**Youth, Democracy and Education: Well-being for All in this time of Crises.**

Ted Fleming

Teachers College Columbia University

New York

I would like to make one main comment about well-being and, if time allows, a number of brief points about the interconnections between Youth, Democracy and Education as part of the task of enhancing well-being. THE GOOD LIFE!

When thinking of working with young citizens I want to assume that an increase in well-being is a really worthwhile and agreed outcome. If so, then there are three domains in which well-being is located. These domains are:

 the well-being of the individual,

the well-being of one’s relationships and

the well-being of the community and society.

1. The well-being of the individual involves: feeling well, feeling worthwhile and valued, there is the well-being of one’s awareness and intelligence and imagination, experiences of well-being includes feeling respected and ability to respect others, recognition and being value by important other people. It includes feelings of self-worth and self-esteem.
2. The well-being of one’s relationships refers to the areas of care, nurturing and affections and refers mostly to intimate and family relationships and friends.
3. The third domain refers to the well-being of the broader community and society. It includes areas such as housing, the environment, clean air/water, transport, health care, social welfare, education and school, jobs, public spaces including parks and recreation, museums, galleries. And many more.

The core point I want to make is the following. For students who study these matters I am following the tradition set by Hegel (1770-1814) who identified the interconnected areas of the family, the economy and civil society as three domains. But more recent social theorists such as Honneth (2014a) have identified these domains as areas in which emancipation or freedom is fought for and hopefully achieved, i.e. interpersonal relations, the markets and public policy.

Leading on from this the core agreement among critical scholars is that freedom or as I am calling it here well-being is achieved in all these domains and the achievement in one domain depends on and assumes well-being in the other. We cannot be well as individuals in a society that is not well. We cannot be a free or healthy society if individuals are not also well.

Most if not all the crises in our world are located in one or another of these areas. Mental well-being or mental health is experienced as a most profound individual problem but it is a product of a society that has real difficulty caring for so many. Crises in our world today are located in interpersonal relationships and families who also suffer the consequences, in relationships and in the broader society. Racism, violence against women and children, drug abuse and huge international financial crises are the same. They are multi-domain problems and can only be addressed in the same way – by seeing them as interconnected and with consequences across these three domains. The causes of these crises are also spread with different weight across the domains.

I want to stress again that freedom or emancipation or well-being in one area is dependent on and assumes the well-being of the other.

For those who work with youth or who are young that engagement is about individual, relationship and social well-being.

Individual, relationships and community are the spaces in which well-being is found (or not). We could go on to discuss the

 Spaces are the places where either personal, or social or community well-being are found;

 Signs that well-being is being delivered – for example a sign of well-being among young people is a higher sense of control over their lives;

 Sources of well-being – the opportunities to express their voice and be heard in a way that delivers results, resources and outcomes, e.g. education, organizations, including youth councils;

 Strategies of empowerment for all. These include policies that are resourced, agreed and funded so that the sources are delivered.

For example any of these spaces, signs, sources and strategies can be applied to any of the areas I mentioned concerning well-being – individual, relationship or community. For example community well-being can be found in the space of health care; with the sign of responsive care that is respectful of all from a source of accessible and expert care that is responsive to real needs of citizens; supported by strategies that are well resourced and funded by public policies and practice.

In relationship well-being it can be expressed in the spaces of supportive relationships of support (friendships, mentors) which are derived from and depend on successful experiences of nurturance and attachments, supported by empathy and opportunities to learn, to give and to receive care and compassion. It is possible to adopt these as criteria for working with and evaluating aspects of a public policy initiative on Youth Councils (Evans & Prilleltensky, 2007).

In addition, it is a logical extension of this understanding to see that an interest in young adults and in their well-being involves the interdependent involvement and well-being of all other sectors.

The current crisis of Covid-19 has taught us very clearly and in unexpected ways how dependent we are on each other – like never before (we think). A healthy economy can only be created and sustained in a healthy community of workers and consumers. Each one’s health contributes to and draws from a healthy economy. They are mutually interdependent. Workers who previously were on lower steps of the socio-economic ladder are now key or essential workers.

A Youth Council will only be successful if it is part of the community delivering the same well-being to all other citizens.

