

# Manifesto for a critical pluralistic education

Johan Öhman and Ásgeir Tryggvason

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*Editor: Ásgeir Tryggvason*  
*Örebro University, Örebro Sweden*

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## Manifesto for a critical pluralistic education

This text is a manifesto for an educational approach that we call *critical pluralistic education*. This approach includes how the education is understood and how it is taught. The basis of this approach is that students learn and grow as human beings by encountering and critically examining different ways of seeing the world in their education.

The claim that society is pluralistic and that different perspectives should be expressed in education is fairly unproblematic. However, answering the subsequent questions may be more difficult: Where are the boundaries for which perspectives should be considered legitimate in education? Which values should be allowed in a classroom? Taking education seriously means tackling these questions, both as crucial pedagogical-philosophical questions of and as practical questions relating to the teaching. Basically, it is about the kind of role that education should have in a democratic society.

If we turn to the history of educational thought, it is clear that this is not the first time these questions have been posed. When John Dewey (1916/2004) outlined the reciprocal relationship between education and democracy he did so from an understanding of pluralism. Dewey's (1927) idea of pluralism is the closest thing to an ontological foundation in his pragmatist philosophy of education. By viewing pluralism as both inevitable in society and a prerequisite for democratic life, it is not a problem to be overcome. Rather, pluralism is the very lifeblood of a free democratic society.

For Dewey, the pluralistic society is not only about people being different from each other but also about how they belong together. Pluralism in society consists of a number of different communities to which people belong, which in turn consist of a plurality of individuals. Pluralism must therefore be understood in terms of people both belonging together and differing from each other. Hence, society is not just an aggregation of individual differences but a myriad of different communities. Based on this understanding of pluralism, people's shared lives are at the very core of the democratic idea: "...democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself" (Dewey, 1927, p. 148).

However, the idea of democracy as a shared life, where people decide the future together, has long been criticised as idealistic and naïve. The criticism, which has its roots in Plato, is based on the idea that people are not capable of discussing and making sensible decisions about social issues together with others. For critics of democracy, the conclusion is instead that an enlightened and select few should make decisions that affect us all. It is this criticism that Dewey addresses when he formulates democracy as "the idea of community life itself". However, defending the idea of a democratic society against such criticism is not primarily about providing empirical evidence of people's ability to participate in society and democratic practices. Rather, the idea of democracy rests on a fundamental belief in people's ability to make reasonable and fair decisions together with others. Dewey writes:

Democracy is a way of life controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature. Belief in the Common Man is a familiar article in the democratic creed. That belief is without

basis and significance save as it means faith in the potentialities of human nature as that nature is exhibited in every human being irrespective of race, color, sex, birth and family, of material or cultural wealth. This faith may be enacted in statutes, but it is only on paper unless it is put in force in the attitudes which human beings display into one another in the incidents and relations of daily life. (Dewey, 1939, p. 226)

Even if such faith in people constitutes an unshakeable foundation for democracy, it is not a faith that is blind. Faith is closely linked to the notion that what people are capable of is not a given once and for all. People, both as citizens and individuals, are capable of changing themselves and their environment. To take democracy seriously is to embrace this faith in human beings as rational and changeable.

At the same time as democracy is based on faith in people's abilities, it is also radical in the ultimate sense of the word (Latin *radix* [root], to get to the bottom of something). In democracy it is possible to examine, criticise and reconsider the habits and approaches that form the basis of our society. It is the openness of democracy that guarantees a radicalism in which power relations, values and the history of society can be subjected to critical scrutiny. The critical vein that runs through democracy means that democracy is not a value-neutral position. In line with the Belgian political philosopher, Chantal Mouffe, we argue that liberal democracy is based on the values of *liberty* and *equality* for all (Mouffe, 2005). Without liberty there is no pluralism and no space for critical examination, which means that different visions and ideas about society cannot be formed or expressed. Without equality, these liberties cannot be practised or realised because they are then shackled by unequal power relations. Articulating these values as fundamental does not mean that they should be regarded as universal or neutral. Striving for liberty and equality requires, as we see it, no other motive than that liberty and equality are desirable.

