedagogically.

Since Dewey's *Democracy and Education*, different versions of democratic education have been studied from various perspectives (see Sant 2019). The discussion can take a somewhat different turn depending on whether the focus is on education for democracy, education about democracy, democratic education, or learning about, for, or through democracy. For civic education to consider threats to democracy as a topic, the very definition of democracy is of great relevance. How we understand threats to democracy depends

very much on how we understand democracy. A key idea is the need to consider democracy as more than a form of government: as a political ideology with the inclusion of more and more people with their different experiences and perspectives into the core of decision-making (see Arnstad 2018). As Young (2000) points out, we cannot call decision-making democratic unless those affected by decisions have been included in the process. Arnstad's (2018) idea that democracy has pluralism or an ever-increasing inclusion of voices from the margins as its goal is pedagogically visible through its opposite. While the traditional concept standing in opposition to democracy is that of dictatorship, Arnstad contrasts democracy with fascism, since fascist ideology is necessarily anti-pluralist, aiming continuously to narrow the influence of different voices in decision-making processes. Arnstad's point becomes relevant as we move forward towards the educational implications of placing pluralism at the core of democracy.

Dewey (1916/2001) emphasized learning about democracy as a lived experience (Collins et al. 2019). In Dewey's approach, schools should be considered a social environment where students are able to learn and practice democratic skills. An understanding of pluralism as relevant for democracy is central to Dewey's thinking: he describes democracy as being "more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (Dewey 1916/2001, 91). In this form of living, Dewey advocates for the "extension in space of the number of individuals who participate so that each 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" (1916/2001, 91). He also considered it important that intellectual opportunities be made "accessible to all on equable and easy terms" (Dewey 1916/2001, 92) to avoid the risk that only a few persons would dominate the discussion. This striving to include an increasing number of people and their experiences within the decision-making sphere is a central theme in his work, even if Dewey does not necessarily mention the concept of pluralism as such and even if his perspective on who to include precedes any attempts at decolonization. His use of the "discovery of America" (1916/2001, 19) as an example of what a shared educational activity and his use of the dichotomy between "the civilized man" and "savages" (1916/2001, 12) are examples of this.

Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2001) have been known to call for a radical plural democracy. This is visible for instance in their vision of a democracy where the democratic includes "more and more fields of the social" (Torfing 1999, 256). Can democracy ever be fully realized? Here, Dewey and Laclau and Mouffe are on the same page: in Dewey's understanding, democracy has never—and perhaps never will be—fully realized (Burman 2014, 25). Laclau's and Mouffe's attempt at outlining a radical plural democracy implies a project that will always be incomplete and conflictual (Torfing 1999, 258). However, the concept of contingency plays an important part in the discourse theory introduced by Laclau and Mouffe, and some scholars have even viewed contingency as the element that separates discourse theory (DT) from other ways of describing discourses (Egan Sjölander and Payne 2011). The notion of contingency is relevant for democratic education because it creates openings for alternative understandings and descriptions, for political imaginaries. Things did not have to be this way; they could have been otherwise. Contingency implies a focus on reason for the existence of tangible things, such as how democracy works. What created this particular political reality? What has changed power relations in the past? As Egan Sjölander (2011) points out, an awareness of contingency makes resistance to inequalities meaningful.

Referring partly to Laclau and Mouffe as pioneers of the movement for radical plural democracy, Young (2000, 1990/2022) builds a persuasive argument for grounding democratic theory in the inclusion of pluralist perspectives. She shows how the

Enlightenment ideal of impartial moral reason and a quest for the universality of a general will have obscured heterogeneity, leaving difference, particularity, and the body behind (Schaffar 2023). This has led to the exclusion of certain persons, and the specific aspects of life that such persons could contribute, from “public life” (Young 1990/2022, 119–120). What the democratization of politics thus needs is a reconceptualization of the meaning of the public, the private, and their relationship. This political project demands a recognition of how oppression is connected to various experiences. Emancipatory movements need to discard the idea of a “universal general will” and be based on a different ideal of liberation. Democracy needs to “draw on social group differentiation, especially the experience derived from structural differentiation, as a resource” (Young 2000, 83). Young considers radical democratic pluralism, such as that suggested by Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2001), as an approach that acknowledges and affirms the significance of social group differences as a means of ensuring people’s participation and inclusion within political institutions. She points out that this puts a challenge on political communication, since marginalized groups who have tried to take part in political discussion have been ignored or insulted (Young 2000, 57).

