Towards a democratic ECEC system

Diana Sousa

The need for transformative change

I start this chapter lost in the entanglement of my own thoughts. Where to begin when attempting to discuss democracy? As strange as this may sound, my relationship with democracy started before I existed. Perhaps imprinted somewhere in my DNA there are memories of marks left by undemocratic regimes. Both my grandparents and my parents were born during Salazar’s Estado Novo (‘New State’) authoritarian regime in Portugal (1933–74), and possibly because of that, I strongly feel my privilege and my responsibility as a born democratic citizen, in the same country.

This chapter is an attempt to discuss democracy equally from both a public and a private perspective. I will use my lenses as a citizen, an educator, a researcher, a migrant and all the other complexities, intersectionalities and positionalities that constitute myself. I will bridge my personal and professional experiences in England (where I live) and Portugal (where I was born) to explore meanings and ambiguities of democratic relationships, with a focus on education, not as a tool to teach democracy but as a means of experiencing a democratic life.

For the purpose of this introductory overview, there are concepts and ideas that I will use throughout this chapter that need to be clarified. Many of these ideas are rooted in the philosophies of the pedagogues Célestin Freinet (1896–1966) and John Dewey (1859–1952), both pivotal in my education in Portugal as an early childhood educator. I will also use concepts that are central to the Movimento da Escola Moderna Portuguesa (MEM; Portuguese Modern School Movement, see www.movimentoescolamoderna.pt for further information), which I will later present as one of the most active and widespread democratic pedagogical approaches to be found in any country today.
As a visible expression of the hybridity of thoughts and experiences present in this chapter, Portuguese and English terms will be used. Below I start by broadly explaining how I understand ideas of both democracy and education, and what I mean when using these terms in the chapter. Other concepts will be explained as they emerge throughout the narrative.

Democracy and education

The first notion to clarify is that of democracy. Despite its frequent use, many different values and definitions have been associated with the term. When speaking of democracy in this chapter I am not simply referring to procedures compliant with the rule of law, electoral processes or party politics. I am using as a source of inspiration Walt Whitman’s (1871) definition of democracy as the highest form of human interaction. In other words, following the thinking of both Freinet (1947) and Dewey (1897), I take democratic education in this chapter to mean a social process, which includes real-life experiences and relationships lived in the school as a form of community life.

Notwithstanding what Lee (1994) explains as the different starting points and different educational orientations of Freinet and Dewey, these two pedagogues have in common the idea of democratic education as a means of experiencing the world through communication, participation, information exchange and cooperation. Democracy is therefore conceptualised by them as a value, which generates conscious individuals who participate and live together in society. Or as Dewey describes it, as ‘a mode of associated living of conjoint communicated experience’ (1916, 87) where social relationships constitute the essence of educational institutions.

Such concepts construct an understanding of schools as spaces of relationships and socialisation, and of education for democratic citizenship, which is particularly significant for the evolution of children and young people. Democracy in these terms is construed as an essential condition in education to support and propel social progress, creating a space for adults and children to express their opinions and beliefs about themselves and society, and to voice concerns about matters that affect them (Moss 2007). In the same vein, Freinet (1947, cited in Lee 1994, 16) maintained that education and society could not exist without one another: ‘one prepares the democracy of tomorrow by democracy in the school. An authoritarian regime at school does not know how to form democratic citizens.’ He also emphasised democracy as a space for
valuing diversity and heterogeneity, as a form of participation and cooperation, and as a means to create innovative reflections and transformative practices in education and society.

It is important, then, to highlight that here I am talking about education in its broadest sense. Put another way, although the education of young children is the main focus of this chapter, I refer to democratic education as a unified journey, that is, without highlighting distinctions between different levels of schooling. Consequently, I use the term *escola* (school) to include educational establishments of every level of education from early childhood to higher education. Nevertheless, in addition to school, the term ECEC (early childhood education and care) is also used in the chapter to refer to all institutions that provide care, education and more, for children under compulsory school age (including but not limited to nurseries, kindergartens, children’s centres and preschools).

The democratic deficit in contemporary English education

Dynamic political changes continually shake democracy. Cannella (2005, 25) maintains that prevailing political climates drive governments and institutions to devise legislative conditions in which they construe corporate capitalism as synonymous with democracy. With the rise of hyper-capitalism, populism and nationalism as potentially the most important political developments of the twenty-first century, now seems an apt time to discuss concerns about democracy in education.

