

Educating democracy: Competences for a democratic culture

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Abstract

The focus within the European tradition of democratic education has increasingly been on personal traits or character traits, values, and skills, rather than on broad structural features or systemic issues. This is reflected in a recent publication by the Council of Europe titled *Competences for Democratic Culture: Living Together as Equals in Culturally Diverse Democratic Societies*. In that publication relevant character traits are grouped under the heading 'competences for democratic culture'. We scrutinize the notion of 'democratic competences' which is developed in the publication and suggest a different one. The Council of Europe presents a model with 20 competences, each of which falls into one of four categories: (1) a value, (2) an attitude, (3) a skill, or (4) knowledge and understanding. We suggest a notion of competences where a competence is conceived of as a complex construct composed of elements from all these categories. We then describe seven democratic competences, grounded in a Deweyan conception of democracy, which we think are both central to a democratic culture while also educationally relevant and manageable.

Keywords

Democracy, democratic competences, democratic culture, education, John Dewey

Introduction

The focus within the European tradition of democratic education has increasingly been on personal traits or character traits, values, and skills, rather than on broad structural features or systemic issues. This is reflected in a recent publication by the Council of Europe titled *Competences for Democratic Culture: Living Together as Equals in Culturally Diverse Democratic Societies*. The Council of Europe has, in its 70 years (founded in 1949), promoted democracy, human rights and the rule of law, through formal institutions (such as the European Human Rights Court set up in 1959) and through extensive cultural and educational activities. With the adoption of the Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education in 1997 (<https://www.coe>).

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int/en/web/edc/charter-on-education-for-democratic-citizenship-and-human-rights-education), followed by extensive publication, workshops, conferences and training programmes, the Council of Europe has been a key agent in the development of democratic education in its 47 member states across the continent.

In the publication *Competences for Democratic Culture*, the authors present a model of what they refer to as ‘competences for democratic culture’ which they believe will provide educators at all levels with a practical tool to work towards democracy in their educational settings. One underlying assumption is that democracy cannot flourish unless it is grounded in a culture that is not only open to democracy but actively supports it:

The term ‘culture of democracy’ rather than ‘democracy’ is used in the present context to emphasise the fact that, while democracy cannot exist without democratic institutions and laws, such institutions and laws cannot work in practice unless they are grounded in a culture of democracy, that is, in democratic values, attitudes and practices. (Council of Europe, 2016: 15)

Such an approach has direct consequences for how democracy and democratic citizenship are dealt with, in the context of compulsory education. Thorbjørn Jagland, secretary general of the Council of Europe (2016), ends the preface to the publication with the following words:

The aim is not to teach students what to think, but rather how to think, in order to navigate a world where not everyone holds their views, but we each have a duty to uphold the democratic principles which allow all cultures to co-exist. (p. 7)

Towards the end of the document the authors sum up their objectives with the model:

... the model that is presented here is an attempt to provide a description of the competences that need to be acquired by learners if they are to become effective engaged citizens and live peacefully together with others as equals in culturally diverse democratic societies. It is hoped that the current model will prove useful for educational decision making and planning and will assist in the harnessing of educational systems for the purpose of preparing learners for life as democratically and interculturally competent citizens. (Council of Europe, 2016: 57)

In this article, we scrutinize the notion of ‘democratic competences’ which is developed in the publication and suggest a different conceptualization. The Council of Europe presents a model with 20 competences, each of which falls into one of four categories: (1) a value, (2) an attitude, (3) a skill, or (4) knowledge and understanding. We, in contrast, suggest a notion of competences wherein a competence is conceived of as a complex construct composed of elements from all of these categories, and describe seven democratic competences which we think are both central to a democratic culture, while also educationally relevant and manageable.

In this Council of Europe (2018: 29–32) publication, there is little discussion of the underlying conception of democracy, although there is a good discussion of several concepts on which the model is based – concepts such as ‘identity’ and ‘culture’. The reason for this could be that the document is not an academic publication but rather a practical guide for educators and policy makers, who might not be keen on reading a complex and abstract discussion of democratic theory. We believe, however, that any discussion of democratic competences must rest on a clear conception of democracy; current theories of democracy are so diverse that they are bound to give rise to very different conceptions of democratic competences and democratic culture. Thus, before we get to the discussion of democratic competences, we will consider briefly current challenges to democracy and three conditions which any theory of democracy needs to address (section ‘Challenges of

democracy’), and then describe three different conceptions of democracy, favouring one inspired by the work of John Dewey in the early decades of the 20th century (section ‘Conditions and conceptions of democracy’). With a clear conception of democracy in mind, we define seven complex democratic competences and compare them to the simple competences listed in the publication by the Council of Europe arguing that our conception offers a better founded and more practical way of approaching democratic education in compulsory schools (section ‘Competences for Deweyan democracy’). Finally, we consider whether we have stretched the concept of democracy too wide or whether it might need to be stretched even wider (section ‘Concluding remarks’).

