The Study of Democratic Schools
and its Contribution to the
Reinvigoration of Democracy
El estudio de las escuelas democráticas
y su contribución a la revitalización de la democracia

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a simple yet profound idea: the lessons learned through the study of democratic schools can offer key insights into how to reinvigorate democracy. To prove this claim, the authors draw on their experience as co-editors of the book *Designing Democratic Schools and Learning Environments - A Global Perspective*. The book explores almost forty cases in sixteen countries where educational initiatives have been implemented and designed to foster democratic forms of education. Using the four-frames theoretical approach by Bolman and Deal (2021), the article assesses how the process of producing a book that analyzes democratic schools and learning environments relates to the challenges faced by democratic governance. The article suggests that the difficulties and challenges of building democratic learning environments may correlate with the difficulties of sustaining and protecting a democracy. This has been highlighted through the example of the democratic book creation process that we followed. This article contributes to the broader topic of the purposes of education by examining ways in which schools and education systems can transform distributive leadership, self-governance, and student agency into key aspects of the mission of reinvigorating democracy in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: democracy, education, four-frames, purpose of education

RESUMEN

Este artículo presenta una idea simple pero profunda: las lecciones aprendidas a través del estudio de escuelas democráticas pueden ofrecer claves esenciales sobre cómo revitalizar la democracia. Para demostrar esta afirmación, los autores se basan en su experiencia como coeditores del libro *Diseñando Escuelas y Entornos de Aprendizaje Democráticos - Una Perspectiva Global*. El libro explora casi cuarenta casos en dieciséis países donde se han implementado iniciativas educativas diseñadas para fomentar formas democráticas de educación. Usando el enfoque teórico de cuatro dimensiones de Bolman y Deal (2021), el artículo evalúa cómo el proceso de producir un libro que analiza escuelas y entornos de aprendizaje democráticos se relaciona con los desafíos que enfrenta la gobernanza democrática. El artículo sugiere que las dificultades y desafíos de construir entornos de aprendizaje democráticos pueden correlacionarse con las dificultades de sostener y proteger una democracia. Esto ha sido destacado a través del ejemplo del proceso de creación del libro democrático que seguimos. Este artículo contribuye al tema más amplio de los propósitos de la educación al examinar formas en las que las escuelas y los sistemas educativos pueden transformar el liderazgo distributivo, la autogestión y la agencia estudiantil en aspectos clave para la misión de revitalizar la democracia en el siglo XXI.

Palabras clave: democracia, educación, cuatro dimensiones, propósito de la educación

INTRODUCTION

In this article, we discuss our experiences as editors of the forthcoming book *Designing Democratic Schools and Learning Environments - A Global Perspective.*[1] Our book includes close to forty cases of schools and educational programs that have created democratic learning environments in sixteen different countries. We believe that by looking at the process of the production of the book, and how these schools and projects confronted the many challenges and difficulties they faced, new perspectives will be highlighted about how democracy can be strengthened across the world.

Schools and education systems need to be treated, protected, and valued as a crucial way to teach and practice democracy. As Dewey (1916, p. 239) famously said, "Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself". We support this in our belief that schools should be places to experience democracy rather than places only to *teach* it.

In a recent interview, the Indian economist, professor, and author Bardhan (2022) commented that, currently, over a third of the world's countries are becoming more autocratic (Scheimer *et al.*, 2023). And, only 4% of people in the world are living in countries that are becoming more democratic (Scheimer *et al.*, 2023.). He also argues that democracy cannot be taken for granted and must be actively practiced. Given these facts, we propose that successes and lessons learned in the educational field can serve as a source of hope and inspiration for new ways to reinvigorate democracy in society at large.

Repurposing the theoretical leadership framework created by Bolman and Deal (2021) in their work to analyze and understand organizations and leadership, this article will use the structural, human, political, and symbolic frames as categories from which to assess how the book's process of creation, and the key takeaways in its chapters can speak directly to some of the most important challenges faced by democracy today.