**A Policy on Working with Youth**

One way of achieving this is to adopt a number of principles that might inform both the process of policy making and the process of implementing policies:

1. Adopt the principle of ‘nothing about youth without youth’. No policy design or implementation that concerns or has consequences for youth will be done without their engagement. This holds for all groups not just youth – women, schools, Roma, drug dependent, older adults, etc.
2. That policy makers and implementers would adopt the principle of ‘youth-proofing’ (like gender proofing or race proofing) all policies and practices. This means exploring and guaranteeing that all policies that impact on any group have particular steps and practices that show how it impacts on and is to the benefit and with the agreement of youth.
3. That policy will make a determined effort to change the usual political path where a problem is identified and a solution found and implemented. The path to action from identifying a problem needs to make a longer route through critical reflection, consultation, analysis, and critique before agreement and implementation.
4. Gender-proof all areas, making sure through explicit policies that there is an equality of men and women everywhere.

**Youth**

Youth councils are important ways of engaging young people in the civil and political life of a city and a number are in operation already. I include the Municipality of Thermi (Θέρμη) and other places where the practice of youth engagement (Aldana & Checkoway, 2013) has progressed (Yohalem, & Shanetta, 2007). However, for many, Youth Councils are deeply problematic ways of engaging young people for a number of reasons. Young activists in particular understand democracy in ways that are fundamentally different from that offered to them by youth councils. They (activists) understand democracy as an exercise in their authority and impact, and not just an expression of their voices. They understand democracy as representing collective concerns and many see youth councils as elitist and non-representative (Taft & Gordon, 2013). Taft and Gordon emphasize the value of controversy and contentious politics while expressing anxiety that youth councils can function as modes of social control that tame and channel their dissent, rather than provide real opportunities to foster political power by young people. We must always also keep in mind how previous educational achievement can be a factor in progress toward youth involvements (Nieuwelink, ten Dam, & Dekker, 2019).

I want to make a number of points what I would like to frame as background to working with youth.

1. Too often youth are understood as being an in-between category of people – either a pre-adult or a ‘not yet adult’. I want to suggest we consider youth as a distinct group of people (citizens) not just in transition. Youth are fully adult. However, young people can get disillusioned with politics and its slow rate of change (Shephard, & Patrikios, 2013).
2. Youth are by definition ‘not old’ but one of the great certainties of life is that youth will get old inevitably and sooner or later! When you become old (I am speaking from experience) you will bring your young self with you into old age. So how you are when young will stay with you.
3. Youth have, like any age group, their own strengths and advantages. More energy, better health (in general) and today a better standard of education and greater access to knowledge and technology. This allied with the potential of lifelong learning will place this generation of youth in a strong position to be better.
4. Not every young person has been fortunate, lucky or advantaged by opportunities in life. Race, disability, refugee status, poverty, Roma may all mean there is a longer road to equality and fairness. Young people will judge themselves, eventually, by their ability to bring with them their less advantaged brothers and sisters.
5. I am most mindful of the myriad of crises the world faces today. They are mostly crises made by those who are not youth today – climate change, financial injustices, wars and their consequences, a neoliberal and unaccountable economy, as well as persistent threats from the attraction (to some people) of a Fascist or far right illusion. So my generation may not be the best source of ideas on solving these issues.
6. I am impressed in any of the interactions I have with young people, especially about the powerful ways in which they cope with differences, e.g. gay friends and acceptance of such difference. In addition I am aware of higher levels of care exercised among youth for each other and the emergence of new forms of masculinity that are certainly less toxic than when I was young! Respect, care and recognition of difference is a powerful energy.

**Democracy**

Let us assume that we know that democracy is not just voting and not just consulting. To consult someone or a section of society is a lower level of democratic engagement. The question for democracy is how to exercise power and how to engage with each other and with each sector of society in the exercise of power. Too often traditional forms of democracy only consult. There is nothing wrong with consulting. But there is more to the possibilities of democracy and the more is about involvement in the decision making process – beyond consultation and advisory committees.

The threats to democracy are real. Not only are there specific political threats (Golden Dawn - Χρυσή Αυγή) but other less easily identifiable threats including forms of capitalism that resist democratic accountability. This neoliberal economy includes a view that everything can be bought and sold and only what can be bought and sold is worthwhile in our lives. These ideas when connected to the crises in our world such as Covid-19, climate change, etc. pose a significant threat. We cannot assume that democracy is a given or that it will survive unless we treat it as something that must be learned every day and every year.