Challenges to democracy

As the iron curtain collapsed at the end of the 1980s and eastern Europe gradually became democratic – or at least more democratic – in the way the countries were governed (public elections, division of power, media that was more open, etc.), many people saw the beginning of a new era of hope and democracy in Europe. And in many ways that was true. Two decades into the 21st century, however, this optimism has given way to pessimism and the politics of fear and xenophobia. Reflecting on the situation, Ivan Krastev (2007) says, ‘The liberal era that began in Central Europe in 1989 has come to an end. Populism and illiberalism are tearing the region apart’ (p. 56). These challenges affect not only the eastern part of the continent but also the established democracies where the rise of the extreme right has transformed the political landscape with a profound impact on democratic culture, as Theo Gavrielides (2016) observes in his paper ‘The death of democracy and the forces of power and control: The case of Europe’:

. . . the rise of nationalist and far-right parties in Greece, the Netherlands, the UK, France and so on bear evidence that progress to social justice is being hampered while the widening gap between the powerful and the powerless in many areas of civil rights protection has brought a significant backlash in how we accept what is normal and what is not. This decline is gradually being accepted as justifiable due to the convincing nature of these reactionary forces. (p. 2)

These reactionary forces have certainly stretched the fabric of democracy in what we might refer to as ‘the established democracies’ of western Europe, as witnessed for instance in the Brexit episode, the rise of True Finns in Finland, and Vox in Spain. But the problems are not confined to the formal political field but are also evident in popular culture, where hate speech and other mundane forms of intolerance, xenophobia, and lack of respect for human values are evident. Against these reactionary forces, however, people should not give up on democracy but, rather, find new ways of working towards more democracy. And this is exactly what the Council of Europe is aiming for with the generation of a model for competences for democratic culture. And although critical of the very conception of competences offered by the Council of Europe and its lack of grounding it in democratic theory, we see our criticism as a constructive continuation of work in this very direction.

The history of philosophy contains various arguments for the importance of democracy, from Aristotle who argued that although a deviant constitution, democracy was the best of a bad lot and Popper who argued that democracy was a means for replacing those in power without bloodshed and violence (Popper, 1945), to the more subtle and substantial accounts of deliberative democracy (see for example, Bohman and Rehg, 1997; Young, 2002; Gutmann and Thompson, 2004) and those of agonistic democracy (Mouffe, 2000; Tryggvason, 2018). These theories are usually concerned with democracy as a system of government rather than as a culture or a form of life (see Dewey, 1916). Against this multiplicity of notions of democracy, the Council of Europe’s failure to

ground its own conception of democratic competences in a conception of democracy is unfortunate. We intend to remedy this shortcoming in the next section: first by describing three kinds of conditions to which any democratic theory needs to respond, and then by identifying three different conceptions of democracy, arguing in favour of one in particular.

Conditions and conceptions of democracy

Let's step back and consider why, in the first place, we want democracy. There are at least three kinds of conditions that any theory of democracy and democratic competences must address:

Political condition: People share limited social and economic space.

Moral condition: People are vulnerable and their self-respect is grounded in social conditions.

Condition of individualization: People live and form their identity or their self-concept in an interplay between the inner world of personal life and the outer world of social relations.

The first condition concerns the fact that people live amid others and depend on the same stock of goods, both economically and socially. Systemic theories of democracy, whether liberal or deliberative, consider this condition central (Bohman and Rehg, 1997). The political condition is comparable to the external conditions that Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) referred to as the state of nature where, he maintained, people had the right to defend themselves while trying to acquire whatever they longed for, resulting in a perpetual war of everyone against everyone. He thought that the only escape would be for people to surrender part of their rights to an all-powerful ruler who could bring about peace by coercing the population into cooperation (Hobbes, 2009: Ch. XIII). This argument of Hobbes brings out the importance of creating political institutions in order to bring the use of force in society under the rule of law. It is another question whether such political institutions can or should be democratic. Hobbes believed that they had to be authoritarian.

