Democratic education online

Remote education as power relations, sabotage, and dystopia

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Education plays a key role in democracy. Nonetheless, while Finnish teachers are positive about educating for democracy, they feel that they lack the right resources to achieve this and tend to exhibit a passive approach to participation. The study contributes to the discussion on democratic education through teachers' reflections on remote education. Through an analysis of teacher interviews conducted in Swedish-medium schools in Finland during 2021, we asked how teachers framed questions of democracy in the context of remote teaching. Our thematic analysis discusses teachers' views of democracy in the remote classroom and presents three themes: changed roles and power relations, safety and digital sabotage, and digital dystopia. Teachers displayed varied understandings of democracy in education. We welcome further discussion within the field of democratic education on the meaning of developing democracy in a digital age and the role of schools and teachers in this development.

Keywords: democracy, education, remote education, digital education.

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Introduction

The Finnish curriculum for basic education (FNAE 2014) emphasizes democracy within education. Nonetheless, while Finnish teachers are positive about educating for democracy, a recent report shows that most feel they lack the right resources to achieve this (Kestilä-Kekkonen et al. 2024). There are several characteristics of Finnish education that could be seen to promote democracy within education, such as the local school policy, teacher autonomy and a curricular teaching model that highlights dialogue (Männistö 2018). Despite this, as Perttu Männistö (2018) observes, Finnish teachers often exhibit a passive approach to society and participation. To some degree, the reason for this could be confusion about the role of democracy in education, such as the persistent idea that democracy is only of relevance to teachers of social studies (Kestilä-Kekkonen et al. 2024). As Andrea Raiker, Marja Mäensivu & Tiina Nikkola (2017) point out, Finnish teachers might often understand democracy in an unnecessarily narrow sense. Instead, democracy could be seen as everyday school work where teachers demonstrate democratic values through their practices – such as how they ask questions and support students' inquiries.

Questions of democracy, agency and power in education gained another dimension as teaching moved online in March 2020 due to COVID-19. For teachers, the sudden task of shifting schooling online meant a confrontation with technology, equity and access and the need to find new ways of building community in the classroom (Buchholz, DeHart & Moorman 2020; Gouseti 2021). Even before the pandemic, the increased use of digital technologies in the classroom had changed student engagement in terms of both opportunities for participation and access to content (Högström et al. 2024). While discussions held through electronic communication devices cause less disruption than talking during lessons, the use of such devices decreases peer interaction and inclusivity in classrooms. This silent interaction results in quieter classrooms but reduces the teacher's authority and diminishes the inclusive classroom experience. Remote teaching created a completely new situation for most teachers, requiring new forms of classroom management (Krumsvik 2021). Importantly, videoconferencing tools, while enabling virtual meetings, are not designed primarily as tools for advancing democracy (see Forestal 2022; Moore 2019). Moreover, Jennifer Forestal (2022) argues that there is a need, even at a conceptual level, to create a vocabulary for evaluating what digital technology means from the perspective of what is beneficial for democracy and participation. Educational institutions, globally, have come to depend on the solutions

provided by certain, often large, IT companies as a resource for teaching, even though the main aim of developing these technologies was not the advancement of democracy, or pedagogical values (Williamson 2017). In an educational context, digital inequalities have increased in terms of access, digital skills, and technology ownership (Williamson, Eynon & Potter 2020).

