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Ewa Kochanowska

ORCID: 0000-0003-0183-1239

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Technical and Humanistic Academy of Bielsko-Biala

## Elementary Education as an Intellectual Space of (Not)Experiencing Democratic Practices by Children

### KEYWORDS    ABSTRACT

early school  
education,  
democracy, learning,  
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in the education  
process

The presented article addresses the problem of learning in democracy by children at the early educational stage. The main objective of the conducted research was to present and analyze the activities of teachers in terms of creating conditions for children to experience democratic practices in the learning process. The background of this research is a review of the contemporary considerations on the idea of democratization in relation to the education of a child at early school age in the contemporary reality. In the course of the research, the author of the study searches for the answers to questions concerning the main problem: Do and what actions undertaken by teachers during integrated classes are conducive to learning in democracy by children at early school age? As a result of the conducted qualitative research using observation of integrated classes (daily blocks of classes) hosted by primary class teachers, the author categorized teachers' actions hindering or preventing the child participation in the education process, building space for student autonomy in cognition and understanding of the world, and facilitating effective learning in the course of interaction with other participants of the educational

process. In the final part, a summary was made and conclusions from the research were formulated, the inclusion of which in the practice of early school education may favor the democratization of the intellectual space of school.

## Introduction

The key issue in contemporary scientific reflection in the field of pedagogy, especially in the area of the student-centered and critical-emancipation trends, is the issue of democratizing education. In the postmodern world, marked by changeability, relativity and pluralism, “the conditions for shaping the man’s individuality, his social position and chances of coping with the risk situation” have changed (Bałachowicz 2015: 15). On the one hand, the need for individual’s autonomy, his right to development is emphasized; on the other – new forms of socialization and interpersonal cooperation, as well as new forms of organizing social life and new ways of institutionalizing care for the “common good”, are sought (Mariański 2001). One of the manifestations of human autonomy is, as Zbigniew Kwieciński (2013) claims, the ability to solve moral dilemmas and problems of the communities in which one lives, being an active participant and co-creator of culture. The active attitude of the individual in the context of changing and transforming the world is fostered by education based on such values as: respect for diversity, perceiving and appreciating the multitude of perspectives and paradigms, and critical thinking (Moss 2007). Attempts to move away from the adaptive doctrine towards building an emancipation model of civic education are usually reduced to respecting the students’ subjectivity, triggering their involvement in creating programs, forms, methods and means of education, and creating conditions for students to “shape their own voice, analyze and use previous experience” (Prokopiuk 2010: 2014). However, based on the conducted research (Przybylski 2013: 26), it appears that despite numerous voices and exhortations to democratize school life, educational reality differs significantly from postulates made by defenders or avid promoters of building democracy among the youngest. In addition, as emphasized by Bogusław Śliwerski (2011: 76), “in Poland education is focused primarily on teaching about democracy and for democracy, but not on democracy. In other words, the assumption is made [...] that education about democracy and for democracy should be implemented in autocracy, bypassing the authentic and committed experience of democratic processes in the school, their manifestations and consequences by students, teachers and parents”. Contemporary democracy does not mean so much the power of people, the form of the state system, legal procedures (Kopaliński 2004) or civil rights (Zwoliński 2010: 11), but above all a system of

related values and social norms that should be rooted and constantly implemented in everyday interpersonal relations (Moss 2014: 27). In the school practice, democracy understood in this way is expressed in the recognition of the subjectivity of the child, respect for his opinion, and in the participation of the child in deciding about education in relations with the teacher. As Bogusław Śliwerski writes (2012: 24), it is about changing the way of seeing this relationship from the “submission” to “partner-dialogue” one. Building democratic relations at work with a young child is expressed and achieved through the respect for his rights, creating educational situations that require his involvement and co-determination and responsibility for the decisions made, as well as the consequences resulting from them. Among the key skills necessary for the internal order of every democratic state that the school should equip its students, Martha C. Nussbaum (2008) puts: the ability to perceive global problems from the point of view of the “citizen of the world”, educating the imagination, mind and practical reason of students, and above all developing critical thinking already at the lowest levels of education. Thanks to this, young people learn to conduct dialogue and discussion, to analyze themselves, and think about the reasons that encourage them to accept such and not other views and decisions. Therefore, the educational system must be focused on developing independence in the students’ thinking, creativity and innovation. Experiencing democratic processes is a complex and long-term process, during which the child from an early age learns social mechanisms and develops skills related to communication and cooperation. Hence, democratic behavior should be practiced as a dominant and significant form in the everyday life of each kindergarten and school (Siemieniak 1997: 10).