The second condition concerns certain moral aspects of human nature. Habermas (1990) says that any theory of justice must take into account the fact that people are vulnerable, developing their identity in a world of meaning which is the product of social relations:

'Moral intuitions' are intuitions that instruct us on how to best behave in situations where it is in our power, by being thoughtful and considerate, to counteract the extreme vulnerability of others. In anthropological terms, morality is a safety device compensating for a vulnerability that is built into the socio-cultural form of life. The basic facts of such a socio-cultural form of life are the following: Creatures that are individuated only through socialization are vulnerable and morally in need of considerateness. (p. 199)

The idea of Habermas is, in a way, the opposite of Hobbes' response to the first condition. Hobbes thought that because people are self-interested and aggressive, they need external authority to keep an appropriate distance from one another. Habermas, however, argues that *because* people are vulnerable and morally in need of considerateness, they need to stay close to each other. And since in a decently just society, it should not be only the fortunate few who enjoy the good of considerateness, it must not be left to the whim of individual charity, but rather, it must be reflected in the basic institutional structure.

We refer to the third condition as the condition of individualization. The underlying question here is how people come to think of themselves as distinct persons with a distinct character. The Danish scholar Per Schultz Jørgensen (2004), writing about education and schooling, puts the point in the following way:

The individual has to choose, to decide, to act and to understand [her] own life in a reflexive movement. That means self-centredness but at the same time engenders a profound need for a social context to return to and rely on. The key concepts are ‘self’ and ‘social integration’ . . . (p. 117)

Jørgensen (2004) continues a little later saying,

This points to two levels of personal existence: one is the inner world of experience; the other is the outer world of social relations – the private world and the public. (p. 117)

From these considerations about the human condition, Jørgensen (2004) infers two statements concerning education:

First statement: formation of character: The modern society has placed much more responsibility on the single individual to form its own character – that means the formation of identity, self-understanding and social role.

Second statement: participation in learning: If learning should contribute to formation of character then there must be an understandable consistency between the inner and outer learning environment – that means an active participant role in our own learning and in the social environment. (p. 118)

This interplay between internal and external factors is the core of what we refer to as the condition of individualization. Jørgensen’s conclusion is that only in a democratic learning environment can this dual condition of the individual be respected. His ideas apply not only to learning in schools but to education and moral development more generally, and to the process of identity formation which is an inescapable part of becoming a citizen.

When these three conditions are considered collectively, they point to the necessity of democracy for a just society, that is, a society in which people have a fair chance of developing into flourishing citizens. The first condition points towards the importance of the rule of law, the second condition highlights the need for an institutional structure where care and considerateness are central and distributed among the whole population, while the third condition highlights the importance of thinking of the institutional structure and cultural conditions not only in relation to the fully developed citizen but also in relation to the *developing* citizen. This obviously applies to the infant who develops into a mature citizen but it also applies to the adult; the status of being a citizen is never complete but is continuously in the making. To sum up, we might say that only in a democratic society will vulnerable people be able to share a common social and economic space and develop into flourishing citizens.

We have only offered an outline of an argument for the necessity of democracy. Most contemporary theories of democracy focus on institutional design, both in terms of the positive understanding of democracy and in the defence of democracy against pessimistic charges (Habermas, 1996; Bohman and Rehg, 1997; Estlund, 2002). Assuming, however, that the question of appropriate institutional design had been settled, say in favour of deliberative democracy, there is still a question about which competences are necessary for people who are to be governed democratically and who are, at the same time, the ones who give democratic institutions their life and maintain a democratic culture. Thus, in developing a conception of democratic competences, we must consider these three distinct but interrelated conditions.

Different conceptions of democracy entail different *roles* for schools as institutions in a democratic society, as well as different conceptions of what makes *school practices* democratic. Institutional theories, in which democracy is conceived of primarily as a form of government and as an institutional design, are extremely limited as an educational ideal. Such theories may even

appear to be rather awkward when applied to school settings. When we have asked teachers and headmasters what they do in the way of democracy in their schools, they usually mention things having to do with structure such as student representation, choice and voting. When probed further, as to how democratic principles are reflected in the daily work of teachers and students, they often try to extend these formal principles of structure, choice and voting to teaching and classroom work. The result is usually disastrous; school structure is very much hierarchical, choice is severely limited by national curricula and standardized tests, and voting, if used at all, is rarely about any important issues.

To avoid the situation mentioned earlier, people have asked the question: What competences do students need in order to participate effectively in a democratic community? This shifts the focus from structural concerns to individual competences and, thus, may provide for more tangible ways of developing democratic learning practices. It remains to say, however, what *democracy* means in this context; and it is, additionally, necessary to steer clear of the danger of making democratic or citizenship education simply a matter of individual competences and skills without taking into account the inevitable social context (Biesta and Lawry, 2006; Pontes et al., 2019).