We deploy this heuristic using the following structure: In the first section, we address dynamics in the knowledge-creation process in a Western elite academic setting. In the second section, we explore the inherent tensions of producing a book about democra-

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[1] Soon to be published by Palgrave Macmillan.

tic education through a process that is also democratic. The third section covers the creation of an emerging framework that helps identify and categorizes democratic practices that exist in various educational contexts. Finally, we assess the similarities between the challenges faced through the book's creation process, challenges faced by the schools and projects included in the book, and significant challenges faced by democracy today.

DYNAMICS IN KNOWLEDGE-CREATION

The process of producing *Designing Democratic Schools and Learning Environments - A Global Perspective* began when two graduate students (Gustavo and Jonathan) invited a former professor (Linda) to create a book including the work they and their colleagues had done during a whole semester in Linda's class at Harvard's Graduate School of Education. It is not common for students to ask a teacher to do something like this; usually, it is the other way around. The journey of creating the book was sparked by one fundamental question: Can an academic and intellectual conversation in favor of democratic schools be revitalized? Jonathan and Gustavo were two graduate students passionate about the intersection of democracy and education in their contexts. During Linda's class, they designed concepts for democratic schools in their contexts.

Jonathan focused on India, a context largely impacted by a wealth of diversity and the magnitude of the population. His design was a School of Entrepreneurship that equipped K-12 students with entrepreneurial skills to address challenges that affected them and society at large, drive innovation, and generate employment while preserving local practices and culture. Gustavo focused on Chile, his home country. Particularly sensitive to the social upheaval that the country faced during an intense episode known as "Estallido Social" (roughly translated as "Social Outburst,") he focused on creating a concept for a culturally and environmentally sustaining school aimed at offering indigenous communities a top-quality intellectual education that centered the Mapuche[2] identity and culture as the most important assets in the school's project.

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[2] Chile's most numerous and relevant indigenous group.

After their final project exhibition, Gustavo and Jonathan discussed the value they saw in creating their designs, and also in learning from their colleagues. They proposed to Linda the idea of an edited volume that explored the concept of democratic education from a global perspective. Jonathan and Gustavo wrote, "We aren't ready for the experience of the class to end and we think that some of the ideas generated in the class need to live out in the world." Linda was honored and overwhelmed. She hadn't thought about writing another book. She didn't have time. However, perhaps because it was still a "pandemic" year,[3] or perhaps because at the exact moment that Linda received the email, she had just gone to visit one of the schools born out of the designs of a former student, she said yes.

Initially, the idea was that they would reach out to their classmates who had studied with Linda. However, Linda had a slightly different approach to the project. She has been teaching this class for twenty-five years and she knew that many of her former students and colleagues had built their schools, some years after taking her course. She also knew of other brilliant schools that did not have access to institutions like Harvard. She suggested to Gustavo and Jonathan to broaden the scope and send an invitation to former students and many other educators in their networks. The initial outreach resulted in responses from seventy people from across the globe. Throughout the process, we discovered new schools and initiatives that could add a unique narrative to the book, to the point that we had to consciously stop one another from recruiting new authors. This overwhelming response was the first indication of the relevance and timeliness of the topic, and it gave us the motivation and endurance to pursue what would become a two-year commitment.

STRUCTURAL FRAME

This unusual scenario of students summoning a former teacher to produce a book offers the first opportunity to put the four-frame

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[3] Jonathan and Gustavo sent the letter in late December 2021.

model into action. The editorial team developed its unique process for decision-making. In addition, decision-making was a key area of focus for several chapters as many schools tried to involve key stakeholders, such as students, in critical decision-making processes. Decision-making often revolves around power and authority. We examined decision-making through a structural lens, focusing on designing operational structures that could mitigate the impact of power dynamics. This involved creating rules, structures, goals, and objectives that influence the decision-making process. At times, the ineffective design of these structures can lead to the perception that sharing decision-making power hampers the organization's overall effectiveness. On the other hand, a well-thought-out design can unlock significant potential to democratize decision-making within an organization or project. For the editorial team, this meant developing laser-focused attention to detail, managing structures, including our work schedules, and clear and regular communication with the chapter contributors. Initially, we had envisioned the book's production process taking six to nine months. Democratizing many of the critical steps of the book's production process, however, meant understanding and accepting that shared decisions require investing more time. We hope that this results in a higher-quality book that captures perspectives that would be overlooked in top-down decision-making.

