

# Democracy and Early Childhood Education

Fitria Ulfah, Hani Yulindrasari and Vina Adriany

Graduate School of Early childhood education, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia  
fitriaulfah@student.upi.edu, {haniyulindra, vina}@upi.edu

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Abstract: Democracy conveys justice, equality, and inclusivity. Understanding democracy involves a long process of learning about egalitarian values and rights. Young children are the future subjects of democracy and potential agents of egalitarian society. Thus, the values of democracy should be introduced as early as possible to build a comprehensive understanding of justice and equality in future generations. Democracy in early childhood education (ECE) has drawn western scholars attention in the past view years. In Indonesian context, research about democracy in ECE is very limited due to exclusive assumption that democracy is an adult subject. This article analyses existing literature about democracy in early childhood education. It investigates the theoretical framework and methodology used in the related research to develop insights to start researching democracy in Indonesian early childhood education.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Democratization in Indonesia started in 1998 after the fall of Suharto's authoritarian regime. President Habibie who was in office from 1998-1999 established instruments of democracy. In his administration, political parties were growing in number from only three in Suharto era to forty-eight political parties, the law of regional autonomy was established, freedom of the press was restored, and for the first time Indonesia had more than one presidential candidates (Isra, 2009; Naïmah, 2015; Azra, 2005).

Democratization happens in every field of development, including education. The Law of Indonesian Education System states that education should be organised based on principles of democracy, equality, and human rights. In the field of education, there are two forms of the practice of democratization: democratizing education and democratic education (Suharto, 2005). Democratizing education opens up opportunities for civil society to get involved in education, including participating in policymaking. One example of the products of democratization in education is the school-based curriculum known as KTSP (*Kurikulum Tingkat Satuan Pendidikan*) which was developed in 2006. This curriculum allows schools to develop and customize their own curriculum together with their

stakeholders. Democratic education is pedagogical practices that potentially in still understanding and values of democracy in students. For example, project-based learning is one of the pedagogical practices that uses and teaches democratic values.

Early childhood has always been the site of anchoring foundational knowledge and skills of the future generation. Unfortunately, how to introduce democratic values in ECE is rarely discussed in the Indonesian context. It is common assumption that the topic of democracy is an adult domain. Democracy is also rigidly framed in a formal political context rather than as day-to-day practices that happen throughout human's life course. Moss (2007) and Arthur and Sawyer (2009) suggest that children should be regarded as full citizens who have voice and aspirations. Thus, they should participate in decision making of any decision that would affect their lives. Research about democracy in ECE has been conducted widely around the globe, especially in western countries (see Moss, 2007; Hellman, 2012; Aasen, Grindheim, and Waters, 2009; Serriere, 2010; and Arthur and Sawyer, 2009). This paper aims to review existing literature about democracy in early childhood education to identify theoretical framework and methodology commonly used in the topic. The purpose is to provide a reference that can be applied in research on democracy in ECE in the Indonesian context.

## 2 DEFINING DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

There are various definitions of democracy. The term democracy comes from Greek *kratos* (rule) and *demos* (the people) (Crick, 2002). Thus, democracy literally means the rule of the people or the majority of the mop. The concept of democracy itself is highly contested, complex, dynamic, and unfixed (Crick, 2002). However, the most common contemporary definition of democracy is institutionalised and un-institutionalised freedom, independence, and rights (Dalton, Sin, and Jou, 2008). Democracy is also considered as a worldview that influences politics, government administrations, institutional arrangements as well as social practices. One of the essential values of democracy is equality and inclusivity, where no one is left behind in the decision-making process (Moss, 2007).

John Dewey (1913) argues that democracy should be mediated through education. The core purpose of education should be citizenship and the creation of social spirit, instead of job market-oriented. Social spirit involves characteristics such as directness, open-mindedness, single-mindedness, and responsibility. To in still these characteristics in children, Dewey proposes a way of learning that facilitates children's imagination, flexible way of thinking, and enhances children's communication and listening skills to be more responsive to the need of others (Mason, 2017). Thus, education should be the vehicle to produce inclusive citizenship with high social awareness (Helman, 2012). Democratic education views students as agents that can participate in the education-related decision making, to collaborate both with teachers and their peers to solve problems and find a solution that can accommodate everyone involved in the decision (Samawi et al., 1995). The goal of democratic education is to create social justice and equality (Giroux, 1989).

## 3 METHOD

The purpose of this paper is to identify core concept of research on democracy in the field of early childhood education. It serves as preliminary library research required to develop further research on democratic education in early childhood settings. In addition to library research, the authors also conducted social media assisted interviews with five

kindergarten teachers to explore their understanding of democratic education.

For this paper, the authors analysed five accessible research on ECE and democracy which was conducted in a western context such as the United States of America, Australia, Sweden, Norway, and the United Kingdom.

## 4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Researching Democracy in ECE

There are two main focuses in researching democracy in ECE: the policy of ECE and the democratic education practices. Research on policy (such as Moss, 2007), look at democratic values that are incorporated into the curriculum and the principles of early years learning, while research on democratic education practices (such as Hellman, 2012; Aasen, Grindheim, and Waters, 2009; Serriere, 2010; and Arthur and Sawyer, 2009), investigate how democratic values embedded in educational practices. Whichever the focus is, researching democracy in ECE needs to take into account an analysis of power relations entrenched within student-peers, students-adults, and students-other community members interactions. The key to democratic education is equality. Therefore, the ultimate research goal should be improving equality in the school context and the society in general.