Commentators have suggested that a new form of English nationalism has recently emerged (Calhoun 2017; Crouch 2017; Hearn 2017). According to these authors, after a referendum in 2016 resulted in a majority for withdrawing the UK from the European Union, the process branded as ‘Brexit’ swiftly led to some significant social manifestations of dangerous ‘isms’ (including populism, nationalism, racism, classism, elitism and so on). Considering that democratic citizenship education has a critical role to play in the mitigation of xenophobic and nationalist agendas (Starkey 2018), this referendum and its aftermath have publicly revealed some of the tensions between social and educational values in this particular national context. Starkey (2018, 156) argues that ‘there is confusion between values such as democracy and symbols that have become associated with an essentialized and nostalgic view of Britain’. In education, this seems particularly visible in the Fundamental British Values (FBVs) agenda, where private and maintained schools have obligations to demonstrate, during their Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) inspections, that they are actively
promoting these values of democracy, rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect and tolerance for those with different faiths and beliefs (DfE 2014).

Nevertheless, as Starkey goes on to point out ‘where schools simply attempt to meet obligations to follow FBVs, it is quite possible that they will not promote human rights or encourage students to develop multiple and cosmopolitan identities’ (Starkey 2018, 159). Following this logic, questions about mandated values can be raised. Since the motivation for the FBVs agenda did not emerge from a political desire to pursue democratic education but instead as a reaction to a political imperative to prevent terrorism (HM Government 2011), it can be argued that complying with Ofsted’s requirement to demonstrate the promotion of democracy is not the same as fostering democratic values in education, that is, a requirement is not a value. Mansfield (2019), for example, maintains that FBVs are ‘confusing, contradictory, and excluding’; while Richardson and Bolloten (2015, 2) stress that FBVs are constructed within conceptually unclear definitions, since terms such as “rule of law”, “liberty”, “democracy”, “tolerance” are open to conflicting interpretations, and over the years have had different meanings at different times and in different contexts. None of them refers to an absolute value'. Following the same line of argument, Apple (2009, xiii) also reminds us that ‘concepts such as freedom and democracy are sliding signifiers. Their meanings are struggled over, subject to various manipulations, hegemonic and counter-hegemonic interpretations and uses.' The uncritical normative approval of so-called FBVs not only makes them vulnerable to assumptions, misuses and ambiguities, but also puts them at risk of becoming totally devoid of meaning (Wringe 1984).

Alongside the specific educational values represented by FBVs, other transformations in English education have been apparent in recent years. Auld and Morris (2014) explain how a new paradigm focused on measurements of educational outcomes contributes to a degree of curriculum narrowing and control (see also Chapters 7, 8 and 11). They have also noted the economic rationale behind a new emphasis on performance-driven, preparatory, and easily measurable workplace skills (Auld and Morris 2016, 2019a). The focus on controlling education by means of metrics arguably undermines adhesion to democracy by drawing attention away from other educational traditions and possibilities.

In relation to ECEC, the use of a global language driven by metrics sends a powerful message about what is valued in the education of young children (Moss 2019). For example, England’s participation as one of the three countries in the first cycle of the International Early
Learning and Child Well-being Study (IELS), a cross-national assessment of the performance of 5-year-olds on certain standardised early learning outcomes conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), represents a strong statement favouring an image of the child as a unit of human capital (Auld and Morris 2019b; Moss 2019; Sousa et al. 2019; see also Chapter 11). This project led by a powerful international body reifies education as a measurable product, while actively negating concepts of education that do not fit the assumed model, including the multiple ways of viewing childhood and pedagogy within ECEC’s diverse traditions such as socio-cultural and socio-pedagogic models, indigenous knowledge(s), and democratic traditions in the early years (Sousa et al. 2019).

There is also a level of ‘creative ambiguity’ within the British democratic culture, where ‘conflict is avoided by not defining key concepts such as democracy or the constitution too carefully’ (Starkey 2018, 154). Therefore, it will come as no surprise that in the English ECEC system, which is based on the ‘dominant narratives’ of privatised provision, marketisation and strong centralised managerial control (Moss 2019), the space for democratic debates is virtually non-existent; while as Moss (2014) explains, democracy as a value, ethics, practice and purpose has been largely absent. In such conditions, democracy is not explicitly acknowledged, either at the policy level or in mainstream practice, nor is it detailed in the curriculum.