The system of social relations based on democratic processes includes the notion of education space in which the main creator – the individual – undertakes intellectual and practical activities related to building a network of the student’s space for developing his own potential and creating a personal, individualized development path (Nowak 2014: 81). The component of the education space understood in this way is an intellectual space which – using the metaphor quoted by Janusz Morbitzer (2015: 421-422) – is “always available. It is [...] a constantly open gym, adapted to intellectual exercises, which we always have ‘with us’”. In the context of the democratization of school, the intellectual space becomes particularly important in the pedagogy of coexistence, the essence of which is expressed in the fact that “interpersonal contacts, ties and bonds occurring in the course of various activities of students and teachers (...) are a friendly, kind, multi-humanised space of co-existence and dialogue. It is characterized, inter alia, by the desire to reciprocally share the resources of one’s mind” (Dymara 2008: 54). According to the discussed concept, the intellectual space, in connection with the real, emotional, mental, worldview, therapeutic and spiritual spaces, creates the conditions for joint problem solving and thus developing the creativity of community

participants, i.e. students and teachers, in an atmosphere of joy and fascination with mental discoveries (ibidem: 55-56). In the application of educational practices based on the idea of learning in democracy, the proper attitude of the teacher who can create an organizational framework for social contacts in the classroom, so that the learners can independently get information, be active and communicate with each other, plays a very important role (Kosz 2009).

The article attempts to present and analyze the activities of early education teachers in terms of creating conditions for children to experience democratic practices in the learning process. Based on the observation of integrated classes, the author categorized teachers' actions hindering or preventing the child from participation in the educational process, building space for the student's autonomy in learning about and understanding the world, and in the course of cooperation with others.

## Research procedure

The issue of learning democracy in various ways fits into two basic models of education, i.e. a transmission and transformative model, because in each of them there are different patterns of perceiving the child's possibilities, his or her ways of learning, and the teacher's actions, i.e. managing the child and supporting their subjectivity. The foundation of the democratic approach to education, characteristic of the transformative model, is primarily the idea of expanding students' perception and increasing the possibility of making decisions about learning goals by students, as well as the students' co-deciding about the choice of methods and forms of learning. Learning democracy, however, rejects the formative-authoritarian model, recognizing the indispensability of shaping young people according to a top-down external model and assigning the teacher a superior role in guiding the education process and determining rules prevailing in the school (Tokarz 2014). Based on the assumption that "communication is the basic tool of democratic relations" (Błajet, Przyborowska 2014: 88), the purpose of the qualitative research was to determine whether and how elementary grade students experience democratic practices in the learning process. The research sought to answer the following problems:

1. What activities undertaken by teachers during integrated classes are conducive to learning in democracy by children at early school age?
  - 1.1. Are children aware of learning goals and do they participate in planning learning goals?
  - 1.2. What solutions used by teachers in the area of organizing the child's learning conditions during integrated classes are democratic in nature?

The applied research method is qualitative observation carried out in the natural context of observed actions and interactions, the essence of which consists in “allowing the researcher to immerse in everyday life, where relationships, correlations and causes of phenomena can be observed directly, as they emerge during observation” (Konecki 2000: 145-146). In qualitative research, during the observation, the attention of the researcher is focused on capturing the entire sequence of behaviors and their context, which gives an insight into the circumstances in which the observed processes take place. The observation concentrated on the interaction between the teachers and their student/students and the students and other students during the classes. The point was to faithfully record all the verbal and nonverbal behaviors of the people involved who demonstrated them, along with the context in which they occurred.

The aim was to faithfully present the context and dynamics of all events and interactions taking place during integrated classes. Detailed class reports were prepared on an ongoing basis<sup>1</sup>. The observation involved integrated classes – 54 day blocks (3-5-hour) – conducted by elementary school female teachers at elementary schools in the provinces of Silesia, Lesser Poland and Podkarpacie. The respondents had to meet the formal requirements that were: being a teacher of early school education and agreeing to be observed during conducted integrated classes by the research author.

## Appearances of (not) experiencing democratic processes by children at early school age in the learning process – research results

As a result of the analysis of the class reports, the author distinguished the categories of teachers’ actions favoring and hampering the children’s experience of learning in democracy in school practice. In creating the description category, the terms used by the respondents themselves or the context of their statements were used. For the purposes of this article, each category was analyzed and illustrated with specific examples collected during the classes.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this article, the analysis of integrated classes reports collected during the author’s own research on the personal knowledge of a child at early school age was made. The quoted examples from the course of the classes are taken from: E. Kochanowska, *Wiedza osobista dziecka w refleksji i praktyce nauczycieli edukacji wczesnoszkolnej* (Eng. *The Child’s Personal Knowledge in the Reflection and Practice of Early School Education Teachers*), Impuls, Krakow 2018.

### **1. Co-participation / lack of children's participation in setting learning goals during the classes**

One of the manifestations of the child experiencing democracy in the learning process is the awareness of learning goals and participation in setting the goals of the classes. The child has the opportunity to see the sense of learning, and the goals of the course have a chance to become personal goals of learning. Acquainting children with the goals of classes by the teacher and applying the strategy of giving goals the subjective character in early childhood education (Puślecki 2010) not only directs children's attention to what is to be learned, what new skills are to be mastered or improved, but also gives them a chance to realize what they already know on a given topic, what they would like to know, and what knowledge they want to supplement or extend. Unfortunately, during the classes that were watched, only a few teachers from among the respondents made the children aware of the goals of the classes and created conditions for reporting other (apart from their own) learning goals, which are the expression of either the child's lack of knowledge or his specific personal knowledge. An example of this type of action is the teacher's reaction to the student's submission of his own "goal proposals":

- T: I hope that each of you will be glad if after today's classes you shall be able to explain the states of concentration of water around us.
- S1: Ma'am (the child is eager to answer), I would like to know why rain falls from the sky ... Where does the water in the sky come from... and then it rains hard or just a little, it sometimes only drips ...
- T: That's a really interesting question, maybe your friends or classmates already know the answer. We will try to answer this question for sure today.