The use and interpretations of technology are relational and contingent to the socio-cultural and economic circumstances of their users. In the Nordic countries, teachers reported challenges related to the organisation of teaching, classroom dialogue, and assessment of student learning during remote education. Teachers perceived the changed conditions for interaction as problematic for students' equal educational opportunities, as interaction in remote teaching was transformed and stripped of the essential features of face-to face teaching. Moreover, teachers claimed that interaction became flatter and less dynamic, thereby providing a glimpse in these teacher reflections of the ideal of active student participation where students can learn from each other (Nilsberth et al. 2021a; 2021b). Furthermore, Verneri Valasmo and colleagues (2023) argue that technology actively, although often invisibly, participates in configurating forms of student participation during remote teaching. These findings imply that the conditions for teachers to promote democratic education changed drastically when teaching moved online. What we can perceive to have occurred during remote education reveals something about democratic education. In this study, our attempt is to contribute to the discussion on democratic education through teachers' reflections on remote education. We ask how teachers' accounts of remote teaching contribute to an understanding of the relationship between democracy, power, agency, and digital tools in education. We approach this question through an analysis of teacher interviews conducted in Finland during 2021.

Democracy in education

As John Dewey (1916/1966, p. 87) suggests, democracy is "more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience". This definition has influenced perceptions of democracy in education. In an extensive theoretical review of democratic education, Edda Sant (2019) identifies eight distinctive versions, ranging from elitist to neoliberal, participatory and agonistic understandings of democracy. One version that has gained much support within education is the deliberative view of democracy, which places communication at the centre (Englund

2007). In education, this view can mean considering the classroom a place for collective inquiry and problem-solving. However, as Sant (2019) observes, the focus on argumentative skills can be considered discriminatory, favouring those who master language and communication better than others. The degree to which power dynamics vary when it comes to different forms of written communication, such as discussions in chat groups, is less apparent, but it is reasonable to assume that being able to express an idea and possessing knowledge of writing genres helps strengthen one's position overall. It has also been argued that deliberation favours consensus. In a classroom full of eloquent, seemingly unanimous voices, it is hard for a student with a differing opinion to articulate their point. In answer to this, Sant (2019) points to multicultural democratic education, which focuses primarily on diversity, as well as the agonistic version of democracy, which prioritizes making the classroom safe for dissensus. Importantly, agonistic democracy concerns learning to articulate the difference between political adversaries and moral enemies (DesRoches & Ruitenberg 2018; Mouffe 2020).

Participatory democratic education favours action and praxis over communication and consensus. Participation humanizes us – political action, learning to act in a democratic setting, is a way to become part of society, even to become human (Todd 2011). Within critical democratic education, the humanizing effect of being able to pursue equality and social transformation is likewise highlighted. Critical democratic educators turn to questions of power, criticizing constrained versions of democracy, where the proposed arena of action is limited (Mikander & Satokangas 2023; 2024). Sant (2019) exemplifies the critical version of democracy with Paolo Freire's claim that to exist humanly "is to name the world, to change it" (2000, p. 88). In sum, Sant's (2019) review highlights how democracy within education, in several of its versions, can and should be seen not simply as referring to democracy as an institutional process, such as might be expected (referring to democracy as classroom voting, for example), but as an effort to humanize.

According to Henry Giroux (2021), pandemic pedagogy has precipitated a crisis in democratic education since it depoliticizes people, replacing democratic forms of solidarity with phenomena such as ultra-nationalism, individualism, and a war culture. Anja Besand (2020), however, argues that living with ambiguity is central for learning about democracy. In her view, a crisis provides an opportunity to ask central questions of democratic education. Focusing on students' power and agency are examples of such questions. Participation and democracy require an analysis of power relations in the

classroom (Heid, Jüttler & Kärner 2023). Power in education is not just about theoretical abstractions but connected to daily practices (Apple 2012). Student agency can sometimes be limited to deciding only how much effort to put into school assignments. Power is also often considered in the individual sense. As Carrie Karsgaard (2024) points out, even while emphasizing political participation among young people, many visions of the role of digital solutions for citizenship engagement emphasize individual empowerment rather than the enlivement of democracy.