Despite this deficit in England, democracy is still part of several active traditions in early childhood education across the world. It is at the centre of the ECEC curriculum in a variety of countries (for example, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Portugal). It is considered a fundamental value in local educational projects (for example, Reggio Emilia, in Italy). In an earlier manifestation, the OECD (2006, 218–19) argued the importance of democracy in ECEC, recommending that governments ‘aspire to ECEC systems that support broad learning, participation and democracy’, and arguing that ‘in addition to learning and the acquisition of knowledge, an abiding purpose of public education is to enhance understanding of society and encourage democratic reflexes in children’.

In the next section, I present MEM as an active pedagogical tradition that embraces democracy as a fundamental value. As previously alluded to, MEM has been central to the development of my identity as an ECEC professional. I have encountered it throughout my formação as an educator, in my practice and in my research in schools, and I discuss it here as a reflection about democratic transformation and potentiality in education.
It is important to clarify, however, that I am not suggesting that the democratic practices discussed in relation to MEM either could or should be exported to other education systems, as these result from distinct social, historical, cultural and political conditions within the Portuguese context. But what will hopefully come across is the potential for democratic alternatives in education and for thinking about doing things differently. For as Sousa Santos (2019) has argued, ‘alternatives are not lacking in the world. What is indeed missing is an alternative thinking of alternatives.’

Towards transformative change

What it looks like in practice: The case of Portugal and MEM

Alternative movements in education tend to be naturally connected to socio-political conditions, within particular contexts and historical periods of time (take, for example, the historical context behind the local cultural project of early childhood education in Reggio Emilia (see Edwards et al. 1998; Moss 2019)). MEM is no exception to this, and the experiences generated out of repression and consequent struggles for freedom in Portugal were critical in informing MEM’s pedagogical alignment with democratic ideals. To be clear, Portuguese modern history was marked by a dictatorial regime that lasted almost half a century (first there was a military dictatorship from 1926 to 1932 and then Salazar’s Estado Novo regime from 1933 to 1974). This oppressive rule, which ended with a democratic revolution, was pivotal in establishing democracy as a national aspiration for both education and society (Sousa 2017), and consequently, a political period that inspired those who were looking for progressive alternatives.

Defined by Nóvoa (2012, 17) as ‘the most important Portuguese pedagogical movement’, MEM quietly emerged in the mid-1960s from the activity of a small group of teachers (Niza 1998a). Between 1963 and 1966, Rui Grácio promoted and directed a series of professional development courses, which led, in 1965, to six teachers forming a working group for pedagogical improvement at the National Union of Teachers (Santana 1998; Niza 2009).

A year later, in 1966, MEM was founded with the aim of promoting the development of regular activities of Autoformação Cooperada for educational professionals. The democratic revolution in 1974 allowed the legal institutionalisation of all political and cultural associations, with all the accompanying rights of expression and assembly. This included
MEM, which was legally established in 1976 as a ‘pedagogical association of teachers’ and other education professionals (Santana 1998).

Sérgio Niza (1998a), one of the most influential figures in the movement, explains that MEM emerged from a model strongly inspired by Freinet’s cooperative pedagogy. Niza claims the theoretical foundations supporting MEM are driven by the reflections of the Portuguese teachers who have been involved in developing the movement since its foundation. Further sources of inspiration are the civic education actions proposed by the pedagogue António Sérgio, the inclusive practices of children with ‘disabilities’ introduced by the Helen Keller Centre, the teacher education courses promoted by Rui Grácio, and the socio-cultural theories offered by Vygotsky and Bruner (Niza 1998a).

It is, therefore, not surprising to find that the objectives established by the first cooperative group of teachers are still part of MEM’s purpose today. Furthermore, just as in the first days of MEM (Niza 1965), educational professionals from all levels of education continue to organise regular encounters to reflect upon pedagogical practice, to share experience(s), exchange knowledge(s), reflect upon challenges, discuss new methodologies, and analyse experiences emerging from students’ work (Santana 1998). The reflections generated in this cooperative process are combined with readings of academic work and research, to support, develop and consolidate old and new theoretical understandings. Subsequently, from these interactions, new educational instruments to sustain pedagogical practice (known in MEM as ‘piloting tools’) are often produced (Niza 2009).