However, a democratic society cannot thrive without education. The forms of democracy are not fixed once and for all. Democracy needs to constantly evolve in line with the continually changing social and cultural conditions. In this development, education has a key role, or as Dewey puts it: "Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife" (Dewey, 1916/2004, p. 139). At the same time, the reverse relationship applies, which is that education cannot be a place for growth unless there is a free democratic society. Therefore, education cannot serve as an instrument for specific ideologies or political interests. If education becomes a tool for the formation of citizens with set views and values for a specific society, then education is no longer education, but rather instruction or indoctrination.

When education is seen as a place for intellectual and moral growth, its purpose need not be sought externally. Rather, it is the growth itself that is the aim of education. In that sense, Dewey's famous expression that "education is life itself" should not be understood as a metaphor or euphemism, but as an immediate description of what it is about: in education life grows intellectually and morally. A prerequisite for this growth is that education is experienced as meaningful here and now and is related to students' experiences and the world in which young people live. Education cannot therefore be reduced to simply being a preparation for the future.

Furthermore, it is also against this background that Dewey's idea of democracy as a form of life can be understood. Seeing democracy in this way means that it is *in* democracy that individuals and communal life reach their full potential. As Dewey puts it, that democracy must be (re)born anew for each generation, is therefore not a metaphorical expression, but a description of a life that is taking shape. It is this close and strong relationship between education and democracy that is the starting point for critical pluralism as an educational approach.

Although education is not seen as an instrument for serving society or for fostering specific types of citizens, critical pluralistic education is neither value-neutral nor value-relativistic. Education, like democracy, presupposes both *liberty* and *equality*. Liberty is necessary if anything is to grow. As a place of intellectual and moral growth, education is a practising of liberty. Since growth takes place with others, it also requires equality. Without equality, liberty is limited to only being for the few, rather than for everyone. Liberty and equality are thus the value conditions for education to be a place for growth.

However, the concepts of liberty and equality have no meaning in themselves. They only have meaning in people's relations and actions. That is, it is in real life, where people are both connected and differ from each other, that values acquire meaning. When values are disconnected from real life, they simply become "hopeless abstractions", as Dewey puts it. So, what is needed to avoid liberty and equality becoming hopeless abstractions? In line with the perspective formulated by Dewey, we believe that it is in and through communication that values are given their concrete implication. This does not mean that everyone has to agree about what liberty and equality mean or how to realise them, but rather that it is in communication with others that we can turn abstract values into meaningful practices. A similar perspective can be found in Mouffe, who argues that liberal democracy is characterised by the fact that we have conflicting views of freedom and equality yet agree that these values are worth striving for. In a broader perspective, the fact that there are different and sometimes conflicting views is also a prerequisite for creative innovation. Encountering other people's perspectives enables students to reconsider their own perceptions and positions. According to Dewey, the 'democratic attitude' is about valuing such opportunities. Critical pluralistic education aims to create the conditions for new experiences, values, identities and opinions to take shape and for new ways of shaping society to develop. The openness of education and the plurality to be found amongst students is therefore a prerequisite for the renewal of society. Hence, the critical pluralistic approach that we formulate here has a fundamental conflictual perspective on education, where conflicts are understood as a prerequisite for renewal and change.

In educational theory, the communicative perspective on the relationship between democracy and education has been further developed by the Swedish professor of education, Tomas Englund. By taking a starting point in Dewey's pragmatism and in political philosopher Jürgen Habermas' theory of deliberative democracy, Englund has formulated specific principles for deliberative communication (Englund, 2006). Without going into the detail of what these principles mean, we would like to highlight their basis in pluralism and the importance of bringing together different perspectives on education.

Englund argues that if education does not provide space for different perspectives to meet, then there is nothing to deliberate on. At the same time, Englund has also shown how the teaching and learning content of education is a result of encounters between different political views. The content that students encounter is neither inherently given nor a neutral representation of the world. Instead, it is the result of educational policy conflicts and consensus about what education should pass on to future generations. Here it is important to remember that students' encounters with the content is never about a simple transfer but must be understood as communicative processes that are characterised by the meaning the content offers and the students' own meaning-making.