For Gert Biesta (2003; 2007; 2011), democracy is a form of life, and the role of the school in preparing students to become democratic subjects is central. Biesta (2007) discusses the possibilities and limitations of democracy within education. He addresses the question of the role schools play in a democratic society and argues that the answer depends on one's understanding of a democratic person. The concept of democratic education is instrumentalized and individualized, creating obstacles to our understanding of what it means to be democratic. However, challenging conventional notions might be an unrealistic demand for education, considering their dominant role in society at large: "A society in which individuals are not able or not allowed to act, cannot expect its schools to produce its democratic citizens. The ultimate task for democratic education therefore lies in society itself, and not in its educational institutions. Schools can neither create nor save democracy—they can only support societies in which action and subjectivity are real possibilities" (Biesta 2007, p. 765). Nonetheless, the role of education is vital. Teaching for democracy concerns fostering relationships (Collins, Hess & Lowery 2019). Moreover, there is the possibility and the need for education to re-examine the relationship between social relations and education (Schaffar 2023). Being surrounded by other people with different experiences, nurturing relationships and attempting to empathize and understand are important for learning. Relationships are crucial in teaching for democracy, starting by recognizing each student in class as an active participant. Furthermore, promoting democracy at school necessarily includes recognizing anti-democratic trends (Mikander & Satokangas 2024).

Many arguments about democracy in education are circular — democracy requires people who are educated, thoughtful and appreciative of democracy itself (Brown 2020) while there is a need to portray democracy as desirable and worth saving, even when there is ambivalence in society about the ways democracy is desirable and whether it is even worth saving (Knight Abowitz & Sellers 2022). Democratic education thereby necessarily includes a component of temporality, and particularly an

aspect of the future. What kind of society do we, as the *demos*, want? As Christina Löfving's (2023) study shows, teachers tend to consider digitalization mainly in terms of technical knowledge and usage as well as responsible and critical awareness rather that its connection to democratic values. She argues that this narrow perspective can restrain democratic values and increase digital inequality. One step towards nuancing the role of technology in education could be by recognizing the powerful agency of digital tools. While technological solutions in education have been widely introduced, critical research about the effects of these, such as on shifting power and agency in the classroom, are still scarce (Decuypere, Grimaldi & Landri 2021). As Sigrid Hartong (2021) shows, educational platforms are often observed as seemingly neutral, hiding questions of power. Their ready-made formats restrict efforts to reconsider power and interaction, making teaching into one-way processes that position students as "knowledge consumers" (Gouseti 2021, p. 24). Focusing on the role of pedagogy, Julian Sefton-Green (2022) stresses how the process of platformization can be seen as part of a wider inscription into forms of pedagogic power. Seen as Bernsteinian *pedagogic devices* that exercise power, platforms steer their users into compliance. This has effects on relationships, such as those between teachers and students. Notably, however, while the studies above mostly concern online learning platforms that accumulate assignments and track learning, there are few studies particularly about online meeting platforms as *pedagogic devices* of interaction.

Materials and methods

The material for our discussion consists of semi-structured, video-recorded, online interviews about teaching during the remote education periods 2020–2021. The participants were teachers in grades 5–9 in six Swedish-medium schools in Finland (meaning Swedish was the language of instruction). The interviews were conducted by some of the authors during spring 2021 within the DigiLi (Digital litteracitet i utveckling) research project. The same teachers had also been interviewed one year earlier, then partly about other topics. The videoconferencing software Zoom was used, and the interviews lasted for approximately one hour each. Convenience sampling and snowball-sampling were used to select the participating teachers (Table 1). The respondents' interest in digitalization in teaching constituted a core selection criterion. At the time of the interviews, the teachers

had at least 2–3 months experience of remote teaching. Eight of the teachers were subject teachers, and two were class teachers.