According to MEM’s website, the movement is currently organised in 14 regional centres spread across most of the country. It has a membership of more than 2,000 professionals committed to the integration of democratic values in the life of the school, across different educational levels (from early childhood to higher education). It is officially recognised by the government as a national ‘Collective of Public Utility’ and as an ‘Honorary Member of the Order of Public Instruction’.

MEM’s website also declares that the movement regularly collaborates with various municipalities, universities and other higher education institutions through protocols of educational cooperation, and annually creates a comprehensive plan of formação, which is promoted by MEM’s centre of formação and supported by MEM’s centre of educational resources. The formação on offer to education professionals is accredited and can either be incorporated in the structures of the movement’s Autoformação Cooperada or integrated into the framework of the ongoing teachers’ formação (which I will explain later in this chapter).
Values and principles

Following core principles of cooperation, solidarity, socio-cultural integration and initiation to democratic practices, MEM sees adults and children as having the right to participate actively in the construction of inclusive and democratic school culture (Vilhena 1998; Niza 1998c). The processes of learning and teaching are therefore focused on the socio-cultural development of sciences, techniques, arts and everyday life, within the spirit of communication and cooperation between all stakeholders in education (Niza 1998a). Vilhena (1998) explains that MEM is sustained by a deep belief in a ‘democratic cooperative school’ that is profoundly humanised by the participatory construction of knowledge that results from the relationship between adults, children and the community. MEM is, therefore, a pedagogical movement, which ‘proposes to construct contemporary responses to a school education intrinsically orientated by democratic values of direct participation, through structures of educational cooperation’ (Niza 2009, 602). It does so in a multitude of ways following systems and subsystems inspired, for example, by the democratic ideas of work and learning seen in Freinet’s (1947) pedagogy.

The organisation of work and learning is based on a dialogic and cooperative system in which structures of educational cooperation, communication and democratic participation inform each other in a reciprocal relationship. Education is then defined as a shared journey towards active and democratic citizenship where everyone teaches and everyone learns (Niza 2009).

How it works in practice

Santana (1998) and Vilhena (1998) describe MEM as an educational model characterised by the isomorfismo pedagógico – a pedagogical isomorphism between teacher education (formação) and educational practice (educação). Niza (2009, 605–6) explains pedagogical isomorphism as:

the methodological strategy of experiencing, through the entire process of formação, the involvement and attitudes, methods and procedures, technical resources, and modes of organisation that are intended to be carried out in the effective professional practice of teachers.

In other words, MEM is strategically orientated towards a process of permanent dialogic action and reflection within a context of the interaction between the cooperative formação of teachers (from different educational levels) and their pedagogical practice (Santana 1998).
Santana (1998) explains that, within MEM, teachers’ formação is founded in both formal and informal situations of Autoformação Cooperada. MEM’s teacher education system is structured from the local to the national level and organised into regional centres. Associate members of MEM, coming from different sectors of education, meet in their regional centres to reflect upon their educational practices. As previously mentioned, in these reflective encounters, new knowledge, ideas and piloting tools are created (Santana 1998). These are then integrated into the cooperative education projects carried out in the cooperative learning groups of Autoformação Cooperada:

1. **Grupos cooperativos** (cooperative groups). These are prime spaces for formação where groups of MEM associates: evaluate and plan their educational practices; construct and share pedagogical piloting tools; reflect upon their certainties and their doubts; and discuss the theoretical deepening of their practices in light of new contributions from educational research (Santana 1998).

2. **Sábados pedagógicos** (pedagogical Saturdays). Each regional centre coordinates a monthly Saturday of ‘pedagogical animation’. These encounters are free of charge and promoted to the teachers and schools within each region (Santana 1998). These events can be organised as: thematic teaching days; simultaneous presentations of three pedagogical practices from all levels of education (that is, from early childhood to higher education), followed by discussions and debates; and plenary sessions, with presentations and discussions of either an academic work or a current subject in educational policy. Additionally, in September, the coordinating committees in some of the regional centres promote the organisation of ‘pedagogical days’. These days resemble small regional congresses and aim to support the beginning of the school year.