HUMAN RESOURCE FRAME

Power dynamics in knowledge creation can also be assessed by examining the quality of personal relationships between the editorial team and the book's contributors. In this context, understanding the bonds of love, friendship, and care is critical, as they serve as antidotes against political and symbolic limitations that might hinder the democratization of knowledge creation, particularly within esteemed institutions like Harvard University.

Jonathan and Gustavo discovered their shared passion for democracy while collaborating not only as colleagues but also as friends in various work and communication spaces. Their decision to email Linda was heavily influenced by the mutual appreciation they had

developed for one another during their time in class. Trust, appreciation, and friendship also played significant roles in generating a highly positive response rate from the contributors we invited to join our project. These elements were fundamental in transforming the project from a mere idea to reality, as we gathered a group of enthusiastic individuals willing to participate in its enactment.

Moreover, fostering a sense of mutual respect, support, and collaboration among the community of chapter contributors was crucial to producing a high-quality book through democratic and participatory means. By cultivating strong relationships and a supportive environment, we were able to collaboratively bring the project to fruition, ensuring that diverse voices were heard, and knowledge creation was approached in an inclusive and empowering manner.

POLITICAL FRAME

This unconventional knowledge-creating scenario also offers the opportunity to critically assess how power dynamics and explicit conversations about how to distribute such power create an impact that benefits the overall goals of the project. As stated earlier, the power asymmetry between faculty and students is self-evident. And, it is often the case that faculty attract students to projects that are under the professor's strict control and management. In the case of this book, although Linda was the senior member of the team given her age and experience, the three editors made a conscious decision to always strive to reach a consensus.

Making this decision required each member of the editorial team to build a deep capacity to acknowledge strengths and limitations, and compromise with the others. Linda knew that she was not the expert on democracy in the Global South and that she had much to learn from Jonathan and Gustavo. Gustavo knew that his passionate vision of democracy in Latin America might be blind to ideas in non-western contexts represented in the book. Jonathan knew that the discussion about democratic education in India needed to be reframed to be understood by an international audience. These divergent perspectives could have eliminated the possibility of creating a strong project, but the editors restrained themselves from

being dogmatic about one definition of democracy, and instead remained open to many points of view, without losing the overall focus on the book. Later in this article, we touch upon how politics and the nature of political governance affected the composition of authors in this book.

SYMBOLIC FRAME

We became aware, as the project came to a close, that we were trying to transform the power dynamics in knowledge creation. We felt that we might be creating a new kind of scholarly research that is more egalitarian and does not always rely on senior members having the final word. To ensure a more democratic and participatory process, we decided to invest in guiding our large and diverse group of contributors to have a strong sense of community. In the process, we uncovered the real significance that this book-writing process had on the educational community we worked with. Some authors got emotional that their life's work would be documented and immortalized. Some authors found solace in a community of educators who shared their struggles and positive experiences. Some previously thought that scaling their school would be impossible but were delighted at the thought that some practices could be captured and scaled. And many expressed gratitude that someone (in their experience) was finally talking about democratic learning environments. Our specific objective was to produce a book that would highlight wonderful educational initiatives but also to be a symbol to a community of educators that setting up democratic learning environments is messy, time-consuming, but also very possible. The book has also served as a symbol to increase documentation of best practices from the global south to broaden definitions of Western-dominated concepts.

Each of the four frames mentioned above overlaps with significant complexity and therefore, will be elaborated on throughout the article, not in silos.