We identify three general conceptions of democracy which have very different educational implications. The first (a version of liberal democracy) we call *the market conception of democracy*. According to it, democracy is concerned with institutional structure which serves to accommodate people's diverse views, preferences and positions by ensuring a free market of ideas and opinions and by regulating competition in this market to avoid any form of coercion or monopoly (Dahl, 1989). Accordingly, the democratic role of schools becomes mainly twofold: (1) to strive to make people fit to participate (compete) in the market of ideas, and (2) to provide students with a knowledge of the fundamental rights and basic principles that are needed for society to function efficiently. The role of schools will be to *prepare* students for a society to which they do not yet belong. Democracy becomes a task that schools face and must solve, however successfully, just as schools should produce knowledgeable and skilled workers for the workplace (Biesta, 2006). From this conception of democracy, one can certainly derive a conception of democratic culture and democratic competences – but those will be geared towards competition and the advancement of one's own interests and, hence, will differ from the ones suggested by the Council of Europe, which focus more on cooperation and the common good.

Liberal conceptions of democracy, such as the market conception, are sometimes contrasted with a *deliberative* conception of democracy (Bohman and Rehg, 1997; Cohen, 1997; Habermas, 1998; Young, 2002; Gutmann and Thompson, 2004). This view gives dialogue and mutual recognition a more prominent role in education than the market conception does, and it also places more emphasis on cooperation than on competition. Still, the deliberative conception faces problems in the context of education since in schools (a) the individuals involved do not come together as equals but as unequal in important respects (teacher/student, headmaster/teacher, headmaster/student), (b) they are not there for mutual benefit, and (c) part of the population, namely the students, has no choice but to participate independently of whether life within the boundaries of the school has any meaning. Moreover, the deliberative view does not provide any account of the role of attitudes, emotions and practices that are essential for sustaining and cultivating a democratic community while, at the same time, being central for the school as an educational setting (Tryggvason, 2018). The problem is not that it goes in the wrong direction, like the market view of democracy, but rather that it does not go far enough.

A third conception of democracy, which we refer to as *Deweyan democracy*, retains the dialogical emphasis of the deliberative view but places the concept of democratic *character* rather than democratic *structure* or *procedure* at its core (hence responding directly to the moral condition and to the condition of individuation as discussed earlier). Such a conception of democracy was argued

for by John Dewey in the first decades of the 20th century (Dewey, 1916), and has been revived in recent decades (Putnam, 1990; Biesta, 2006; Hansen, 2006).

Dewey thought of education and democracy as intertwined: a democratic community is characterized by mutual learning and any truly educational setting must be democratic in the sense that participation should be meaningful and free of coercion. Moreover, according to Dewey (1998 [1939]), issues relating to democratic practices arise in the most mundane circumstances of individuals working together and need not be related to any institutional design nor to binding collective decision-making:

[. . .] democracy as a way of life is controlled by personal faith in personal day-by-day working together with others. Democracy is the belief that even when needs and ends or consequences are different for each individual, the habit of amicable cooperation – which may include, as in sport, rivalry and competition – is itself a priceless addition to life. To take as far as possible every conflict which arises – and they are bound to arise – out of the atmosphere and medium of force, of violence as a means of settlement into that of discussion and of intelligence is to treat those who disagree – even profoundly – with us as those from whom we may learn, and in so far, as friends. (p. 342)

Dewey thought of democracy as rooted in personal attitudes and habits – democratic character or moral virtue – arguing that institutions are democratic only insofar as they can be seen, in their day-to-day functioning, as projections of democratic character (see Chambers, 2013). In *The Public and its Problems* he writes,

The idea of democracy is a wider and fuller idea than can be exemplified in the state even at its best. To be realized it must affect all modes of human association, the family, the school, industry, religion. (Dewey, 1946: 143)

Dewey (1946) then elaborates on the meaning of democracy – or the content of the idea of democracy itself apart from the various contingent forms which the so-called democratic institutions and states have taken. For him, the idea of democracy and the idea of community life are inseparable:

Regarded as an idea, democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself. It is an ideal in the only intelligible sense of an ideal: namely, the tendency and movement of some thing which exists carried to its final limit, viewed as completed, perfected. (p. 148)

Deweyan democracy gives rise to conceptions of democratic competences and culture that are very different from what one might get from the market view of democracy. According to the market view, the fact that individuals differ and disagree is unfortunate; it is in the face of this fact that democratic procedures and institutions are needed, much as Hobbes' idea of the one powerful ruler is a response to the hostile state of nature. Moreover, the important competences will be those which further one's interests in the market of ideas while tolerating others. Dewey, however, views the plurality of interests, values and preferences as a positive fact that gives rise to learning and which is 'a priceless addition to life'. For him, democratic life is a life of learning and, thus, the generation and maintenance of a democratic society depends on a democratic educational system (Dewey, 1916), a point which Hilary Putnam (1990) captures neatly in his paper on Deweyan democracy:

The extent to which we take the commitment to democracy seriously is measured by the extent to which we take the commitment to education seriously. (p. 1697)

The conceptions of democratic competences and democratic culture which the Deweyan conception gives rise to concern learning, growth, and communal living in a shared but very limited world.