3. **Congresso nacional** (national congress). The MEM national congress takes place in the second half of July and is one of the major events of the movement. It is organised by different regional centres, where MEM associates have an opportunity to display and evaluate the work completed by different educational institutions throughout the school year, including in schools, in teacher education, and in academic research. Several hundred teachers from all sectors of education (starting with ECEC) participate in the congress. At these events, approximately 80 comunicações and ‘practice stories’ are presented and discussed over three days. Teachers communicate
their professional practices while reflecting upon major themes related to education and *formação*. Additionally, in the plenary sessions, those who have conducted research studies about MEM’s pedagogy communicate the findings of their investigations.

### 4. Encontros de formação (encounters of *formação*)

There are three types of education encounters:

1. **Easter encounters.** These are meetings organised by the governing board and the coordinating committees of the regional centres. In these encounters, members discuss issues related to the associative life of the movement (such as activities of *formação*, organisational strategy and so on). The purpose of these meetings is also to reflect on specific topics of professional relevance. These happen once a year for a day and a half, during the Easter break.

2. **National encounters.** These occur throughout the year and are organised by special committees – specialised either by educational sector or by themes – arising from the specific needs for pedagogical deepening of MEM’s activity.

3. **Inter-regional encounters.** These are promoted by regional coordinating commissions, and serve as spaces for sharing relevant practices and supporting discussion panels for educational improvement and curricular innovation. These gatherings can also serve as work exchanges for regional centres that share close relationships and/or are in geographical proximity.

As explained in Santana (1998), it is challenging to select the most meaningful concepts and paradigms underpinning MEM’s approach to *formação*. The conceptual richness that is behind the construction of MEM’s work shows how this is an organic and dynamic democratic project, constantly evolving and changing. The dialogue in the encounters and activities of *formação*, explained above, constitutes only half of the isomorphic pedagogy that characterises MEM. The pedagogical model explained below represents the other half.

---

**Pedagogical model**

As a living pedagogy, MEM fosters the democratic character and the socio-moral development of children and adults by ensuring their full participation in the conjoint-cooperative management of the school curriculum (Niza 1999). In this context, ‘the exercise of cooperation and
solidarity in the school community challenges both adults and children to construct themselves as democratic citizens’ (Folque 2018, 9). In this logic, ‘sharing knowledge, power, and its regulation with children is a difficult practice to start with, but it becomes essential when we realize that this creates a net that always cushions our falls’ (Vilhena 1998, 44).

MEM’s pedagogy is enacted through direct democracy. In other words, cooperative interactions between teachers and young people are lived in the form of direct participation and not in the form of representation or delegation. Democracy is experienced as an ethical dimension based on a moral interaction woven in mutual help, respect and solidarity (Niza 1998b). Consequently, young people, independently of their level of education, are responsible for actions such as collaborating with teachers in the planning of curricular activities; interacting in the learning that results from their study, their research and their participation in projects; and evaluating their own work.

In MEM schools, young people have daily and weekly meetings for planning, where they reflect about the intellectual and moral progress that is made between themselves, with the support of the teachers. Assessment is based on a cooperative negotiation of judgements; and in the monitoring of the objectives set out in the collective curricula, in the individual work plans, and in other maps and checklists of learning-work. These piloting tools assist in registering and monitoring the contracts made by the students in their council meetings.

MEM in early childhood education
According to Niza (1998a), MEM defines three specific starting conditions for educational activity in ECEC. The first condition is that, ideally, groups of children are not divided into age-grouped classrooms. MEM values cultural and generational heterogeneity as a means to respect individual differences. It is also believed that heterogeneity enables opportunities for interactive formative collaborations in a process of sociocultural and cognitive enrichment. The second condition is the need, inspired by Freinet’s pedagogy, to maintain an environment where children’s free expression is respected, that is, where their life experiences, opinions and ideas, are publicly valued. The third condition is the importance of enabling time for inquiry through spaces for spontaneous and playful activities that explore ideas, materials, and documents; through such moments, children can develop their own investigations, and propose their projects alongside the provocations facilitated by the educator (Niza 1998a).
Niza describes MEM educators as advocates of participatory education and catalysts of cooperation. He continues by stating that these educators are civic and moral animators of democratic education; in other words, MEM educators are perceived to be active agents who provoke free expression and critical attitudes. As a result, a central part of educators’ work in the MEM pedagogy is to stimulate and maintain the autonomy and responsibility of each child within the cooperative education group (Niza 1998a).