Viewing democratic challenges from current perspectives in *Justice by means of democracy* (2023), Danielle Allen shows how democracy requires participating in epistemic processes, where members of groups facing discrimination are positively welcomed into decision-making. This means recognizing and enabling the capacities of all to take part: “The work is to call in, not call out” (Allen 2023, 214). Allen points to three concrete challenges in this process: an existential challenge, an epistemic or intellectual challenge, and a relational challenge. The existential challenge is for democratic citizens to realize their role and function. The epistemic challenge is about strengthening collective decision-making by drawing on the knowledge of all citizens. As Allen points out, the knowledge among citizens originates in formal expertise as well as contributions from the perspective of routine social participation. The relational challenge entails the ability to empower all citizens as co-creators or recognizing and enabling their equal capacities to take part in decision-making.

From Dewey (1916) to Allen (2023), we have pointed out that the pluralistic inclusion of different voices is a central aspect of democracy. As we will argue, this focus is productive to confront the current question of freedom of speech as central to democracy *and* hate speech as one of its central threats. We see a tension between pluralism as an ideal and the threats that this view of democracy is facing in many societies today.

How, then, can pluralism be productive in education for democracy? The distinction between deliberative and agonistic approaches is often referred to in the discussion around democratic education. In practice, the deliberative ideal promotes communication in the classroom, with the aim of finding out a collective will, while the agonistic ideal emphasizes political conflict, aiming not to seek consensus but to make different political identities and emotions visible in class (Tryggvason 2018). As Mårdh and Tryggvason (2017) point out, Dewey’s presentation of deliberation leaves no room for antagonism. For Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2001), however, antagonism is an important theme. While Laclau and Mouffe did not address educational issues per se (Snir 2017), their proposition to focus on antagonism has been widely used by other scholars with respect to education (see Ruitenberg 2009).

Both deliberative and agonistic approaches to democratic education have been criticized. The deliberative approach has been frequently criticized for privileging dominant voices and excluding those less eloquent (Sant 2019). According to Englund (2014), a focus on agonism in classrooms is not suitable, since it leads to highlighting students’ conflicting

identities, often based on ethnicity, rather than focusing on political issues. Agonism, in his view, thereby hinders mutual respect. If we were to consider democracy as the ideological pursuit of an ever-expanding inclusion of voices and experiences into the discussion and decision-making, and what is needed to make all of this possible, then this might be one way for education to tackle the anti-democratic threats of both disengagement and anti-pluralist movements.

Pluralism is central to both deliberative and agonistic forms of democracy and democratic education. In our view, framing democracy as pluralistic ideology can theoretically be seen as compatible with both camps: agonistic, since the aspiration to enhance the voices of people with different backgrounds, with different stories necessarily provides new, various and conflicting perspectives, and deliberative, since this ideology assumes that including these experiences and listening to these perspectives will lead to better democratic decisions. However, it is also possible to consider our proposition as temporally prior to the agonistic/deliberative division: before focusing on how to handle a multitude of experiences, we need to find a way to include these in the first place. Most people from marginalized backgrounds have experienced being ignored and silenced before, and the prevalence of anti-democratic threats in society and even in the classroom signifies an extra challenge for education. Before entering the deliberative/agonistic discussion, there is a need to tackle the antidemocratic forces that silence these voices, and to find ways to help amplify them.