DEMOCRATICALLY PRODUCING A BOOK
ABOUT DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

One of the most critical decisions we made during the initial stage of the process was to make the production of the book as democratic as possible. This decision was influenced by the work of Metha and Fine (2019). In their book, *In Search of Deeper Learning: The Quest to Remake the American High School*, the authors describe a trait in all of the *deeper learning* schools, classrooms, or workshops they analyzed. They talked about the notion of symmetry or "the ways in which adults worked with and learned from one another paralleled the ways in which they hoped students would learn" (Metha & Fine, 2019, p. 375). For us, this symmetry meant that if we were producing a book in which educators, researchers, and students shared their journeys in designing and implementing democratic education projects, our process needed to be as democratic as possible.

Our democratic process of writing and editing this book represents our efforts to share as much responsibility as possible in producing the entire book with our community of contributors. Peer reviewing was one of the most useful tools to accomplish this democratic process of production. Each chapter author was paired with two other authors and two editors to provide feedback, encouragement, and help with the articulation of core ideas. This operational algorithm to pair authors (structural dimension) was heavily influenced by some straightforward questions: What do these chapters have in common? Are people referencing similar challenges? And was also influenced by a more nuanced knowledge of their experience and personalities. We hoped that this coauthor relationship might also become a meaningful personal relationship (human resource frame).

We felt that peer reviewing reflected a strong democratic value because it fostered a sense of shared accountability between colleagues. This proved essential to meet the requirements of our flexible but ambitious schedule. And, it also helped us understand the value of fostering a very important emotion during this process: empathy. Although the initial plan was to only recruit Linda's former Harvard students, the final list of contributors was curated from a long list

of scholars and practitioners with vast hands-on experience in the field. The connection between recent graduates, excited with endless possibilities in their professional careers, and individuals who had studied, reflected, and experienced the challenges and rewards of implementing democratic principles in educational settings, was inspiring. The synergy between practitioners' and academics' feedback allowed for both perspectives to be captured in the essays. However, creating connections between contributors allowed us to see that the commitment of authorship demands cannot be met by all individuals in the same way. We had to account for this difference in logistical or operational terms. Importantly, the changes we made also served as a symbol (symbolic perspective) of democracy's commitment to inclusion. Just as our school leaders wrote about the importance of inclusion in classrooms, we had to figure out how to include student authors, non-English speaker authors, and authors who had no experience writing about their work and create conditions for everyone to feel important and welcomed.

This was perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of implementing a democratic book production process. Many times, we felt at loose ends and struggled to resist the urge to make a tighter schedule. At other times (especially after having a signed contract with a publisher), we realized there was no other option than to create a tight-loose schedule. Ideally, we wanted to create one timeline that made sense for everyone, but this was not always possible. For those contributors who were running schools, due dates and chapter reviews always took a back seat. Their first commitment was to their schools, students, and families. Sticking to the value of empathy helped us realize that we often needed to develop different strategies to support those writers. One strategy we used was recurring Zoom meetings to keep contributors engaged and accountable through interaction with others. Another strategy involved providing more direct support to reviewing and re-writing. We enlisted the help of other colleagues who knew about the project and just wanted to help not by being a chapter author, but by contributing as additional readers and editors. The overall effect of this accommodation was that our book now contains many voices that did not have the conditions, resources, confidence, or platform to be seen and heard.

At the same time, Linda tried to blog about many of our writers[4]. We knew that they had taken on an enormous undertaking by sharing their work with the world; we wanted to highlight their accomplishments in other arenas. For many of our contributors, this was the first time that anyone had said: you matter; your work matters.

The challenge of producing a book about democracy and education in a democratic way also meant being especially careful with gender, geographic, age, cultural, racial, and even political representation. Representation demands giving space to diverse voices as equally as possible. However, finding authors from some countries proved to be a challenge, highlighting the uneven proliferation of democratic education practices or the freedom to express it, around the world. Even though the editors had contacts in countries like Cuba, Singapore, and Sri Lanka, for example, those authors could not commit to writing without involving their respective ministries of education (political dimension). Unfortunately, including these voices was not possible, since it would have added months, if not years, to our project. The absence of these countries, and others, remains a missing piece in the global conversation we desire to spark through our book.