To facilitate the conditions above, among other features, in MEM schools particular attention is paid to (1) educational space; (2) distribution of activities; (3) cooperative formative assessment; and (4) interactions with families and communities. Within the educational space, the ECEC classroom is usually divided into six basic activity areas, also known as workshops or ateliers. Within these, there is a space for a library and documentation, a writing and printing workshop, a laboratory for sciences and experiments, a space for carpentry and constructions, a space for arts activities and an area for artistic expression (such as drama and music). There is also usually a central multi-purpose area for collective work, and in the settings where the kitchen is not accessible for the children, there is a specific area for culture and food education (Niza 1998a; Vilhena 1998).

Additionally, MEM classrooms are expected to be highly stimulating, while presenting continuous and permanent exhibitions of children’s work. All the piloting tools are accessible and displayed on the walls, including the map of attendance where children register their presence every day; the day plan that children develop together with the educator in the morning council meeting; and the activities map that children complete throughout the day (Figure 10.1). Sometimes translated in English as ‘activities chart’, this piloting tool is a double-entry table with working areas/activities across the top horizontal row and children’s names in the left-hand vertical column. Usually after the morning council meeting (although this could happen at other times), each child draws an empty circle in the planned activities columns, filling in the circle when the activity is completed. This is a tool for pupil self-regulation in choosing activities, reflecting upon those choices, respecting the choices made, taking responsibility for their own work individually and collaboratively, for engaging with planning and for progressive assessment.

Other piloting tools include: a weekly list of projects with the names and tasks of the children involved; the weekly task distribution chart where some children have responsibilities to ensure the management of life in the classroom; and the group diary where each week children
register likes, dislikes, what they did and what they would like to do (Niza 1998a; Vilhena 1998; see also Figure 10.2). The group diary is a weekly register of the life of the group and is available for everyone in the classroom to add their thoughts, suggestions and feelings every day. The children then discuss it every Friday in a council meeting where they reflect about their week. In this conversation, among other things, children engage in the creation of rules for living together, in cooperative reflection for resolution of conflicts and in the planning of future activities. This piloting tool not only makes children’s learning and experiences visible, but also helps with participation, planning, assessment and resolution of conflicts.

The diary has four columns: (1) ‘I liked’, (2) ‘I didn’t like’, (3) ‘We did’, (4) ‘We want to do’. Some examples of what children say in each column in Figure 10.2 are: ‘I liked that Hugo worked a lot to make a cape’, ‘I liked the drawings that Fernanda and Jessica did in the diary’, ‘I didn’t like that children forgot what we had agreed we could have in the pretend play workshop’, ‘I didn’t like that Filipa threw sand into my eyes’, ‘We wrote a text about our visit to Mr Marques’s farm’, ‘We played music with the musical instruments of our classroom’, ‘We want to arrange a party for the baby with Fernanda’s mum’ and ‘We want to learn things about whales and sharks’.

Figure 10.1 The activities map shows how children identify and choose activities from a range of possibilities within the classroom environment. As a ‘self-regulatory’ tool, this is where children plan, register and monitor their individual choices (Source: Folque 2008)
All piloting tools mentioned above are part of the classroom’s daily, weekly, monthly and yearly routines and serve as managers for the evaluation and distribution of children’s activities throughout their time in the setting.

In relation to evaluation, MEM considers assessment as a cooperative and dynamic process within the natural development of education. As such, cooperative assessment can develop through a myriad of interactions and relationships. For example, the documentation of children’s work and experiences, both individual and collective, in the piloting tools gives an indication of the activities and projects children have been involved with. The *comunicações* of projects, experiences or reflections that happen in the everyday life of the group (for example, in the morning and afternoon council meetings) also provide opportunities for self and group assessment. These evaluations are naturally present, too, in the daily discoveries that children share with the teacher and the group, in the significant events registered in the group diary, and in the debates and reflections that happen in the Friday council meeting (*Figure 10.3*).