Educational Responses to Anti-democratic Threats

How can, and should democracy then respond to threats towards it? Dewey's educational theory shows why democratic education requires not just deliberative discussion, where different alternatives are created as equal, but working against undemocratic practices. As Jackson (2014, 245) points out, "improving students' capacity to debate with others does not sufficiently account for the effect of certain taken-for-granted school practices in producing undemocratic attitudes among the students." Taking students' disengagement with democracy more seriously may well involve recognizing some of the relevant criticisms about how democracy has been portrayed. Writing from a U.S. context, Ayers (2020, 2) criticizes common understandings of democracy, pointing out that fascism and white nationalism are on the rise: "we can't simply pass over the truth that most democracies, from Athens to the founding of the U.S., have been reserved for privileged populations who sat on the backs of oppressed, often enslaved, workforces."

As Näsström (2021) shows, there is consensus on the fact that democracy should be defended, but not on how it should be done. This question spills over into different spheres of society—which parties can and should be tolerated? Should the media give the floor to anti-democratic movements in an attempt to debunk their arguments, or not? How should educators respond to anti-democratic threats? While advocating for pluralism, proponents of democratic education rarely make reference to how anti-pluralist movements should be handled within education (Mikander, Aashamar and Högström forthcoming). For education as an endeavor to teach young people about democracy, the conclusions presented in a study by Svolik et al. are important. Simply put, the appearance of anti-democratic politicians is not a threat to democracy so long as citizens are unwilling to tolerate them. Citizenship education can make visible just what threats to democracy look like, and help students recognize them. How well does education address this challenge? As Näsström

(2021) points out, it is simply expected, for instance in school textbooks, that everybody appreciates democracy. Based on this assumption, she argues, textbooks might explain how democratic institutions work, but not engage students in discussions about why they are needed.

Finnish Social Studies Textbooks as a Case

By introducing an analysis of Finnish social studies textbooks, we aim to present concrete examples of democratic education and explore how democracy and its threats look like on the level of actual pedagogical texts. Our observations function as a basis for more general reflections on how democracy can and could be presented and how a pluralistic perspective can contribute to education.

In Finland, social studies is taught as a subject mainly in grades 4–6 and grade 9. Democracy is at the center of two of four content areas within the social studies curriculum (FNBE 2016). As noted by Männistö (2020), democratic education in Finland is strongly tied to a traditional, representational understanding of democracy, even though Finnish policy documents have emphasized the need for all individuals to realize their active democratic agency, or what could be understood as deliberative, or even critical, democratic education. Our research has shown that Finnish social studies textbooks offer students limited democratic agency (Mikander and Satokangas 2023).

The study data consist of ten social studies textbooks in total, six books for grades four to six (10–12 year olds)—*Me Nyt I* [We now], *Me Nyt II*, *Vaikuttaja I* [The Influencer], *Vaikuttaja II* (*Forum I*, *Forum II*)—and four books for grade nine (15 year olds)—*Memo*, *Yhteiskuntaopin Taitaja* [The Social Studies Knower], *Forum 9*, and *I tiden 9* [In this time]—all printed in the years 2016–2021. All textbooks are written in Finnish, except for *I tiden 9*, which is written in Swedish for the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland (5%). We studied how democracy, as well as threats to democracy, are portrayed in the basic education social studies textbooks. We did so by approaching the concept of democracy as a floating signifier, employed in textbook discourse to fix meanings that reflect its hegemonic pedagogical usage.

As shown by Torfing (1999), Laclau and Mouffe's version of discourse theory (DT) implies that every discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, partially fixing the meaning of the floating signifier. This is done through practices of articulation (Laclau and Mouffe 1985/2001). Articulation is a central theoretical concept within discourse theory, referring to the construction of meaning. It has also been utilized in critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Isaksson 2011) and can be flexibly combined with other discourse-analytical concepts. We analyzed Finnish school textbook texts as articulations of discourse and attempted to describe the discourses in a way that reveals how the concept of democracy as a floating signifier is given meanings through these articulations: in introducing, defining, contextualizing and explaining it, as well as linking it with notions such as threats and freedom of speech. Which connections and relations are articulated as relevant, and which are made invisible? Our use of the concept of discourse refers to a configuration of meaning that constitutes democracy and threats to democracy in certain ways.