Competences for Deweyan democracy

While institutional theories of democracy talk about what it means for a state to be democratic, and by extension, what it means for the citizens to *live in a democracy*, the Deweyan conception is about what it means to *lead a democratic life*. When the political field is governed by appropriate democratic principles of cooperation and governance, we can say that the state is democratic and that people live in a democracy. Institutional theories of democracy describe and contextualize such principles. But people can live in a democracy and yet lead lives that are tainted with oppression, silencing, even violence and a lack of any real opportunities for a meaningful and flourishing life. The Deweyan conception takes as its starting point the realities of ordinary life and asks, what is it for such a life to be democratic? The answer lies less in the overarching structures of society than in the principles, culture, and values that people directly experience in their daily lives. Thus, Dewey maintained, the core of democracy is less about institutional design and more about cooperation, communication, and learning – and a mutual commitment to these. The recent ‘anti-establishment’ movements (e.g. the election of Trump in the United States, the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom, the rise of VOX in Spain) bear witness to the lack of this kind of mutual recognition of democratic principles and values. Thus, the precondition for a school to be democratic is not that it be governed according to the same democratic principles as regulate the political field (such as a threefold division of power, public elections, etc.) but that the school community be based on certain democratic values, and that life in school should be characterized by mutual understanding and acceptance of the school as a field of education and growth in a democratic society.

Deweyan democracy takes as its point of departure mutual coexistence in a community of learning. His ideas have often been described as a theory about a certain way of living rather than about organization or structure – one might say that they are bottom-up rather than top-down. In line with this, we identify certain democratic competences having to do with the ability and willingness to work constructively with others, engage in dialogue with people with whom one may disagree, resolve conflicts without the use of violence, be willing and ready to question authority, while, at the same time, recognizing legitimate forms and uses of authority.

Discursive competence

This refers to the ability and the willingness to engage in a dialogue with others. This is not just the skill of being able to express one’s ideas and listen to others, it also involves the attitude that one is ready to learn from others, that is, that one is willing to engage in a dialogue with others in honesty and with respect, and to value what others have to say and consider it as potentially true or credible. Discursive competence also involves the willingness and ability to use relevant arguments and identify the central issues at hand. Thus, this competence demands knowledge of the relevant issues and the willingness and the skill to acquire knowledge when one finds oneself wanting in the relevant matters (see for example, Hess, 2009).

At the heart of Dewey’s views on learning is the idea of critical reflection, but such reflection need not be a solitary activity but can be done in a community with others. And in a democracy which is based on face-to-face relationships developed within face-to-face communities, a discursive competence will be central to democratic living.

Competence for conflict resolution

This refers to a complex set of values, attitudes, skills and knowledge that is needed in order to both formulate and defend, with arguments, one's own point of view as well as respecting those of others. Fundamental to this competence is valuing human dignity, rights and culture. It also involves the skill of presenting one's own point of view in a manner accessible to others, especially those who disagree with oneself (to be 'reasonable' in Rawls's sense). Moreover, it involves the attitude that one will accept legitimate authority when it comes to conflict resolution.

As quoted earlier, Dewey thought of democracy as 'the belief that even when needs and ends or consequences are different for each individual, the habit of amicable cooperation . . . is itself a priceless addition to life'. Thus, Dewey would place this competence for conflict resolution at core of the democratic character, but he would also claim that the process of resolving conflict must be an educational process, that is a process where we 'treat those who disagree . . . with us as those from whom we may learn'.

Competence for critical reevaluation

This refers to the ability to reflect on personal and cultural precepts. Although democratic culture, like any culture, relies on various preconceptions of what is right or wrong, good or bad, permissible or not permissible, if such a culture is to develop and not become stagnant and coercive, people must be able to question any form of authority and power within the culture while, at the same time, admitting that not just anything goes. Thus, this competence refers to the willingness and courage of the citizens to question what is taken to be self-evident, and also to reconsider their own self-conception – not merely leaving this at an intellectual level but also doing experiments in living according to such a critical outlook (see for example, hooks, 1994).

Most conceptions of democracy, and the Deweyan conception in particular, reject external authority, whether in the form of a ruler (which is obvious) or in the form of customs and traditions (which is not as obvious in the case of republican conceptions of democracy). But rejecting the authority of tradition is not the same as denouncing tradition but, rather, being open about reconsidering the customs, traditions and tenants of tradition. Here, as in the first competence, critical reflection is essential.