The final element of this section relates to the question of access. Given the dearth of literature on democratic education and the disproportionate focus on democratic practices in Western schools, we strongly believed that this book had to contribute to the field of democratic education globally. As a result, we believe that the book should be easily accessible to readers internationally, so we decided to publish it in Open Access. However, the decision to produce a professionally edited and published book that everybody could read for free required the mobilization of financial resources. We were grateful for Linda's position in the United States as a long-time and respected educator and author which made the fundraising process within reach. Further, given the relevant economic disparities between the USA, where Linda is based, and India, Chile, and Mexico, where Jonathan and Gustavo work and live, Linda took responsibility for raising the funds to pay the publisher's required fee for an open-access publication.

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[4] Many of those posts can be found here: www.lindanathan.com

After securing the funds and signing the contract with the publisher, we could not avoid reflecting on the fact that the publishing industry inherently benefits writers in Western English-speaking countries. This is only buttressed by the fact that English is the official language of publication in many editorial houses. Despite our discomfort with these aspects, we prioritized securing an opportunity to publish the book and sparking a global conversation about education's role in reinvigorating democracy. In the future, we hope to produce translations of the book and to create new editions of the book, including more countries and contexts.

AN EMERGING FRAMEWORK TO DISCUSS DEMOCRACY IN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS

When we began reading the draft versions of the book's chapters on democratic education projects, we realized that the task of designing, implementing, and leading such initiatives was far more complicated and messier than initially anticipated. Our contributors shared diverse personal accounts of their experiences and reflections, revealing a plethora of tensions and dilemmas they faced. As we delved into the editing process, it became evident that we needed clearer systems and structures to move beyond merely collecting submissions to designing a coherent and cohesive publication. Furthermore, we wanted to find ways to balance diverse perspectives about democratic schools.

We didn't have a preconceived set of responses or a blueprint for all the decisions we had to make to produce this book; we were still developing systems and structures. A key turning point for us was the creation of a framework. We called it: "Emerging Framework for Democratic Schools." This became an important tool for decision-making and a way to foster co-author active participation, such as having each chapter edited by at least two other authors, as well as two of the three co-editors. Having a framework enabled us to address conflicting views about controversial issues in some of the chapters. We insisted on designing a tool that could be shaped by the diverse interpretations of our authors and we purposely called our framework an "Emergent" Framework for Democratic Schools. We knew that our contributing writers would help to shape

it, too. To comprehend the democratic approach that shaped this framework, it is worth mentioning the process we took.

For example, we had one preliminary chapter about a faith-based concept school[5] in the United States. We grappled with how to address the symbolic contradiction of building a democratic school while selecting students based on their religious preferences and urged the author to clarify her thinking around this paradox. The discussion was particularly thought-provoking and prompted us to reflect on how religious affiliation should not automatically disqualify a school as "democratic", as religious schools representing minority groups may provide spaces for belonging and expression not readily available through the spaces dominated by the majority in power. For instance, a Christian school in the United States, a Christian country, may not be considered democratic; however, a Christian or Islamic school in India, where Christians and Muslims are a minority, might be considered a democratic school. We included chapters about controversial issues, even though, at times, those challenged our thinking and notions about democratic schools. We came to that decision because we wanted to be inclusive of how authors from different cultures and countries approached our framework. The symbolic implications of editorial decisions involved acknowledging that our community of contributors spanned a wide range of cultural and political backgrounds, ensuring that major editorial decisions were not misinterpreted as cultural or political discrimination but were driven by the pursuit of intellectual rigor.

When we approached the initial list of seventy authors to invite them to participate in this book, we knew we had to give all candidates some sort of guidance about what they would be writing about, so that they could assess their willingness and capability to say yes. We did this through a set of central questions that we felt could serve as self-explanatory goalposts. These questions were:

1. What does democratic schooling mean in your context?
2. How does your school actualize liberty, equity, community, and collaboration in your local contexts?

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[5] Concept schools is how we defined all school projects that were still on the design stage or not fully in operation.