In an empirical analysis of discourse, Laclau and Mouffe's understanding of DT needs to be complemented with a more hands-on toolkit for unraveling the articulations of discourse as a way to overcome the so-called post-structuralist methodological deficit (Glynos and Howarth 2007). Zienkowski (2012) provides an example of how to approach textual

data linguistically as articulation: by concentrating on a relevant linguistic phenomenon, in his case metapragmatic markers, with the help of an adequate linguistic methodological framework. Similarly, in our discourse-theoretical analysis of how democracy is articulated in textbooks, we examine how a) the concept of democracy and b) threats to democracy are constructed in textbook texts by focusing on definitions of democracy as well as representation of threats to democracy as a means of engaging the reader. This research design of approaching a value-laden concept in textbook discourse is informed partly by Pavlick (2019), who examines the concept of freedom in textbooks with a similar CDA-based heuristic toolkit. Egan Sjölander (2011, 36) particularly refers to democracy as one of the themes that connects the approaches of DT and CDA. In the following analysis, we have chosen excerpts that either demonstrate the dominant ways of representing democracy and its threats or are noteworthy deviations from it, in which case the exceptionality of the passage is discussed.

Following the discourse-theoretical ethos, we view meaning as not fixed but constructed, articulated, and negotiated anew in different contexts. In the case of a floating signifier such as the concept of democracy, the examination of meanings given to it in the authoritative and influential forum of social studies textbooks reveals hegemonic ways of pedagogically orienting students to political thought and action.

Democracy and Its Threats in Finnish School Textbooks

In the textbooks, democracy is presented as a fixed system that the student is convinced to accept as it is, and the role of antidemocratic and anti-pluralist movements as threats to democracy is largely left invisible. In the following section, we discuss the discursive portrayals of democracy and threats to democracy in our case study data.

Framing Democracy

Many of the school textbooks for ninth-grade students describe democracy mainly as the opposite of dictatorship. In the distinction between democracy and dictatorship, elections play a major role. The ninth-grade textbook *Memo* (170) describes democracy as the “generally accepted ideal model of decision-making,” where citizens choose their political leaders through elections. The book continues by saying:

Although democracy may seem almost self-evident in Finland, not all countries in the world are democracies. [...] In some countries, power is exercised by an absolute ruler, that is, a dictator, who alone decides on state matters. (Memo, 170)

However, the textbook *I tiden 9* explicitly discusses the link between human rights and democracy. It highlights how representative democracy often leads to decisions that are more “deliberated and analyzed than if the people had voted yes or no in referenda” (20). It continues by pointing out that it is easier for minorities to have their voices heard in representative democracies, and that decision-making in democracies more often includes compromises that take different opinions into account.

Democracy as a form of rule is, in the ninth-grade textbooks, also described as *imperfect*. As an example, the back cover of *I tiden 9* includes no text other than Winston Churchill’s famous quote about democracy being the worst form of government except for all others. *Forum 9* (174) includes the following assignment: “Prepare a speech in which

you defend democracy but also highlight its disagreeable aspects. Come up with a title for the speech.” The task urges students to reproduce a discourse of democracy as imperfect. Despite the effort to problematize the concept in the textbook, the discourse on democracy as imperfect nonetheless orients the students toward an understanding of democracy as a mere on/off choice, where a state either is a democracy or not (in which case, the given alternative is dictatorship). Students are expected to accept that democracy is the best form of government, even with its flaws, a stance that tends to portray democracy as settled, static, and unable to respond to its more “disagreeable aspects.” On this point, the textbook *I tiden 9* again offers a different take, though. It is the only ninth-grade textbook that offers alternative interpretations and a collective reimagining of democracy; however, this important point is not discussed in the actual texts but embedded in the assignments. One assignment stands out as offering students an opportunity for utopian thinking:

5. An alternative! Use your collective imagination and think of other ways to elect members of parliament or the president. Can you imagine that instead of voting for your favorite candidate, you would vote against all those you do not want to see elected? Or, could you imagine that all people have three votes, which can be distributed among different candidates? Or ten votes? Could different methods of voting for or against someone be combined? Play with the idea of how best to reveal the will of the people in elections and argue in favor of your method! (*I tiden 9*, 144).