Although there are many differences between the perspectives put forward by Dewey, Mouffe, Habermas and Englund, they all share the basic premise that society is characterised by pluralism and that it is therefore important that different opinions and visions of society meet in communication. However, such encounters do not take place outside the power relations that characterise society. When education opens up for different opinions to clash, there is an apparent risk that such discussions will also reflect the power relations we see in society. Critical pluralistic education must not hide these power relations based on the idea that pluralistic conversations are free from power relations or inequality. However, there is a crucial difference between the discussions that take place in education and those that take place in other spheres of society. The difference is that in education there is always a teacher. The teacher can, through their unique position of teaching the students, actively counteract the reproduction of unequal power relations in education. Here it is important to emphasise that democratic values and approaches constitute the limit for what can be regarded as legitimate arguments and positions. Arguments must not offend, belittle or oppress any individual or group. How these limits are applied and realised is a didactic question for the teacher to determine based on their knowledge of the specific teaching situation. However, it is through their didactic choices that the teacher can highlight subordinate perspectives, challenge prevailing hegemonies and allow different voices to be expressed. This means that students are given the opportunity to critically examine the history, values and power relations of societies. Critical examination means that the different options that are available and their possible consequences can be explored. Both norm-critical and normative perspectives are important didactic tools in this respect. They can be used in teaching as a means of broadening and deepening students' perspectives and as tools for questioning habits and ways of thinking, thus stimulating their learning. However, in critical pluralistic education, the aim is not to force students to adopt the specific values and approaches of normative perspectives. The purpose of critical inquiry must always be to contribute to collective *Bildung* and to each individual's intellectual and moral growth.

Both the teaching content and arguments in critical pluralistic education must be based on established knowledge. Here, scientific knowledge has a special position, in that it is systematically and methodically produced to establish a reliable link between reality and conclusions, is critically reviewed according to specific criteria and is accepted by other researchers with good insights into the knowledge field. However, this does not

exclude students being able to learn about and be inspired by other epistemologies and ways of knowing.

Given the perspective on pluralism formulated above, the key question is not whether pluralism is desirable or not. In the theoretical and pedagogical tradition to which we ascribe, pluralism is both a fact and a prerequisite for liberty and equality. Nor is it a question of how pluralism relates to democracy and education. Rather, the question before us is what pluralistic education means now. What are the implications and consequences of pluralism for education and democracy today? In this sense, we stand in the same tradition as Dewey but in a different time and with different challenges.

In our view, there are three contemporary challenges that, in different ways, bring the issue of democracy, education and pluralism to a head. First, we see a political polarisation of the public discourse. As part of this polarisation, there has been a shift in which political controversies also arise around factual issues. That is, the political conflict is not only about normative questions such as: What should we do about climate change? We also see a politicisation of the scientifically answered question: Is climate change due to human activity? Such polarisation puts questions about pluralistic education in a new light. Second, we see an increasing instrumentalization of education. As policy research has shown, education systems in Sweden as well as internationally have moved towards an increased focus on results, comparisons and standardisation. Striving for an education that is about the moral and intellectual growth of students now needs to be assessed and evaluated in relation to predetermined goals and criteria. Third, society is experiencing an ongoing environmental and climate crisis that seriously threatens life-supporting ecosystems and humanity. This requires a comprehensive and effective societal transition, which raises the question of whether there really is time to discuss and critically examine different perspectives in education.

In addition to these three challenges, we also see the formulation of different educational policy responses to what education should be about. On the one hand, there is an educational policy direction that tends to reduce knowledge to the memorisation of facts and relegates values to the private sphere. In times of uncertainty, the memorisation of facts is presented as the only guarantee for stability and continuity. On the other hand, voices are raised for an education that is strongly normative. The idea here is that schools need to educate in a direction in which the beliefs and perspectives to be embraced by students are already determined before they take part in the education. This normative approach is based on the same fundamental idea as that held by the critics of democracy, which is that people are incapable of discussing and making decisions together about their common future. Therefore, from the normative perspective, perspectives and perceptions of the world need to be already determined by the few before the many take their place in education. Both the memorising and the normative approach to education imply that political conversations about common life are removed from the classroom. Not only is education separated from democracy by these two directions, but they also make education apolitical, as political conversations presuppose that there are different views and perspectives to discuss.