We also know from research that support for democracy does decline if the real experience of democracy falls too far below an expected ideal (Glaser, Gille, Kruger, & De Rijk, 2010).

**Citizenship and Education**

From the critical theory tradition Jürgen Habermas relates adult learning to his vision of a democratic society and refers to democracy as an adult learning project (Habermas, 1987). He (1979) also states: “I can imagine the attempt to arrange a society democratically only as a self-controlled learning process” (p. 186). By implication adult education and adult learning become projects in democracy, a project in citizenship education. Habermas (1987) also postulates an adult learning crisis in modern society, arguing that adults are not sufficiently prepared for what is central to his vision of a democratic society, namely participation in public discourse (Fleming, 2016, 2021). Therefore a youth Council is part both of the problem (a learning deficit in general) as well as an essential step toward democracy.

Axel Honneth (2014a), also a critical theorist reorients critical theory and states that in order to realize social freedom (or well-being) individuals must be able to view each other’s freedom (and well-being) as a condition for their own. Members of a free (healthy) society are defined as free by their ability to enhance and initiate mutual recognition and respect. Honneth seeks a vision of democracy involving not only the political sphere but emancipated democratic families and socialized markets. These are like the areas of individual, relationship and community. For Honneth (2014a), the realization of freedom in any one of these areas depends on its realization in the others as democratic citizens, emancipated families and ethical markets “mutually influence each other, because the properties of one cannot be realized without the other two” (p. 331). Everything is connected.

Freedom and well-being are inherently social as they cannot be realized if one is not involved in the “we” of democratic will formation where the same weight is afforded to the contributions of all citizens (Honneth, 2014b). Places such as work, friendships, family, laws, are all justified only if they promote, support and bring about a free society for all. All these institutions can be evaluated as successful to the extent that they encourage and bring about social freedom and a better life.

Recognition for Honneth is the driving force of group formation (Honneth, 2014b) and by implication it is of central importance in adult learning. As the personal and social are connected this leads to a significant re-thinking of adult learning especially learning for citizenship. Individual and social freedoms are connected – and not in some vague or superficial way but essentially. One cannot be fully free in some individual way alone but only when individual and social emancipation are connected.

These ideas are not new to adult educators such as Olesen (1989) and Wildemeersch (1992). Olesen (1989), quoting Negt, sees “experience as a collective process because when we experience as individuals we also do so through a socially structured consciousness” (p. 8) and again “the socialized individual cannot experience individually” (p. 68). The individual is always multiple, or as Brecht call it - “the self is always plural” or dividual (cited in Kluge & Negt, 2014, p. 45).

This has clear implications for the ways in which critiques have attempted to disconnect individual learning from social learning. (Fleming, 2018) The most important sphere of social freedom is what Honneth calls the ‘We’ of democratic will formation (2014b, p. 253). This leads Honneth to his theory of democracy where democratic interactions enable citizens to make their lives and conditions better through a process of discourse or democratic will formation (2014a, p. 254). Again, with reference to Habermas and his discursive democracy, the democratic state acts as an agent of the democratic public sphere (2014a, pp. 305-307). This suggests that learning (and teaching) for the development of the ‘we’ of democratic discourse may be a vital task of education and a necessary one for adult education.

One’s identity development is not merely an individual task but necessarily involves a social dimension. Social movements have been important in enhancing democratic moments of the public sphere and current indignations and insurgent social movements in places such as Barcelona, Athens and Wall Street are typical of the expanded ‘we’ that are, in Honneth’s view, spheres of social freedom. Only through agreed and mutually supportive cooperations with others can there be political freedom. Freedom of this kind is inherently social as it cannot be realized if one is not involved in the ‘we’ of democratic will formation where the same weight is afforded to all contributions of citizens (p. 261). This is reminiscent of Dewey’s affirmation that ‘democracy is a name for a way of life of free and enriching communication’ (Dewey, 1966, p. 148). A new vision of citizenship education would involve supporting through tuition, seminars and its entire pedagogy and indeed its management systems a collaborative environment that supports and teaches how to be democratic.

Mezirow (and Habermas) see democratic participation as an important means of self-development that produces individuals who are more tolerant of difference, sensitive to reciprocity and better able to engage in discourse (2000). Engagements with democracy or democratic engagements are developmental and of themselves increase well-being.

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