Competence for communal living

This refers to a set of skills, attitudes, values, and knowledge that enable people to conceive of their lives as a life in a community that is a continuous realization of the coming together of diverse individuals, extending from one generation to another. This requires that the citizens be able to value justice, fairness and the rule of law, and entails that they be able to perceive some of the communal preferences as their own preferences while accepting, also, that sometimes the preferences of the wider community or future generations may take precedence over their own immediate preferences (see for example, Rousseau, 1979). It also requires that people value cultural diversity since the community is (either actually or potentially) culturally diverse.

Most conceptions of democracy would include among the important competences the competence for communal living. They would, however, interpret it differently. Some, such as the market view of democracy, would see communal living as the (instrumental) ability to participate in the market of ideas, be tolerant and respect the rules of conduct constitutive of the market of ideas. Dewey, however, saw the ability to live in a community with others not as instrumental for democratic life, but as constitutive of, or even synonymous with, democratic living.

Competence for resilience

This refers to a set of personal skills and attitudes which support people in maintaining an intention of holding on to a value or goal in the face of challenges or obstacles. Resilience could here be conceived as a virtue in the Aristotelian sense, where it lies in the mean between the extremes of obstinacy on the one hand, and subservience on the other hand. In relation to a competence for communal living, resilience is, in this sense, important for living a meaningful life in a community which is characterized not only by diversity but also, at times at least, by agonistic plurality (see for example, Mouffe, 2000).

This competence becomes particularly relevant when considering the two levels of personal existence identified by Jørgensen concerning the inner life and of the external life of the person. In a world where the external life of the person is marked by a diverse – and often conflicting – world views, holding on to values and principle is important but also challenging. This also relates directly to Dewey's ideas of learning as grounded in experience. Dewey (1916) did not accept the empiricist concept of experience but, instead a classical conception found, for instance, in Plato, 'To Plato experience meant habituation, or the conservation of the net product of a lot of past chance trials' (p. 311). Competence for resilience concerns the ability to conserve some net product of a lot of past chance trials, but, of course, not stubbornly hanging on to any accepted dogma.

Competence for forming a conception of the good life

This refers to a competence which is a precondition for all the previous ones. Without such a competence, the individual does not have any position to defend, no intention or value to hold on to, no conviction that might need reevaluation. It will even be difficult to talk about a pluralistic or a diverse community without this competence being widespread, since the defining characteristic would be missing, namely a conception of the good life, or 'philosophies of life' as Rawls puts it (Rawls, 2001). This competence might be referred to as 'ethical' rather than 'political' but, as such, it is the competence to form an ethical base – or moral foundation – on which to stand and from which one views and values the world. For sure, most people have this competence, at least to some extent, but that does not mean that most people form the *same* conception of the good life, nor does it mean that a person's conception of the good life is ever complete or fixed. The fundamentality of this competence is aptly brought out by Rawls (2001) when he says, 'just institutions and the political virtues would serve no purpose . . . unless those institutions and virtues not only permitted but also sustained conceptions of the good . . . that citizens can affirm as worthy of their full allegiance' (pp. 140–141).

Competence for respecting the natural boundaries of human living

Democratic interaction does not only involve interactions among humans but also interactions with the non-human environment. This extension takes two forms: First, human life is a life on earth, and by upsetting the natural balance human behaviour may undermine the possibility of meaningful living in the future, and compromise people's lives in different parts of the world. Thus, a competence for recognizing and acting in harmony with such environmental and global responsibility is certainly among the necessary democratic competences. Second, human virtues such as kindness, respect and friendship apply not only to other humans but also to non-human animals, and even to parcels of land or ecosystems. Thus, quite independently of the detrimental influence that human living has had – and continues to have – on the conditions for all life on earth, decent living involves non-human animals. In her *Frontiers of Justice*, Martha Nussbaum (2006) writes,

‘The purpose of social cooperation . . . ought to be to live decently together in a world in which many species try to flourish’ (p. 351).

The list mentioned earlier of competences is not meant to be exhaustive; others might want to define more competences or construct them in different ways. We believe, however, that identifying democratic competences along these lines has important practical value for educators and scholars alike.