Moss (2007) provides insight on how neoliberal national policy significantly influences democratization of education. Market-driven and business-oriented policy lead education sectors to be tailored to fulfill market demands, which put the democratic mission of education at stake. He suggests that the government should establish a policy that facilitates and secure democratic education in all level of educational administration. In Indonesia, Adriany and Saefullah (2015) argue that Indonesia has adopted a neoliberal approach to the development of early childhood education. On the one hand, the neoliberal approach has given greater opportunity for ECE administrators to develop their programs according to their own needs. However, it has a downfall since neoliberal policy also relies on privatization for the establishment of ECEs, which then leads to market-driven ECE programs. The complicated situation of Indonesian early education where academic achievement has become parents' priority in early childhood education (see Istiyani, 2013) leads to academic-oriented ECE program,

which put democratic learning at risk. Therefore, early childhood education should not be a business commodity; instead, it should be a medium to teach democratic values such as respect, responsibility, understanding of difference and multiple perspectives, open-mindedness, and critical thinking (Moss, 2007).

Four other articles analysed focus on democratic education practices. Focusing on the discourse of power in educational practice, Arthur and Sawyer (2009) conducted a case study to gain insight from a successful practice of democratic education in an early childhood education setting in Australia. Their finding suggests parents, teachers, the students, and local community members should conduct democratic education collaboratively. A shared vision should be established, and each party should be able to contribute in the learning process and documentation of the process. Another important point in democratic education is an understanding of the discourse of power, which will sensitise teachers of whose voice is heard and who is valued. A successful democratic education empowers children by acknowledging their freedom to choose not only the experience but also the meaning that they construct out of the experience. Children also have to be given opportunities to explore how the real life works, to understand the community they live in, and to be aware that they are part of the community. Like anybody else in the community, they also have rights and responsibilities as a member of society.

In addition to child-adult interaction, Aasen, Grindheim and Waters (2009) also analysed space in relation to democratic education. They investigate how outdoor setting contributed to the process of democratic learning. Playing outdoor is part of childhood culture in Scandinavian countries since extensive outdoor play area, including a natural forest, was available for the children to explore. Therefore, outdoor playing means understanding their community better. From their observations, Aasen et al. (2009) concluded that peers and teacher-student interactions play an important role in the process of democratic learning and outdoor setting provides a medium where negotiation of teachers' attitude toward children and children's attitude toward other children take place. They argued that teachers should reflect on their understanding and values of democracy and their perception and attitude toward outdoor activities. Teachers who saw outdoor activities as potentially harmful for children would hamper children to participate fully in their learning and making meaning of their outdoor experiences. Playing outside symbolises act of freedom where

children are free to build their own knowledge, discover something new without any adult interventions. Thus, teachers should assess their attitudes and values that may impact their interactions with children and children's learning process. Outdoor settings provide different context of learning that can be resourceful for both children and teachers to reflect and negotiate their beliefs and attitude to create a more democratic learning.

It is important to discuss democratic education from a gender perspective (Hellman, 2012). Hellman (2012) investigates the process of solidarity formation among young children in a Swedish preschool. Based on her observation, she highlights the importance of challenging the stereotyped gender categorisation in creating a space for solidarity. A situation where gender stereotypes are not emphasised creates an opportunity for boys and girls to play together and create a safe space where solidarity emerges. Creating activities based on common interest and common project instead of based on gender category would open space for friendship between girls and boys which in turn would establish a sense of solidarity. Drawing from Hellman (2012), a democratic education can be achieved by challenging any form of stereotyped categorisations whether it is gender, age, religion, ethnicity, or class and highlighting common interest instead.

#### **4.2 Indonesian ECE Teachers' Perception of Democracy**

In the rise of Islamic conservatism in Indonesia, the term democracy has multiple meaning. Some conservative Islamic groups demonize democracy and claim democracy as un-Islamic (Bruinessen as cited in Wahid, 2014). Indonesian society then becomes polarised into two opposite groups: pro-democracy and anti-democracy. Democratic education will work if only the teachers have a comprehensive understanding of what democracy is and not against it. According to interviews conducted in this preliminary research, most teachers understood the classic definition of democracy that power was in the hand of the people, by the people, and for the people (Lincoln cited in Winataputra, 2001). They also related democracy with freedom of speech and expressions. Most of the teachers agreed that schools should teach democratic values as early as possible. They approved that children should be able to choose their learning activities and should be encouraged to share their opinions and thoughts. However, there was a teacher that did not agree with democratic

education. The teachers argued that it was against Islamic teaching. The teacher emphasized that the most important thing in ECE was teaching children right or wrong, instead of teaching children to agree on what the majority said. Preliminary findings of teachers' perception of democracy trigger further questions about what these teachers do in practice since what people say do not necessarily consistent with what they do. Do teachers who advocated democratic education incorporate democratic values into their pedagogical practices? And do teachers who disagree with democratic education denied democratic values in their practices?

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

Researching democracy in ECE involves multiple data collection methods ranging from document analysis, observations, interviews, focused groups discussion. The focus of investigation can be varied - from policy, space, settings, and other pedagogical practices, but it is important to conduct an in-depth analysis of social interactions between children and adult, children and their peers, and children and other community members. Researching democratic education in ECE should also take into account intersections of various social categories such as gender, age, religion, ethnicity, and social class in creating a democratic space. Another important point to consider in researching democratic education is teachers' and the researchers' understanding of their own values and beliefs about childhood, children, and democracy.

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