

Chapter 10

Democracy, Affective Atmospheres, and Physical Education: Learning Juggling Games Through the Pedagogy of Ignorance

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ABSTRACT

Democratic education in Physical Education classes has traditionally focused on conveying to students the knowledge of how to be a good citizen and has disregarded its affective dimension. Based on the pedagogy of ignorance and the concept of affective atmospheres, the following text describes and evaluates a teaching activity involving juggling balls as a way of enabling students to experience democratic affects. Analysis of the teacher's field diary and of students' self-assessment questionnaires reveals the existence of four affective figures among the students: the committed, the sceptical, the traditional, and the passive. These should be understood as four poles in a topological space, within which various forms of discourse on the orientations of students' actions when carrying out a democratic experience can be positioned. The text recognises the affective force of democracy and addresses the question of how democratic education can be implemented in Physical Education classes through different forms of content without being addressed explicitly.

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INTRODUCTION

The current situation has been referred to as “post-democracy”, this being the root of a process of disaffection with democratic institutions and is reflected in an increase in the level of electoral abstention (Mouffe, 2018). In this context of democratic crisis, educational institutions have an important role to play in revitalising democratic affections (Ruitenberg, 2009; Zembylas, 2018). And within these institutions, Physical Education, due to its characteristics, may have certain advantages over other school subjects when it comes to implementing democratic experiences. Play is a potentially motivational teaching resource and offers students a meaningful framework in which to experience democracy as opposed to just talking about it.

In spite of this advantage, not many Physical Education initiatives have been proposed whose purpose is to contribute to the democratic education of citizens. The aim of all of these proposals is to transmit to students a body of knowledge, skills and attitudes that will enable them to become good citizens.

Following the classification established by Biesta (2007), such initiatives could be grouped into two models: education “for” democracy (Butler, 2006; Kokone, Kokkonen, Telam, & Liukkonen, 2011; Kwon, H. H., & Kim, M., 2010; Pehoiu, 2011) and education “through” democracy (Enright, Coll, Chróinín & Fitzpatrick, 2017; Enright, Williams, Sperka & Peucker, 2018).

Nevertheless, even though all these approaches are fine examples of good practice of Physical Education for democratic education, it could be argued that they all fail to address the affective dimension (Ruitenberg, 2009; Zembylas, 2018).

To address this omission, Biesta (2007, 2011a, 2011b) argues for a model of democratic education that is not only based on the transmission of knowledge about what it means to be a democratic citizen but also on the experience of its affects. To implement this model of education, Biesta (2011b, 2017) considers the pedagogy of ignorance (Rancière, 1991) to be exemplary. What is important in the pedagogy of ignorance is not the knowledge transmitted but the reflection on the affects experienced in the self-taught, collective learning process. This would involve reflecting on what Zembylas (2020) has called “affective atmospheres” for democratic education.

Some studies on atmospheres have tried to address the question of how certain specific elements can influence a given affective atmosphere (Buser, 2014; Gandy, 2017; Michels & Steyaert, 2017). For example, the spatial and material organisation of the school, the methodology employed, the type of school, the subject content, any social or political issues, the demographic represented in the classroom and the geopolitical space, are some of the elements that can transform these affective atmospheres. However, according to Zembylas (2020), no studies have explored the relationship between affective atmospheres and democratic education. In this regard, he considers it important to explore the affective atmospheres created in the classes in which the schoolmaster aspires to educate his students democratically. How do the curriculum, the pedagogy, the class organisation and the materials used enable students to “feel” certain democratic values? In which sense is the atmosphere of democracy felt by the students? What kinds of affects are present in these democratic experiences? Are these affects the same for all the participating students? Is there one or various democratic atmospheres?

These questions serve to provide the necessary impetus to empirically investigate the concept of affective atmospheres in democratic education in Physical Education, and they direct attention towards the different ways in which educators and researchers can examine how the atmospheres created in classrooms and schools are of political significance (Closs Stephens, 2016).

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