“Playing with the idea” that there are other ways of finding out what people want is a welcome addition to social studies textbooks. The topic of potential change here is the act of voting. The attempt at rethinking democracy could have been even more ambitious, including playing with other ideas on how to make space for pluralism in decision-making processes. The example does, however, provide a glimpse of how playing with ideas can be employed as a form of pedagogical action that enables the use of political imagination and utopian thinking. If taken more systematically and rigorously, such a stance would make it possible to utilize the view of democracy as a pluralist goal to strive for also in education. Moreover, democratization and de-democratization could be approached as continuing processes, the different dimensions of which can be observed and assessed (Tilly 2007). These approaches could also have the potential to argue in favor of and discuss democratic ideas more engagingly.

Educating for democracy necessarily entails a futurist element. Teachers need to consider what kind of future they are preparing their students for. Often, however, considering the future with regard to education means trying to prepare students for a future that is given. Reimagining alternatives in education would help shift the perspective in this regard. Instead of asking what skills students will need for the labor market of the 2050s, teachers could view the classroom as an arena for change and ask what skills we want future citizens to have in the 2050s (see Bregman 2018). As Eskelinen (2020) suggests, the discussion about democracy would benefit from utopian thinking. This could mean empowering students in the struggle to seek alternative futures (Rajala et al 2023). What would society look like if all people’s voices were given equal influence and attention? What would need to change? Allen’s (2023) three concrete challenges provide guidelines for a re-thinking of democratic decision-making. We know that changes to the economy, means of communication, and impending climate disaster might need a democratic response that is not dependent on older structures. It is becoming more evident that being able to imagine a different reality is a skill that needs to be taught. It is likely that practicing collective, utopian skills will meet with resistance, since it goes against consumer capitalist practices that currently have a dominant, even hegemonic position in society. When democracy is presented

as a ready-made system, focusing on procedures and institutions, attempts at utopian thinking are made invisible.

Disengagement and Populism: Visible and Invisible Threats to Democracy

Democratic disengagement is an important topic for education, most notably education for active citizenship and social studies education. However, it is not clear how teachers should best approach this issue. It could be argued that in a time where democracy as a value is not self-evidently appreciated by young people (Wikforss 2021), social studies teachers need to teach about the epistemological basis of democracy and provide space for discussions about it, not just state what democracy is and how it works. Importantly, *silence* is not necessarily the same as disengagement. As Gray (2021) suggests, while much democratic theory is concerned with giving all citizens a voice, there is a tendency to perceive silence as democratic failure. While democracies require systems of communication, Gray argues, affective communicative silence can be used as a tactic for democratic deliberation, as in using silence as a way to make others answerable for their speech. Citizen silence could be interpreted as a resistance to a continued expectation for voice, as space for better understanding democracy itself.

We have previously (Satokangas and Mikander 2023) shown how ninth-grade social studies textbooks take a normative position against passivity among young people. Passivity is framed as a threat to democracy, as in the following textbook text on the reasons for low voter turnout:

One of the reasons for the decline in voter turnout is that many people think that voting cannot influence politics. In their eyes, all parties are the same. [...] Another reason is that, before the elections, politicians talk about how they would develop Finland, but after the elections they are not always able to act as they promised. Therefore, some voters feel that the politicians have betrayed their voters, and the next time they no longer want to vote. This kind of thinking shows that some people have a bad understanding of Finland's political system. [...] A third reason for not voting may be that people do not have the time or interest to follow politics. Many problems in society are difficult and complex, and there are no easy solutions. If you don't know enough about things, it can be difficult to form your own opinion about how things should be taken care of. (*Memo*, 187)

The style of address in the text is noteworthy, since it portrays the problem of low voter turnout as a failure not of the democratic system or structures, but of “some people’s” insufficient knowledge. As we have shown, the introductory chapters in Finnish ninth-grade social studies textbooks are more welcoming to the readers, providing opportunities for the young students to see themselves as actors for social change, while the rest of the chapters narrow down the space for societal agency to only such actions as voting and purchase choices (Satokangas and Mikander 2023). The above quote does not empower the reader. Instead, the third reason for low voter attendance can even be read as a call for expert rule, not democracy. Connecting the right to take part in constructing society with demands for knowing “enough about things” could serve as an example of the critique posed by those concerned that deliberative democracy disregards oppressed voices: it is not your experience that matters, it is whether you know how to frame it rationally.