Table 1. Study participants

Participating teachers	Teaching subject
Anne, Kim, Bea	Subject teachers: L1 (Swedish Language and Literature)
Alex	Subject teacher: Mathematics
Martin, Silvia	Subject teachers: History and Social Studies
Susan, Mia	Subject teachers: L2 (Swedish as Second Language)
Eva, Tom	Class teachers

A semi-structured interview guide was prepared by the authors, with a broad focus related to different topics about remote teaching (for instance, organization of teaching, content, social aspects, interaction, participation, and understanding of democracy). This allowed the interviewee to elaborate on different angles and themes that were important to them, and for the interviewer to follow up on issues that were important in relation to the research question. Our previous study on teachers' reflections on remote teaching during 2020 (Slotte, Rejman & Wallinheimo 2021) had prompted us to focus more deeply on equity and student participation. Based on these results, we developed a focus on teachers' perspectives on democracy and power in remote education in this study. The recorded audio files were transcribed verbatim by an outside professional and checked within the research project. The interview transcripts were then coded with NVivo software. All the names of the participants were pseudonymized.

For this article, the following open-ended interview questions were analyzed in particular:
1. As a teacher, what opportunities do you consider there are for you to enhance student participation in discussions, for example democratic discussions where students can voice their opinions during remote education?
2. How are potential power relations in the student group affected in remote teaching? How is this different from onsite teaching?

Both questions were enriched by potential follow-up questions, such as (1) Which digital tools have you used to create possibilities for students to engage in democratic discussions and What other solutions do you

see for students to participate in education, and (2) Does technology affect power relations in class and How have you experienced being in control during remote education. Together, the themes of democracy and power accumulated to about one third of the interviews. We investigate the empirical data by means of thematic content analysis, which allows the researcher to identify different patterns and themes in qualitative data at the semantic and latent level through several stages (Braun & Clarke 2006; 2021). The thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was a twofold process. First, all authors familiarized themselves with the data, reading all the material to provide an overview of the data. Next, we focused on the parts of the interviews that topicalized democracy and power relations during remote teaching. All the parts connected to democracy in education, in the broader sense of the concept, were highlighted. Moreover, we identified interview descriptions of teacher-student relations to contribute to our analysis of how remote education can help us understand the meaning of democracy in an educational context. This means that even though the direct questions about democracy and power were limited, we found that the topics became relevant throughout the interviews. In the following, we present the thematic findings of the interviews.

Wide-ranging understandings of democracy

The teachers' descriptions of democracy indicate varying understandings of the concept, ranging from the view of democracy as primarily processes of digital participation to broader understandings. Democracy was often referred to as participatory processes. When asked about opportunities to enhance student participation in democratic discussions during remote teaching, the teachers appeared committed to ensuring that all students were able to participate and voice their opinions. Their focus in the answers was on the different digital tools that enabled participation, such as filling in forms to ensure that everyone gets an opportunity to express their opinions. Using digital solutions to ensure participation is an example of viewing democracy as mainly digital participatory processes. The enhancement of student participation is achieved through the technological solutions implemented in teaching. Completing a digital form or logging out by answering a question forces the students to react, on what can be considered as equal terms, but the link between similar fill-in tasks for everyone and attempts to advance democracy is not self-evident. As Sant (2019) observes, the multicultural criticism of deliberative democracy centres on the norms of eloquence that favour deliberative discussions among

students who enjoy greater access to linguistic style. This privilege can also be connected to social class and racialization, since some social groups are more confident than others that their voices will be heard (Lo 2017; Sibbett 2016).

Further, Anne, an L1 teacher, used log-out-questions to randomize the order in which students voiced their opinions about what they had learnt. She considered this procedure more democratic, since it made the situation "detached from potential pain points in the group". She considered this a strength regarding remote education. It is understandable that the use of digital technology to randomly select the order of students facilitates the teachers' job – for instance, through the notion of accountability, as teachers are not required to defend themselves against accusations of favouritism; rather, the technology can be held responsible for this. However, selecting the order in which students can speak is a pedagogical choice that is based on the teacher's competence. As education relies on building relationships, it might be necessary for the teacher to make such a choice on pedagogical grounds, and stand behind that decision, at least sometimes. From an agonistic point of view, assigning digital tools the task of detaching the discussion from potential "pain points" in the group makes for an interesting discussion, since agonistic democratic education favours the foregrounding of "pain points". The avoidance of difficult discussions was found to be prevalent in Perttu Männistö and Josephine Moate's (2023) study, where Finnish primary school teachers articulated their lack of sufficient competence to support students' argumentation skills. However, digital turn-taking was not the only way for the teachers to understand democracy in the context of remote education. In the following, we highlight three themes: changed roles and power relations, safety and digital sabotage, and digital dystopia.

