

1. Schools as democracy labs




**Isabel Menezes, Pedro D. Ferreira,
Norberto Ribeiro & Carla Malafaia**
Centre for Investigation and
Educational Intervention, Faculty of
Psychology and Education Sciences,
University of Porto, Portugal

Back in 1916, in *Democracy and education*, John Dewey challenged the role of education as preparation for life. He did so by considering that “the learning in school should be continuous with that out of school”. But he also assumed that education should aim to promote the “capacity to live as a social member so that what [the person] gets from living with others balances with what [s/] he contributes”. In his view, however, “education is not a mere means to such a life. Education is such a life”.

In this sense, education should not be conceived as being outside of one’s own life. An education that does not consider life as a fundamental part of its daily educational practices is easily vulnerable to arguments that question the political and social mandate that has been attributed to it and which give rise to criticism. Education should also not take students as passive consumers without agency (Biesta, 2011; Biesta & Lawy, 2006; Hedtke, 2013).



In fact, we learn quite a lot about democracy just by being at school: we learn about justice and injustice, equality and inequality, participation and alienation, power and powerlessness but we also learn to express one’s ideas, to debate and discuss, to negotiate and be flexible, to oppose and confront others, to argue and advocate in favour of those who are treated unfairly. As such, the school experience is inevitably a political experience.

There is a long tradition of research that demonstrates that education is a key predictor of civic and political participation, including not only conventional (e.g. voting) but also emerging (e.g. signing online petitions, demonstrating, boycotting) forms (e.g. Hadjar & Beck, 2010; Quintelier, 2010; Stockemer, 2014). This is not surprising as schools do provide a lot of opportunities for students to live democracy – and experience its imperfections –, in and out-of-class. In a recent European study, Catch-EyoU⁵, young people stress, during focus groups discussions, how these diverse experiences are important:




Marta: *Maybe because I went for other things that exist here in school: Young Parliament; European Club, all these things. And I feel it is a great opportunity for young people to participate in the affairs of the community, not just school, but in terms of politics in our country and in Europe. I think we have a lot of opportunities ... (Portuguese student, female)*

Linda: *I think the school is the most important (institution to foster an active citizenship), because it's where we're raised in school, so if you get information early in your life and you know it's a place where you're often, you might not get that at home, so it's important that you get it somewhere else. (Swedish student, female)*



Georg: *politics should be brought more into the school, because when talking about all the things we have been talking about today, the only way to get rid of them [the problems such as youth disinterest in politics] is that young people [acquire] an understanding of politics as something where their voice really counts, where their opinion counts; as something that is not distant, strange and incomprehensible, but close". (Estonian student, male)*

Petr: *The students' council meets here, the school representatives, some teachers and students and there are usually about 30-40 people here in the meeting room, talking about various topics. People say what bothers them, what they want, and the director talks to us, expecting that we bring it directly to the classes. (Czech student, male)*



5 Constructing Active Citizenship with European Youth, a research project co-funded by the EU Horizon 2020 Research and innovation programme: <http://www.catcheyou.eu>

These findings resonate with other research we have been conducting in schools for the last decade (Malafaia, Teixeira, Neves & Menezes, 2016; Menezes & Ferreira, 2014; Ribeiro, Neves & Menezes, 2017). A first and especially significant tendency is the noticeable trusting, yet critical, relationship students maintain with school. They insist, again and again, that schools are the only context where they can learn about politics: "if not in schools, where?" they keep asking. However, as a second trend, there is a recognition that while there are many opportunities, in and out-of-class, for students to participate, many rest on tokenistic and top-down approaches – an illusory access to citizenship that risks having pervasive effects – and are largely dependent on individual teachers who may, or may not, be willing and able to contribute to a plural, democratic and participatory school culture.

So, while schools are inevitable contexts for living and learning (about) politics, the quality of democratic life within schools should be scrutinised. Are students encouraged to express their opinions, even when they disagree with colleagues and/or teachers? Do they have room to discuss the implications of the knowledge they are learning in their lives? Are there opportunities for them to get involved in solving real-life school and community problems? Are their opinions about the way schools are organized and run taken seriously? On the whole, our argument here is that there is no way to advocate for the role of the school as a context for democratic learning if we take the living component out of the equation, i.e. unless we invite democracy and politics in.