In their description of threats to democracy, textbooks generally emphasize passivity and downplay anti-pluralist movements. *Yhteiskuntaopin Taitaja* (153) suggests that “the

passivity of citizens can threaten the foundations of democracy, because passive people do not give their support to the democratic system.” The textbook explicitly connects passive people with threats to democracy. As has been shown previously (Svolik 2023; Gray 2021), the question of passivity as a threat to democracy is relevant, but also complicated. The connection between anti-pluralist movements and democratic threats is, however, less visible in the textbooks. *I tiden 9* includes a list of the characteristics of populist parties, and the first point listed is that the parties are anti-democratic, a word described as being “against representative democracy, in want of more referenda (e.g., Brexit)” (151). The fact that the textbook is written in Swedish for a minority population can be considered one reason for the dubious attitude toward referenda, since they can be disadvantageous to minorities. While connecting democracy to human rights, the book’s description of anti-democratic tendencies as the desire for more referenda can be rather confusing for the reader if democracy is introduced only as “people’s rule.” Here, presenting democracy as a pluralistic ideology would make it easier for students to understand how referenda can work in anti-democratic ways. *I tiden 9* also lists other characteristics of populist parties, such as anti-liberal, anti-establishment, anti-EU, anti-global, and xenophobic (151). The other textbooks, however, draw no links between threats to democracy and anti-pluralist parties. Many of the ninth-grade textbooks describe populism as a movement that is in opposition to the EU (*Yhteiskuntaopin Taitaja*, 198), or as *Forum 9* (172) says:

Populism means aiming for popularity among the people through simplifying difficult issues. Populists are often nationalist, oppose the European Union, and demand a stricter immigration policy. They gain support from people who are dissatisfied with the current situation and with the old parties.

In this regard, the textbooks deviate from the scholarly explanations of what is considered threats to democracy, as reviewed above. Populists are described as often being nationalist. Nationalism is a movement that principally opposes inclusion and pluralism, but this is not presented in the textbooks as a problem with respect to democracy.

Democracy, Threats, and Freedom of Speech

The textbooks do not address hate speech and its aims of silencing marginalized groups as threats to democracy even when they discuss freedom of speech in relation to democratic ideals. Demarcating what kinds of communication should be included in and excluded from the democratic sphere can be viewed as embodying the action of exclusion more generally, which, in the deliberative view on democracy education, is seen as essential and inevitable for the legitimation of democracy: there can be no inclusion without exclusion (Habermas 2004; Leiviskä 2020, 504–505). From an agonistic perspective, an explicit discussion of what to exclude in a democracy is also pedagogically relevant (Tryggvason 2019). While the textbooks generally do not refer to anti-pluralist movements as threatening democracy, they do include plenty of references to limiting freedom of speech as a democratic threat. The textbooks attempt to strike a balance between presenting free speech as a core element of democracy and stressing the need to protect minorities from anti-democratic hate speech.

Generally, the textbooks accentuate the need for democracy to allow for a diversity of opinion. *Yhteiskuntaopin Taitaja* (28) emphasizes that “everyone has the opportunity and the right to express their opinion,” but also that there are certain restrictions to freedom of speech, such as “You may not intentionally offend anyone, and you may not

break Finnish law, for example by inciting a crime.” *Forum* 9 (184) also highlights the importance of free speech:

Without free communication, democracy would not work [bold in original], because people need to know about things to be able to decide on them. Democracy also needs a public debate, where as many different opinions as possible are presented. There is a constant exchange of opinions in the media on, for example, immigration, environmental protection, and gender equality.