Changed roles and power relations

The teachers in our study made revealing comments about how students' roles changed during the transition from onsite to online remote teaching, particularly regarding power relations:

> There are students who take up a lot of space in remote teaching, even more than in class, I would say. And then there are students who take up a lot of space in class, that are seen and that have some kind of power struggle even with teachers, but they again might not be seen in remote teaching, so it can be both ways. ... there are some students who seem shy in class, but then, in remote teaching, they could have the microphone on and say

some fast things, so it was interesting. But maybe more in the other direction, that students who are lively and can be heard and seen a lot in the class, they were quiet in remote teaching. (Alex, Mathematics teacher)

Power relations are always present to some degree in classrooms. Over the years, classroom studies have consistently demonstrated that a highly prevalent sequence type in the classroom, IRE (initiative, response, evaluation), allows teachers to maintain tight control of the classroom interaction (Gardner 2019). Newer studies observe that turn-allocation is interactionally and multimodally negotiated between the teacher and the students and that both verbal and embodied actions, like hand-raising, gaze and nodding, are used. This means that the framework for demonstrating willingness to participate in classroom interaction is a social, public demonstration – and that the conditions for participation change radically when teaching goes online (Evnitskaya & Berger 2017; Kääntä 2012). The teachers in our study found that some students occupied a larger space during remote teaching than in the physical classroom, while for others the opposite occurred. Among the participants' articulations, however, it is possible to perceive how power relations within the classroom affect different students' voices, and how digital technology plays an active part in this. Technology possesses the power to silence certain students and elevate the status of others. Students who, by their physical presence alone, might have dominated the room lost this role when diminished to an equal size square on the screen (see Valasmo et al. 2023). Nevertheless, the fear of saying something wrong in front of others was just as real in an online setting if students sat alone and worried about what their more dominant peers might say. Technology therefore seems to exert a moderating power over who dares to voice an opinion. Nonetheless, the move from a classroom to a screen did not transform existing power structures altogether. Thus, while the processes of participation may seem to enhance equality and democracy, as technology holds an empowering potential, the teachers recognized the limitations of this notion.

In addition, the teachers discussed the lack of teacher presence caused by remote teaching. Furthermore, several teachers were concerned about derailing or uncomfortable discussions. A prerequisite for all voices to be heard is that the classroom functions as a safe space, also when there are differing opinions and power struggles, as proponents of agonistic democratic education advise. However, the classroom as a safe space might often be considered more of an ideal than a given. While the overall worry about student safety and

well-being during initial school closures centred on students being forced to stay home, Martin, a history and social studies teacher, voiced quite a different opinion, pointing out that the home was safer than school for students in 95% of all cases – emphasizing the recent high level of physical violence, with the police visiting school every other week to deal with fighting students. This point of view has rarely been raised by teachers with reference to the debate on remote education, even though some parents considered remote education more effective than onsite education for children who did not dare to go to school physically.

Safety and digital sabotage – digital opportunities and limitations

One topic that was raised was the extent of what we term *digital sabotage* during remote teaching. During the first weeks of education online, technology remained a site of struggle for many teachers, while some students knew how to take control of the lessons in various ways. The teachers had different experiences and ways of framing this disturbance, or sabotage.