As mentioned at the outset, this article is inspired by the recent work of Council of Europe on democratic competences, but our conception of competences differs from that suggested by the Council of Europe. While we conceive of competences as complex constructs composed of values, attitudes, skills and knowledge, the Council refers to these constituent elements as themselves competences. Thus, in *Competences for Democratic Culture*, the authors first identify 55 different competences which they then reduce to a set of 20: three values, eight skills, six attitudes, and three bodies of knowledge (pp. 10–11). The authors are well aware that there is no single orthodox understanding of the term ‘competence’ and explain their understanding in the following way:

For the purposes of the current model, the term ‘competence’ is defined as ‘the ability to mobilise and deploy relevant values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and/or understanding in order to respond appropriately and effectively to the demands, challenges and opportunities that are presented by a given type of context’. Democratic situations are one such type of context. Thus, democratic competence is the ability to mobilise and deploy relevant psychological resources (i.e. values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and/or understanding) in order to respond appropriately and effectively to the demands, challenges and opportunities presented by democratic situations. (Council of Europe, 2016: 23)

There is some ambiguity in the text concerning the meaning of the term ‘competence’: On the one hand, a competence is said to be something simple, such as a particular value or a particular attitude. On the other hand, a competence is said to be an ‘ability to mobilise and deploy’ certain values or attitudes. According to the latter, a competence is always a kind of skill – an ability to mobilize and deploy something. Thus, the 20 simple competences that are listed in the *Competences for Democratic Culture* would be only constituent elements of such a competence. We will, however, not dwell on these issues but move on to compare the seven complex competences which we have defined with the list of 20 simple competences in *Competences for Democratic Culture*.

The relation between the simple competences and the complex ones is far from trivial. Although the simple competences – the values, skills, and knowledge – all figure in the complex ones, the latter are not defined simply as specific combinations of the former. In Table 1 given below, we have set out in a graphical way a relation between the seven complex competences we have defined and the 20 values, skills, attitudes, and bodies of knowledge that are identified in *Competences for Democratic Culture*.

It is far from clear how the squares in the table should be filled out. Some of the simple competences (the left hand side of the table) are so general and basic that they should figure in any complex competence such as the seven we have defined. Consider, for instance, the values (lines 1–3) which are all constituents of the complex competences. The same should perhaps be true of the attitudes (lines 4–9) and knowledge (lines 18–20) even if we have left some squares blank to indicate a difference in centrality. Perhaps there should be no blank squares at all in the table; although some of the simple competences are more central for certain complex competences: ‘Knowledge and critical understanding of the self’ will be central to ‘Competence for forming a conception of a good life’ but less so for ‘Competence for respecting the natural boundaries of human living’. However, none of the simple ones will be completely absent (whatever that might mean) from any of the complex ones.

Table 1. Interrelation between the Council of Europe definition of competences and our definition of seven complex competences.

Complex competences		1. Discursive	2. conflict resolution	3. critical reevaluation	4. communal living	5. resilience	6. conception of a good life	7. respect nat boundaries
Simple competences								
1	Valuing human dignity and human rights							
2	Valuing cultural diversity							
3	Valuing democracy, justice, fairness, equality, and the rule of law							
4	Openness to cultural otherness and to other beliefs, world views and practices							
5	Respect							
6	Civic-mindedness							
7	Responsibility							
8	Self-efficacy							
9	Tolerance of ambiguity							
10	Autonomous learning skills							
11	Analytical and critical thinking skills							
12	Skills of listening and observing							
13	Empathy							
14	Flexibility and adaptability							
15	Linguistic, communicative and plurilingual skills							
16	Cooperation skills							
17	Conflict-resolution skills							
18	Knowledge and critical understanding of the self							
19	Knowledge and critical understanding of language and communication							
20	Knowledge and critical understanding of the world							

The two conceptions of competences are clearly distinct, and although there is no ‘right’ conception in the literature, most theories favour complex structures which include values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge (Rychen, 2009; Mogensen and Schnack, 2010; Hoskins et al., 2015). Furthermore, we believe that the conception of complex competences is more useful for

educational purposes and would serve the aims of the Council of Europe better. To explain the advantage of the complex conception of competences over the simple one, we will discuss two problems which the model advanced by the Council of Europe faces.

The first problem – which we might call ‘the practical problem’ – is that simple competences are so general, and figure in so many aspects of life and learning, that almost any teacher may claim to be working towards one or more of them by simply doing whatever he or she has always been doing. Even an authoritative teacher, following a rigid and outdated curriculum which leaves little room for discussion and originality, may claim to be working on the competences of *respect, skills of listening and observing, and knowledge and critical understanding of the world*. So, when asked whether he or she is promoting democracy by cultivating competences for democratic culture, such a teacher may well give a confidently positive answer. To work around this problem, within the model offered by the Council of Europe, one might suggest that in reality one never works just with one or two competences but always with a bundle of them. But since the simple competences are presented as independent of each other, the model does not offer any means of identifying the relevant bundles. Moreover, this very response leads in the direction of the conception of complex competences such as the one we have been arguing for.