A critical pluralistic education is about something else. It is about taking pluralism seriously and sustaining conflicts and different perspectives within the framework of a democratic society. Critical pluralistic education does not seek to harmonise different perspectives and views, but rather to enable their democratic expression. Just as a democratic society can never be free from conflict, democratic education cannot be free from conflict and different perspectives. A harmonisation or reduction of conflicts risks undermining the pluralism that is a prerequisite for both democracy and education. This is why we need to encounter different perspectives and conflicts in a pluralistic way. This should not be misunderstood. It does not mean that a critical pluralistic education has a neutral, objective, or passive approach to the content of education. On the contrary, it means acknowledging that the content of education always has a political dimension: something is chosen to be taught and something is excluded. Such choices are never neutral, objective or given. The content that students encounter must be carefully selected on the basis of its relevance, ethical and political legitimacy, scientific grounding and importance for students' intellectual and moral growth.

To summarise, critical pluralism is based on faith: faith in people's abilities to make reasonable and fair decisions, faith in the transformative power of education and faith in the teacher's ability to choose content and methods that balance different perspectives, challenge students' preconceptions and stimulate their intellectual and moral growth.

Below we formulate twelve theses that specify critical pluralistic education. Although the theses are definitive, our intention is not to prevent future discussions or limit the plurality of educational perspectives. Instead, we believe that it is precisely by making positions visible and sharpening the contrast that new conversations can take shape.

### **§ 1 The aim of critical pluralistic education: intellectual and moral growth**

The overall aim of education is to create the conditions for students' intellectual and moral growth through joint Bildung. All didactical choices are subordinate to this aim.

### **§ 2 Critical pluralistic education is an open process**

Education is an open process in the sense that both the teacher's didactical choices and the students' encounters with the content are characterised by contingency. This double contingency, in the teacher's choice and the students' encounters with the content, means that education not only reproduces given opinions, positions and world views, but also opens up for new ideas.

### **§ 3 Pluralism is a precondition for education**

The plurality of experiences, values, identities and opinions that exist in society and amongst students is not a problem that education should overcome. Pluralism is a prerequisite for education to be an open process aimed at the intellectual and moral growth of the individual.



#### **§ 4 The content of education is pluralistic**

In critical pluralistic education, the content is pluralistic in the sense that it offers students a variety of ways in which to understand the world and themselves. At the same time, the content is always a selection where the teacher, in a judicious way, decides what should be taught.

#### **§ 5 Plurality amongst students is a prerequisite for renewal**

The plurality that exists amongst students creates opportunities for them to formulate new ethical and political positions. Such processes can bear the seeds for new ideas and visions for the future society. In this way, student pluralism is a prerequisite for renewal.

#### **§ 6 Values take shape in education**

Critical pluralistic education consistently departs from the fact that the only basis for our values is to be found in human practice. Values are formed in communication, and education is one of the most important practices for this value formation. In education, the relationship between facts and values is shaped when students encounter and make sense of the teaching content.

#### **§ 7 Critical pluralistic education is radical**

Critical pluralism is radical. Critical pluralism is open to examining, criticising and rethinking habits, approaches and assumptions that have shaped our society and way of life and that we often take for granted.

#### **§ 8 Critical pluralistic education is ethical and political**

Critical pluralistic education reflects key ethical and political positions, approaches and perspectives. At the same time, the teacher can highlight marginalised perspectives in order to challenge the existing power relations and deepen students' abilities to question habits and norms.

#### **§ 9 Critical pluralistic education strives for autonomy**

As an institution, education needs to be a free voice in society. The principle of the autonomy of education means that it should not be used as an ideological tool by different actors in society.

#### **§ 10 Teachers are an autonomous profession**

It is the teacher who chooses the perspective and creates the content and form of education. The teacher's professional judgement is the basis for all didactical choices. This means that critical pluralistic education is not based on a fixed methodology or approach, but that the forms are changeable.

#### **§ 11 Critical pluralistic education is based on democratic values**

Political and ethical conversations in education must be conducted within certain boundaries. The democratic society's consensus on liberty, equality and democratic

approaches constitutes the boundaries of critical pluralism. The application of these boundaries is a didactical issue that the teacher decides on based on the specific educational context and the aim of supporting the intellectual and moral growth of students.

### § 12 Critical pluralistic education builds on established knowledge

Critical pluralism has limits to what can constitute the knowledge base for the content that students encounter and the arguments that are formed in the education. Both the content and the arguments must be based on an established knowledge base in order to be considered legitimate in education.

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