> Um, yes. I do experience that. I think if you think about settings, for example, it was such a bitter lesson that we had to learn…, that if you have chosen a setting on the computer that makes you completely equal with the students, of course they take advantage of it. They can kick the teacher out of a meeting, for example. And we also had some rare unfortunate situations where students kicked each other out of the lesson, before we had time to have a teachers' meeting where we went through [it]…; this is how we do it; this is our line; these are the settings we use; the teacher takes the role of the administrator for the meeting and the students should not be able to kick each other out. (Anne, L1 teacher)

The initial remote education sessions in 2020, according to Anne, required teachers to learn a "bitter lesson". Removing somebody from class is an authoritative move that in a physical classroom belongs to the teachers' toolkit of ways to handle difficult situations, serving as an enactment of power. In the quote above, Anne considers the student takeover a natural response to the potential for sabotage. The chance was there, so they took it. To some degree, this could be considered a particular effect of online teaching – students might capitulate to the temptation to engage in digital sabotage simply because it demands

so little. In comparison, while there are multiple tools that students can use in the physical classroom to disturb the lesson, these normally demand more than the push of a button – such as physically removing the teacher from a classroom. Anne further framed digital sabotage in the following terms:

> I think of concrete situations that I encountered, for example, that my students had shared the meeting link to our lesson with friends in other parallel classes, which meant that those who were very technically skilled and who also had a social need, they tried to get into our lesson, so a bit like knocking on the door and running further down the corridor… And I think that for the students, it is a pretty strong signal of power that someone is trying to get in, even if it is a digital territory. So, you might have just intended to talk about how you experienced or had interpreted some text, and you might be quite private, so then it is quite an intrusion for someone to try to come in and listen to people, for example.

Referring to the "digital territory" being entered without authorization, and the power signal this sends, Anne shows how questions of power play a role in the classroom's position as a place for democratic deliberation. Knowledge of who is within earshot makes a difference for what we choose to say and how (see also Valasmo et al. 2023). In this example, the safety of students who were about to discuss their personal reflections on a text was compromised by intruders. Anne portrays this as a power struggle for the students, but it is evident that the teacher's power is also compromised, at least until the tools are obtained to maintain control over who enters the online classroom. The digital platform constitutes a site of struggle over power (Hartong 2021), and it also becomes evident that students re-configure power relations through sabotage. Overall, existing power relations became reassembled in the ready-made format of the online settings.

The teachers quickly found ways to change their settings so that students could no longer exclude the teacher or take over the online lessons in other ways. In this way, the teacher's authority and agency took other forms than in a normal classroom. The teacher could mute students, make them invisible and force them to leave the class with, as the respondents described it, just one "click". However, as Martin remarked, more imaginative ways for students to disrupt teaching then emerged: for instance, the use of their own profile background as a space for sabotage. Martin referred to a 14-year-old male student who had attempted to spam and disturb the lesson. When he was unable to disturb the lesson by, for instance, turning on his microphone, he

posted pornographic images in his own background picture. Martin had also witnessed Nazi symbols as background images and considered these acts of trolling impossible to deal with in class. Thus, the technological advantage that Martin had acquired did not stop all attempts to disturb the lesson. Here, the means available to teachers to handle digital sabotage appear limited, given that the teacher saw no other solution than to exclude the disruptive student from the online class. The platform format thus steered both students and the teacher towards compliance on the platform's terms, as described by Anastasia Gouseti (2021).

Digital dystopia – a risk for democracy

One teacher voiced an interpretation of digital sabotage that connected it to a larger understanding of becoming human:

> When students do not have the opportunity to sigh and moan or come a little late or to express themselves and their own presence in different ways, they express it through various [forms of] technical sabotage. They turn off the teacher's microphone or invite other students to meetings who should not be there. The need is so strong to be human, not just to be someone who performs tasks. (Susan, L2 teacher)