The second problem concerns directly the very definition of a democratic competence. As has been pointed out by many scholars, many good qualities that people have – such as empathy, resilience, and respect – make people better persons only if they are already good. A vicious criminal will not become a better person by being more resilient, and respect does not make life under the Mafia in Sicily, *Cosa Nostra*, better or more democratic. It is only the right kind of respect – for the right things and for the right reasons – that contributes to moral integrity and democracy. Even empathy may lead away from democratic character in a person developing pathological dependence on another person. So attitudes, skills and knowledge do not make a person *better* or *more democratic* unless the values, attitudes and knowledge from which the person acts are already good or conducive to democracy. Again, the fragmented view of democratic competences offered by the Council of Europe does not offer any principled way of working around this problem whereas our conception of complex competences addressed it from the start.

Our criticism here of the simple competences echoes criticism of the view that schools should focus on performative virtues rather than on moral virtues:

. . . those ‘[performative] virtues [such as resilience or grit]’ can be positively dangerous if they are untethered from moral constraints. The missing element in the character make-up of the ‘banksters’ in the run-up of the financial crisis, or the average heinous dictator, is clearly not a higher level of resilience and self-confidence. (Kristjánsson, 2015: 6)

Insofar as competences are akin to virtues they are bound to be complex rather than simple. And furthermore, as each of the competences is supposed to make people more democratic, or improve their democratic character, or make them more fit for democratic living, we should expect the competences to be more like the moral virtues than the performative virtues.

Concluding remarks

One benefit of thinking about competences as complex structures – combining cognitive, affective, and dispositional aspects – is that it aligns with recent work on character education, based on neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, which has gained recognition and support both inside and outside the academia (Aristotle, 1984; Bohlin, 2005; Kristjánsson, 2015). Some of the democratic competences we identify might actually be described as virtues in the Aristotelian sense so that character education might include the cultivation of *democratic* character along with *moral* character and

performative virtues. But although we take it to be to our advantage that our view aligns with recent work on character education, we do not want to base it on any specific moral theory, such as virtue ethics rather than, say, Kantian deontology. We do think it is important, however, that the different competences have a moral dimension and are not construed simply as performative virtues or instrumental character traits. Thus, what we refer to as ‘competence for resilience’ is not tantamount to what Angela Duckworth calls ‘grit’ and construes in purely performative terms (see Arthur et al., 2016).

The above-mentioned democratic competences might be thought of as competences not only for living a good life in harmony with oneself and others, but also for living in harmony with non-human nature. These are very demanding objectives and one may wonder whether, by so extending the reach of the concept of democracy, we have not stretched it too wide. From a point of view where there is a clear distinction between politics and ethics – such as in Rawls’ (2001) theory of justice – the answer would probably be affirmative: ‘democracy’ is a political term.

Any conception of democracy – and, by extension, of democratic competences and culture – runs the risk of being too expansive. Dewey’s conception certainly involved expanding the concept by applying it beyond structural issues and procedures for collective decision-making, but his expansion also grew out of an attempt to defend democracy through reforming it. Contemporary forms of democracy have certainly turned out to be defective, and, like Dewey, we believe that any defence of democracy must be reformative. In the spirit of Dewey, we have tried to offer a conception of democratic competences that shows how democracy is not only relevant and important for communal living, but also a workable ideal for educational practices in schools.

Our conception is certainly expansive compared to many theories of liberal and deliberative democracy, but perhaps it is not expansive enough as we have said little about the global dimension of contemporary living. When Aristotle was writing about politics, the global dimension was hardly relevant. This is not to say that it was not even thought of at that time, since Diogenes the Cynic – who was a little older than Aristotle – is reported to have replied when asked where he came from: ‘I am a citizen of the world [*kosmopolitês*]’ (Diogenes Laertius VI 63). Although the ideas of global citizenship and cosmopolitanism were known already in antiquity, the conditions of contemporary human living have made those ideas not only subjects for theoretical curiosity but also objects of moral and political urgency. Because of the global nature of modern living, almost all human action has some global influence: the clothes people wear in the west are made in the east, the fruits eaten in the north are grown in the south, so that even the most mundane actions – such as getting dressed and putting something on the table to eat – are likely to link one almost directly to people in faraway corners of the world.

Likewise, given global warming and the huge demands that our contemporary economy puts on the natural environment, almost everything people do is environmentally relevant. One might then say that it is not our conception of democracy that is expanding, but rather that the conditions of human living have changed so that aspects that were of little political relevance before now require immediate consideration. Thus, in ancient times, the cardinal virtues were typically virtues involving other human beings in one’s vicinity, but today, in times of cosmopolitan living on an exhausted planet, one must also include harmony with nature (Jordan and Kristjánsson, 2017). Democracy as a way of associated living may be more expansive than even Dewey envisaged: not only involving association and cooperation with fellow human beings across the globe, but also with fellow creatures more generally.

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