In the above quotes, the textbooks underline free communication as a cornerstone of democracy, emphasizing a need to present as many opinions as possible. Interestingly, the wording “as many different opinions as possible” is not precisely equivalent to the Deweyan call for including different people’s reflected experiences (Burman 2014), or Young’s recognition of how oppression is connected to various experiences, or Allen’s call to include knowledge originating among different groups of citizens. What particularly Allen shows is that including voices from the margins requires more work than just saying that information needs to be free, an issue she calls the epistemic challenge.

One obvious problem with such articulations is that it is noticeable to most readers that current debates about immigration and gender equality are for the most part not furthering democratic debate. Instead, much of the public discussion regarding minorities pushes anti-democratic agendas in the form of hate speech (Knuutila et al. 2019; Pöyhtäri et al. 2013). While freedom of speech is necessary for democracy, the emphasis on free speech elides how barriers and domains of communication always play out in the public domain (Titley 2020). As Titley (2020) formulates, there is a reluctance among those advocating liberal free speech to engage with questions of experience and subjectivity, language, structure, and materiality. Anti-racism is increasingly considered a form of censorship that silences public participation, even when the goal is to provide a meaningful pluralistic public discourse where it is genuinely possible for everyone to take part in the discussion. Here, a superficial, non-ideological definition of democracy that disregards the experiences of oppressed voices can be seen as a catalyst for anti-democratic threats (see Arnstad 2018, 23). For a meaningful discussion to occur, there is a need to rethink the public space, for instance digital spaces. This is the challenge for democracy, or as Allen (2023) suggests, the point where the need to move from theory to practice lies. One suggestion is to consider the epistemological oppression that minorities have encountered when creating space for discussion (see Anderson 2021). An anti-racist approach thereby becomes a prerequisite, not a hindrance, to democracy.

The lack of references to norms, power, and pluralism regarding public discussion is remarkable in the studied textbooks. When *Yhteiskuntaopin Taitaja* (154) states that, “In Finland, people have many opportunities to influence matters concerning their own lives [and] thanks to freedom of speech, expressing one’s opinion is easy and safe,” the book ignores the experiences of many people in Finland who have tried to take part in the public debate only to be met with hate speech, such as women, people of color, or gender minorities (Pöyhtäri et al. 2013). Voicing an opinion might be easy, but to call it safe is taking it too far, even though, as *Yhteiskuntaopin Taitaja* later states (157),

If a person is concerned that someone has insulted him/her, he/she can file a lawsuit for defamation. In this case, the court weighs the limits of freedom of speech. In Finland, there have been verdicts in which the judiciary has deemed that another person’s privacy has been violated under the guise of freedom of speech,

secret information has been published, or baseless claims have been made about entire groups of people.

The description in the quote could be challenged by people who have attempted to make their voice heard in society, only to be silenced through hate speech. It is also remarkable that the textbook mentions “baseless claims” instead of spelling out what such claims most probably are in reference to, such as racist or misogynistic speech. The problem with violating speech norms is not that the claims are “baseless,” but that their function is political, to create order between whose voices, experiences, and claims are provided space and whose are not. Rethinking the relationship between democracy and free speech could benefit from the conceptualization of democracy as ideological, aspiring for pluralism. This would make many textbook questions, such as the following one, obsolete:

Why is hate speech prohibited, even though there is freedom of speech in Finland?
Is it right to restrict freedom of speech so that there is no place for hate speech?
(*Yhteiskuntaopin Taitaja 9*, 157)

With this type of framing in the textbooks, the short answer to the second question may very likely be “no,” since restricting freedom of speech is portrayed as an anti-democratic act. If democracy was understood as increasing a plurality of voices, then there would not be a need to weigh restricting hate speech against democracy. Instead, democracy would mean constantly negotiating how more people from the margins, with their experiences of oppression, could be included in the discussion and bring in their perspectives without fear of being harassed.