Regarding the interaction with families and communities in MEM, the first principle is that ‘children are citizens with invaluable knowledge, capable not only of exchanging services, but also of questioning, studying...
The council meeting is a whole group dialogic activity, which includes all children and adults in the classroom. It is a participatory tool of evaluation, planning and negotiation of the curriculum, the rules of co-living and individual and collaborative projects (Source: Folque 2008)

or intervening in the community’ (Vilhena 1998, 44–5). Children, in other words, are perceived as agents capable of finding new ways of resolving problems that affect themselves and others.

Alongside the acknowledgment of children as active and critical citizens in the community life, MEM values families, neighbours and organisations within the community as unique sources of knowledge and formação. Communities are, thus, indispensable for the democratic life experiences inside and outside the school (Niza 1998a; see also Figure 10.4).

Towards a democratic early childhood education

While MEM provides a sound example of the enactment of democracy in an education system, it is also clear that the practice of democracy is only viable in a system that enables it. In Portugal, democracy surfaced as a central focus of education policy following the revolution that established a democratic government in 1974. MEM began with the effort of six teachers who had a democratic political-pedagogical intention that eventually found favourable conditions for its practical enactment. This suggests that democracy evolves through space and time, and requires action; it needs political conditions, effort and willingness to become a reality in education and society.
Although I recognise that socio-political developments within the history of England are certainly different from those of Portugal, my objective in this chapter was to bring attention to MEM to signal that, indeed, there are challenges, but there are also alternatives. All of the developments explained throughout the chapter supported my earlier claim that MEM is one of the most active and extensive democratic pedagogical approaches to be found in any country. As stated by Santana (1998, 6), MEM is no longer a small group of friends fighting for the same pedagogical ideals but, rather, an institution with responsibilities towards the education system.

This chapter has only scratched the surface of the magnitude and significance of MEM’s democratic work. It is clear, nonetheless, that this is an established pedagogical movement with meaningful expression. As emphasised by Nóvoa (1998), MEM has a past, a history and a culture all of which deserve to be known and celebrated.
MEM invests in the formação of education professionals, engages in social transformation and promotes the democratic development of young people and communities. Indeed, MEM’s relevance emerges from the fact that this movement is as much about children as it is about teachers, as much about schools as it is about society, as much about formação as it is about pedagogy, and as much about early childhood as it is about higher education. Most importantly, MEM expresses a refreshing coherence between what is said and what is done. And as elucidated by Freire (1998), this coherence is one of the fundamental conditions for democratic education.

Considering that MEM emerged under the most challenging circumstances (as a secret association during a dictatorship), it shows the level of resilience needed for systemic transformative change towards a democratic education. As a ‘movement’, MEM keeps evolving in an organic manner where the transformation of the individual contributes to the transformation of the community. MEM shows how a pedagogical model with a past can be focused in the construction of the future (Nóvoa 1998).

Further reading


A book chapter by Maria Assunção Folque – ‘Yes we can! Young children learning to contribute to an enabling society’ – addresses the possibility and the relevance of young children learning to participate in society based on an image of children as citizens and active contributors to the common good of communities. This chapter appears in *Early Childhood Care and Education for Sustainability: International perspectives*, edited by Valerie Huggins and David Evans (Routledge, 2018).

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the Movimento da Escola Moderna Portuguesa for the information and photographs they have supplied.
Notes

1. *Formação* (literally translated as ‘formation’) is a concept commonly misrepresented as ‘training’. *Formação* is a Portuguese word routinely used to refer to the process of education of teachers. It has a multitude of overlapping meanings, including education, constitution, preparation, composition, guidance, instruction, all depicting a perspective of the construction/building/formation of the individual within a continuous personal and professional lifelong journey.

2. *Autoformação cooperada* (literally translated as ‘cooperated self-formation’) is a concept intended here to represent the processes that educational professionals and pupils undertake to construct themselves (as individuals) in relationship with others. This journey develops following processes of cooperation/partnership action with others, often following dialogic processes of communication, exchanges of practices/experiences, and engaging in project work.

3. *Formação cooperada* (loosely translated here as a ‘system of cooperative education of teachers and other education professionals’) will be used to represent MEM’s participatory approach to the education of teachers.

4. *Comunicações* (literally translated as ‘communications’) is intrinsically connected with the democratic act of communicating in a dialogic way with a critical spirit rooted in respecting learning and valuing difference. MEM teachers and pupils communicate/present/share their ideas, opinions, thoughts, beliefs, feelings with/to each other, embracing every interaction as a democratic encounter.

References