3. How does your school manage and evolve to meet the moment, reflect the voice, values, and goals of its community, and draw on community resources and funds of knowledge?
4. How does democratic schooling prepare students for an unpredictable future?

These questions allowed all contributors to produce initial chapter drafts. As stated earlier, in our weekly editorial meetings we saw that democratic education looked vastly different in different contexts. Depending on geography, politics, and funding, schools operate very differently, and what they can and do hold up as democratic practices has wide variation. What might be considered conservative in one context could be considered liberal in another. What was seen as a challenge to solve in one country could be seen as an achievement and success in a different one. For some, democratizing a school meant sharing decision-making power with parents and students. For others, it meant ceasing to give students grades and starting to provide written feedback reports instead. We knew that our book would offer readers stories that showed how different contexts, needs, and values could shape democratic learning environments in ways that might even feel antagonistic. Hence, the Emergent Framework for Democratic Schools was born.

We used an iterative process with the participation of all the authors to arrive at the Emergent Framework for Democratic Schools. As we continued with the project, the guiding questions and the framework became the backbone of the book, as well as a tool with which to provide feedback to one another. As editors, we continued to word-smith the framework and then, as we continued to invite participation, we suggested that all the authors reflect on the framework as part of their writing. Along with our co-authors' experiences, we articulated the framework into a set of four pillars that are highly likely to be present in schools and learning environments considered "democratic."

Emergent Framework for Democratic Schools

1) Democratic education emphasizes the open flow of ideas and choices, regardless of their popularity. Students and teachers have the space to

express themselves without limiting the rights of others. Democratic learning environments create safe and empowering spaces to enable all voices and perspectives to be heard.

2) Democratic education is a high-quality equitable education and is accessible to and inclusive of all people. Democratic learning environments are rigorous, identity-affirming, and culturally inclusive. These environments have an intentional focus on issues of equity and hold students to high expectations while respecting students' intersectional identities and varied cultural values and beliefs.

3) Democratic education contributes to the "common good" through active engagement, consensus, and compromise. Democratic learning environments enable critical and compassionate dialogue, active listening, and reflection toward the advancement of society. Students and teachers develop the ability to communicate, debate, and synthesize multiple points of view to make decisions. The respect and protection of each other's humanity and dignity are ever-present in support of a more just society.

4) Democratic schools organize students, parents, social institutions, and the larger community collaboratively to achieve its goals and to solve their and society's most urgent challenges. Democracies are collective projects. Collective decision-making structures, practices, and policies must be maintained over time and updated when needed. Democratic learning environments continually welcome and value all voices and reflect on processes and outcomes, considering the challenges of our times and our unpredictable future.

Importantly, we wanted to avoid the possibility of the framework acting as a constraint. As such, we did not require that an author write specifically about each pillar in their chapter. Instead, we wanted the framework to serve as a guide for reflection when thinking about their own stories and also those of their peers when providing feedback. However, as editors we used the framework intensely since we *tested it* against all the chapters in the book to validate this tool and identify gaps for improvement. This organic process was a living testament to the democratic ethos of our book. The pillars we created to embrace the diversity of perspectives in our community of contributors transformed into a resource for all contributors to hone their thinking and writing. And eventually,

the framework ended up serving as the organizing criteria for how we grouped the chapters in the book's final manuscript. Finally, the framework also became part of the teaching tools that Linda and her teaching assistant have implemented at Harvard.

Initially, the book was divided into three sections: schools, after-school programs, and concept schools. This organization allowed each section to present unique perspectives and insights, contributing to a rich tapestry of experiences and ideas. Unfortunately, the chapters were not distributed equally across these sections. But at the same time, we began to see that the emergent framework offered an opportunity to organize the book in a way that sustained the richness of experiences and ideas under a more balanced structure.

A democratic tagging system allowed us to read all the book's chapters and express our own opinions regarding which of the four pillars of our framework seemed the most dominant in each particular chapter. After the three of us had completed tagging all chapters, we assessed the alignment of our responses. In some cases, the alignment was evident. In some cases, there was no alignment at all. These differences were processed in our weekly editorial meetings, taking into consideration the distribution of chapters across pillars of the framework.