As an L2 teacher, thus working with students from linguistic minority backgrounds, Susan connected the question of democracy to the conditions created by remote teaching in an extensive and complex way. In her opinion, democratic discussion is the most important task of the school. During the remote education period, the school had failed at this task by focusing solely on giving students written assignments. Susan described the school's democratic task as having failed by the move from physical classrooms to online teaching. The increased use of written tasks could be seen to maintain the contours of school while omitting what would perhaps have been urgently required at a time when the world was struck with so much uncertainty: joint discussions and reflections. Susan continued by illustrating the difficult role of the teacher in attempting to facilitate discussions with larger groups online. The role of the teacher grows, she suggested, when the chemistry that occurs when everyone is in the same room disappears. Consequently, it is necessary for the teacher to guide the dialogue more, "so that it consists not only of separate speaking turns for the person who now has the microphone on". Susan's opinions echoed Gouseti's (2021) concerns that students are positioned as mere knowledge consumers

online. Teaching in a way that promotes democratic discussion in online settings is thereby not impossible, but more demanding.

Susan produced a discourse that echoes Sant's (2019) conceptions of both multicultural and critical democratic education, as well as Biesta's (2007) suggestion of educating for democracy. After working with L2 learners, she recognized the challenge of providing space for all students' voices. She continued by observing that the dynamic education that occurs in the physical classroom, with its numerous daily occurrences, and intimate discussions about identities and life, suffered during online teaching. The students "held back" in online settings, she observed. As Susan discussed students whose cultural strength was not always considered at school, her reasoning can be seen to connect with Biesta's (2007, p. 759) compelling argument for democracy and education: "From the point of view of democratic education, this means that the first question to ask about schools and other educational institutions is not how they can make students into democratic citizens. The question to ask rather is: What kind of schools do we need so that children and students can act?" Remote teaching adds another aspect to this call for change.

Susan explained the imbalance between assignments and teacher presence as the following:

> Yes, I may have got in more material. Because we usually never otherwise have problems with dead time when we have classroom teaching. But when you work digitally, dead time occurs in a different way if you do not fill it with substance. So maybe we have things that I do quite rarely otherwise. During a lesson I say[...] yes, I think I also do that otherwise, but there will be more repetitions and more repetition of material. I have put in illustrations of one thing from several angles, which means that I have directed the teaching more because I have not been completely comfortable. In this way, I think I lost my grip a little, because now I am just pushing material in and I do not know if they will be able to take it in. What happens in their process? I felt like I lost control of their process when I was not there. When digital media in some way, yes, change our relationships and roles.

It seems that several teachers shared this concern about the amount of schoolwork that students could manage, and what the consequences would be of merely handing out an increasing number of assignments. After experiencing students' return to the physical classroom following the period of online teaching, some teachers described a change in student behaviour. For example, one respondent highlighted small,

everyday disturbances, described as pushing, touching and throwing things around, as necessary friction for learning how to behave. There seemed to be the understanding that teaching involved dealing with these disturbances on an everyday-level, and moving lessons online led to a situation where the teachers were not disturbed, thereby facilitating classroom management while hampering efforts to maintain contact with students.

Susan had witnessed a need among students to express their frustration, as well as a sense of powerlessness with their situation at large. She had often witnessed feelings of being unseen, uncertain, and overburdened with schoolwork. In the physical classroom, this frustration would have been manifested through protesting and different ways of challenging the teacher:

> The balance of power becomes static. The teacher is the one who hands out tasks and you yourself are the one who performs the tasks. And this [display of frustration] would sort of humanize the context[...] Digitally, you log in and wait for instructions and then you act. And this creates a great deal of fatigue and frustration. And I think that when we went back to onsite teaching, that fatigue remained. So that there was an interruption in a certain kind of communication that takes place on a different channel than teaching, but which nevertheless happens all the time.