While disengagement with regards to voter turnout is connected to the supporters of anti-pluralist movements (Svolik et al. 2023), passivity regarding other types of political participation can be viewed from another perspective: as an effect of silencing, of anti-democratic forces. Having witnessed the vast amount of ridicule and threats that emerge as part of the constant exchange of opinions in the media on, for example, immigration, environmental protection and gender equality, or what is often called hate speech, many people, particularly those with experiences of marginalization and oppression, could understandably choose not to take part in the democratic discussion. The textbooks’ way of handling hate speech is to point to the judicial system, stating the option available to a person who “is concerned that someone has insulted him/her.” This discourse obscures the antidemocratic forces of silencing that play out in public arenas, placing the responsibility for ensuring equal political participation with the victim. Such a perspective makes it impossible to challenge the exclusion of voices stemming from a pluralism of experiences.

The excerpts on freedom of speech come close to offering a place for students to discuss who or what is being excluded and why, the kind of practice that Tryggvason (2019, 2) particularly calls for within the framework of an agonistic democratic education and that is also central to a deliberative democratic education (e.g., Leiviskä 2020). For democracy as an orientation that strives to equally include different groups of people, it becomes necessary to exclude positions that aim to inhibit the inclusion of all voices and experiences, such as misogynistic or racist positions (Samuelsson 2018). However, the grounds for exclusion or the act of excluding someone are not topics of educational consideration or discussion in the textbooks. When this act of exclusion is concealed in discussions of democracy, then students are not given the chance to discuss the grounds for inclusion and exclusion as democratic practices. This is symptomatic of treating democracy as a readily made system that must be adopted and appreciated as it is, instead of as a pluralistic ideology whose principles must be discussed. In the

pedagogic representation of democracy, the choices of exclusion have already been made and taken for granted. This discourse on ready-made democracy offers no tools for handling anti-pluralist movements, views, and utterances as threats to the pluralistic inclusion inherent to democracy.

Implications of Considering a Pluralist Perspective on Democracy in Education

In this article, we have departed from research that shows anti-pluralist movements to be the main threat to democracy. We have discussed the role of pluralism with respect to the concept of democracy and how education can respond to threats to democracy. If education takes on the threats to democracy only partially in addressing the problem of disengagement but downplaying anti-pluralism, it equips students insufficiently for a world where democracy is being challenged. In light of our case study, there is room for a more pluralistically oriented approach to democratic education.

Social studies education is crucial for democratic education. However, there is a need to consider how democracy and threats to democracy are pedagogically presented to students. Our main conclusion is that while democracy researchers present threats to democracy as stemming from two, partly intertwined causes, disengagement and anti-pluralism, the textbooks only consider disengagement as a threat and ignore the link between disengagement and anti-pluralism. We believe, in accordance with Näsström (2021), that there are reasons to engage with how young people view democracy. When they ask why democracy is important, it is not enough to say that it is the best of many bad alternatives. Simultaneously, Näsström (2021, 32) asks if we have come so far that those who seek to defend democracy must present the burden of evidence, or asked differently, if inequality is the new normal? Perceiving democracy also pedagogically as a pluralistic ideology has, we suggest, implications on many levels. Reclaiming democracy as ideological, with the inclusion of pluralist voices, means asking new questions. If textbooks explored the concept of democracy not only as an existing system with all its current strengths and flaws, through different framings, then some of the well-acknowledged problems associated with defending democracy could also be addressed. Such explorations and framings could be viewed as alternative articulations of democracy, thus swaying the apparently hegemonic fashion of fixing the meaning of democracy as a floating signifier onto a static state-of-affairs that is unable to respond to its more problematic aspects and change accordingly. The on/off meaning assigned to democracy in textbooks is primarily juxtaposed with dictatorship as the only imaginable alternative form of government, articulated via a discourse of democracy as imperfect but static. However, we do not have to either accept the system as it is or reject the whole idea. We have addressed the notions of utopian thinking—democracy as an ideal to strive for, that drives us forward and sparks alternative forms of including pluralist voices.

A dynamic, processual view of the (de-)democratization of societies also makes it possible to discuss the threats to democracy within education. Pluralism, when placed at the core of democracy, underscores the goal of bringing marginalized voices into the discussion and addressing anti-pluralistic movements as undemocratic. In viewing democracy as a pluralistic ideology, the artificial, yet frequently occurring, opposition between restricting hate speech and democracy also becomes redundant.

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Appendix: Textbooks Analyzed

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