Interestingly, this specific stage in the book's production process offers a compelling opportunity to see how the different frames interact. When considering the structural dimension, we saw how the framework served as an overarching structure for coherence and cohesion, facilitating the process of organizing the book's chapters. From the human dimension, the framework helped strengthen the relationships between the editorial team and the community of contributors, which worked very closely to ensure the framework supported their writing and strengthened the whole book. From a political dimension, the framework offered a neutral ground on which to stand when faced with complex political conversations about the book's chapters. Finally, from the symbolic dimension, the concept "emergent" represents the aspiration that the way to use this framework needs to always be subject to the validation of the stakeholders who use it to reflect upon their own experience.

Creating an overarching schema over which to ground most of our most challenging intellectual challenges helped us to cope with the fact that for many of our contributors, the writing process was fraught with political tensions, as they had to carefully consider what they could and could not say given their various contexts. During the process, some contributors had to drop out due to severe changes in the political climate in their countries, while others had to completely change their essays. This highlighted the precarious nature of democratic education in a world where political landscapes can shift dramatically and unpredictably.

Creating, refining, and intensely using this framework had a cost and a moral dimension. Should we make allowances for chapters that seem contradictory to our understanding of democracy? How could deeply religious schools, which necessarily follow a very autocratic structure, be democratic? Under which circumstances can military service act as a pro-democratic force? We left the answer to these questions as open as possible. And trusted our readers to make their judgments. We were aware that our responsibility was to open new doors, raise new questions, and not be dogmatic in our perspectives.

ANALOGIES BETWEEN CHALLENGES OF DEMOCRACY AND DEMOCRATIC SCHOOLS

The process of producing a book about democratic education during a period in which democracy is being more and more contested or resisted offers the opportunity to dig deeper into insights and takeaways we did not develop in our book's conclusion. As expressed at the beginning of this article, support for autocratic visions of society is growing across the globe. To address this spiral towards autocracy and populism, opportunities for young people to understand and practice democracy need to be expanded. And that can be done through democratic learning environments, such as the schools included in our book, or the time and space we devoted to produce this book. But the trick is that expanding such opportunity comes with a cost: it is messy and complex, and it can take a toll on a person's moral energy reservoir.

The thirty-eight chapters in our book are filled with contradictions and paradoxes between expectations and reality; between aims and means; between what we see (the facilities, the teaching, the community, the relationships), and the invisible beliefs that sustain the current status quo in many education systems across the world. These contradictions can create so much attrition and inertia that they probably explain why the world has not yet seen as many democratic schools as it needs.

A similar thing happens with democracy. This is a term many of us in the Western world learn to revere in our early years in society. But faced with issues like fake news, social media bots, polarization, and large structural problems like the climate crisis or global migration, democracy seems to struggle to garner public support through its most fundamental principles: rule of law, freedom of election, respect for minorities, freedom of speech, and the protection of human rights. Partly, this is because societies have become more dynamic, unstable, and unpredictable. Partly this is because democracy is unable to provide the unilateral one-size-fits-all type of response that populist leaders often offer.

But what we learned in our book is that people, particularly leaders, are key to bridging these gaps and contradictions. This underscores the importance of leadership in fostering democratic education. And it highlights the need for leaders who are willing to challenge the status quo and champion democratic principles. While our book doesn't examine leadership development *per se*, our work involves the coaching and development of leaders. Democracy needs democratic schools. Democratic schools need leaders. Democracy needs leaders!

The pivotal role of leadership in fostering democratic education cannot be overstated. However, preparing leaders for the challenges of reinvigorating democracy is not simple and common. Many of the contributors in our book have faced the solitude that comes with being the single champion in favor of democratic education within an organization or community. Some are successful in transmitting their vision to others and getting new people on board. But all of them eventually end up meeting with immunity to change (Kegan & Lahey, 2009) at some level. Leading complex institutions

in the unpredictable scenario of the 21st century demands leaders that, as French philosopher Morin (1999, p. 48) said, learn how to "hope for the unhoped-for and strive for the improbable".