The extract above points to the intertwining themes of powerlessness and the need to be seen as a human, or a subject. Describing the online teaching experience from the students' perspective, it demonstrates how robot-like education can be experienced as logging on, waiting for instructions and performing tasks. Counterintuitively, framing the experience from a teacher perspective as one of static power balance calls for a more dynamic shift of power. Enabling students to disrupt the handing out of an assignment, perhaps with an unrelated question or a protest, is perhaps something that democratic teaching must bear. Supporting the student in the democratic task of becoming human becomes one of the primary tasks of education. It was clear that this important part of teaching suffered during online teaching. Simultaneously, Bea, an L1 teacher, portrayed online teaching as a potential sign of a dystopia:

> Sometimes I think that we did this remote thing too well because, I am a little afraid of what it will mean for the future, that it has opened a little bit of a possibility for something that in some way has previously been completely unthinkable

in our country. It would have been completely impossible; I mean in my own school days. I remember how the teachers only laughed at the idea, even if it was minus 30 and two meters of snow. In this country, we do not close any schools... But with this, it feels like, yes, I have a slightly eerie feeling concerning what this means for the future.

Bea continued by pointing out that the physical school was where the important work of creating an equal and successful school system occurred. The fear that the move to remote education might have been overly successful is also highlighted by the constant financial pressure under which the school system functions. As there is a declining number of school-age children, particularly in rural areas, and as education represents the largest expense for Finnish municipalities, there is a real risk that the temptation to move more education online will become too great. Bea's "eerie feeling" speaks of a larger concern about education for democracy: it is a sign of powerlessness, of a larger societal crisis where priority is no longer given to becoming democratic subjects and where the conditions in which teachers and students operate are compromised – conditions affected by technology to an increasing degree.

Discussion

While the sudden move to remote teaching must be considered a form of crisis management, it also leaves space to reimagine education as a whole (Buchholz, DeHart & Moorman 2020). This article has demonstrated how Finnish teachers portray questions about democracy in education, particularly relating to remote education period during the time spring 2020–spring 2021. One limitation of the study is that the focus in the interviews was only partly on questions directly related to democracy in education. We found, however, that the participants brought attention to democracy from various points of view, providing us with several noteworthy perspectives upon which to build our analysis. We found that some teachers considered remote teaching more democratic, while many were concerned about maintaining contact with all students. We further discussed descriptions of digital sabotage from the perspective of democracy, showing how one teacher particularly connected remote education sessions to dehumanization, turning away from the attempt to create democratic subjects (Biesta 2007). We also observed verbalizations of remote teaching as a sign of dystopia. The relative success of remote education was seen as a cause of concern.

The results construct a nuanced and complex understanding of the relationship between education and democracy in the context of remote education. The variety of perspectives provided by the teachers, ranging from viewing democracy as mainly digital participation to seeing it as a need to humanize education, speaks of a need to pay more attention to questions of democracy within teacher education. According to Männistö and Moate (2023), a negative cycle exists where Finnish students are not given responsibility until they have proven their democratic competence – a skillset that they have little opportunity to practice. The teachers in our study generally talked positively about the democratic potential of their students. However, in their descriptions of digital sabotage during the early remote education weeks, the teachers considered the problem of sabotage solvable primarily through technological means, such as by learning how to mute students, rather than as a relational or democratic question.

The results of the study at hand expand the literature on democratic education by focusing on teachers' reflections on remote education. We suggest that the observations of participation, agency and power during this exceptional time contribute to the theoretical understandings of the relationship between democracy and education. Williamson (2017, p. 193) suggests that "activities such as learning to code and digital making have become everyday acts that co-produce the political subjectivity of digital citizens: individuals and social groups that can act through the digital to forge styles of participation, but are simultaneously shaped and constrained by the coded software devices, infrastructures and institutional arrangements that make such forms of participation possible." This is an area that democratic education must address in the future. We agree with Biesta (2007, p. 765) in that "schools can neither create nor save democracy—they can only support societies in which action and subjectivity are real possibilities." While preserving and developing democracy in a digital age cannot be left to schools, they play an important part in this critical task, and teachers play a vital role in the development.

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