TESTING THE FRAMEWORK IN REAL-TIME

With the expectation to test how a new generation of future leaders would react to the book's framework, Linda had the opportunity to try it with the new cohort of students in her class. For their final projects, Linda asked the students to either critique the framework or develop their version based on their experiences. Linda recounts how her students, some for the first time, had a real-time opportunity to practice democracy during an end-of-course exhibition. This experience was both enlightening and concerning. It was enlightening because it provided students with a firsthand experience of democratic processes. It was concerning because these were students from one of the most prestigious educational institutions in the world, and yet, for some, this was their first real experience of practicing democracy. Furthermore, many students expressed discomfort at the open-ended nature of this decision-making experience.

Our emergent democratic education framework emphasizes the open flow of ideas and choices, high-quality equitable education accessible to all, support for the "common good" through consensus and compromise, and the organization of students, parents, social institutions, and the larger community to collaboratively achieve its goals and solve society's most urgent challenges. These principles, while theoretically sound, pose a significant leadership challenge to be implemented in practice. They require a shift in mindset, a willingness to embrace uncertainty and complexity, and a commitment to uphold the rights and dignity of all individuals. This reflection underscores the difficulty and importance of building and sustaining democratic learning environments. democracy is quickly falling out of fashion around the world, as Bardhan (2022) suggests. Democracy is hard, time-consuming, and slow. Autocrats take advantage of this vacuum. This is a sobering realization, the urgent need to reinvigorate democracy calls for more robust and resilient democratic education, which to be effectively implemented requires greater and better leadership.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, democracy thrives in an environment of open dialogue, mutual respect, and shared responsibility. It requires a willingness to listen, to compromise, and to respect the rights and dignity of all individuals. Democracy requires time and patience. When things get complicated, as they will, empathy matters. Learning to accommodate becomes crucial. Inclusion is a strength, not a weakness. However, the danger to democracy arises when it becomes 'easy' or when its principles are oversimplified or compromised for the sake of convenience or expediency.

In the context of education, building democratic learning spaces is a challenging endeavor. It requires a shift in mindset, a willingness to embrace uncertainty and complexity, and a commitment to uphold the rights and dignity of all students. Democracy requires an openness to taking on the moral responsibility for working through differences and negotiating between the desire to conclude slowly or fast. We also found that the development and implementation of a shared robust framework guides and organizes the implementation of democratic principles in diverse educational settings.

Moreover, building societies that act as learning environments for democracy is even harder. Societies are complex systems with diverse stakeholders, competing interests, and deeply entrenched power structures, similar to schools but at a different scale. In this regard, we believe starting with schools and the communities they serve works as building blocks and exemplars and hope that democracy can thrive at a larger societal level.

We have learned, throughout this process, that building and sustaining democratic learning spaces is hard and often unfamiliar work. The democratic process that we followed to create this book surfaced examples of the challenges associated with establishing democratic environments. However, the challenges were not obstacles but rather essential issues that we (and society) needed to confront to create a book of value that gives a platform to voices and thought processes usually omitted as a result of autocratic processes. This book creation process serves as an important reflection for policymakers, that for policies to result in democratic environments, democratic practices need to be present throughout the policy creation process and not just be the end goal.

The reflections and insights presented in this article are not just academic exercises. They are a call to action. They underscore the urgent need for more robust and resilient democratic education. They highlight the pivotal role of leadership in fostering democratic education. They challenge us to question the status quo even in the way that we define democracy, and champion democratic principles in our educational systems.

We hope that this article connects the purposes of education with the key principles inherent in democratic learning environments. We applaud the schools and concepts that have grappled with the best ways to include student voice and agency, have reflected on ways to confront the urgent challenges of time, and have incorporated multiple perspectives and stakeholders. We believe that schools that embrace democratic education are better poised to navigate and overcome the multiple crises currently faced by humanity and life on the planet, reinvigorating democracy for all, everywhere.

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