The consent of the teacher to express the child's demand for specific knowledge in response to the given goals of the classes shows not only the understanding of the child's cognitive need which was born in connection with the topic of the course, but also indicates her confidence and belief that children already have a resource of knowledge on the topics discussed, and a promise that in accordance with the principles of democratization of the intellectual space they will be able to share this knowledge and give it common meanings during the course.

### **2. Teacher's (dis)agreement to children's use of their own experience and knowledge and to use one another as "intellectual resources"**

The democratization of the intellectual space is expressed in the use of appropriate strategy by teachers, a model of communication and cooperation with students in the classroom. One of such models is the model of the teacher's cooperation with students

defined as a *problem-posing method* (Freire 2000), in which special emphasis is placed on the importance of a dialogue with the student.

According to it, the teacher treats students as partners in conversation, everyone can ask questions, have doubts and express their own point of view. This shapes the nature of the researcher in students, that is, someone who does not look at the problem discussed only from an artificially limited point of view. Students are equipped with knowledge and skills that allow them to find their way in the reality that surrounds them. The discussed learning model takes into account the ambiguity of contemporary culture and the activity of a child as a learning subject entity who constructs knowledge using his previous knowledge, which today comes from many different sources. The manifestation of the democratization of the intellectual space of early school education is the possibility for children to share their experience and out-of-school knowledge in the education process. This approach to education clearly emphasizes the importance of building and internalizing knowledge by the child through interaction with other students. And in this case, only during a few integrated classes conducted by the surveyed teachers, the school class was a space of free exchange of personal knowledge and experiences by children. Here is an example of the situation of this type:

- T: Tomek, do you remember what you've asked at the beginning of the class, what has interested you so much?
- S1: Yes. I would like to know where the rain comes from. How does it happen that it's raining?
- T: Are you guessing now?
- S1: ...
- T: I am pouring hot water into the glass. Be careful, do not come closer. I am quickly putting a glass saucer on the glass. Watch closely what is happening. We'll wait a moment.
- S1: Water evaporates and stops on the saucer.
- S2: Look, now the drops of water are falling into the glass.
- S1: Oh ... I think I know where the rain comes from.
- T: Will you try to explain it to us?
- S1: First, water from rivers, lakes, and puddles evaporates when it is warm outside.
- S2: This water vapor rises high and clouds are created. But what's next?
- T: When the droplets of water from the saucer began to fall down the glass?
- S2: Oh ... When the saucer cooled down, then it started to drip...
- T: So, what's the conclusion?
- S1: That when it gets cooler, water turns into droplets and falls to the ground. And we have rain.
- T: If the clouds are low – the rain does not fall, but if they rise higher, where the temperature is lower – the water vapor cools down and falls as rain on the ground.

The situations of the discussed type indicate the teacher's respect for questions posed by children, their knowledge and views. The key values in the school learning process are the following: the autonomy of the child, his reflection in action and the construction of knowledge with the use of personal knowledge and out-of-school experiences in the course of democratic interactions with others.

### 3. (In)active listening to spontaneous statements

An essential condition for a real dialogue in the education process, allowing the child to feel the teacher's acceptance and provoking him or her to speak freely and express their knowledge (and the lack of it, e.g. in the form of questions asked) is the ability to listen actively. The child feels listened to, among others, when we understand their point of view, we focus on what they are saying to us, we encourage them to continue to speak, we make inquiries about their speech and avoid asking closed questions. Listening requires from teachers to be aware that their interpretations of reality are one of the possible ones and form part of a vast, integrated knowledge, with simultaneous suspension of their own judgments and beliefs. Listening consists in observing and interpreting children's actions, and consequently in inspiring and sustaining new ones (Rinaldi 2009). During some classes, teachers showed verbal and non-verbal behaviors in the form of eye contact, nods, etc. encouraging children to be active, analyze and organize their statements. A similar function was fulfilled by the following questions: "How do you know about it?"; "Can you say something more about this?" etc.; that encourage children to share knowledge from different out-of-school sources of information. The following is a record of such a situation:

S1: There's reportedly a lot of water everywhere, but I have heard that there are places on the Earth that lack water.

T: Can you say something more about this? How do you know about it?

S1: I watched a TV program with my dad and people did not have anything to drink.

S2: I have also seen such countries on TV, that there is hunger there, because there is nothing to water the plants, and it is dirty. People do not have water to wash themselves.

T: Things you say are quite interesting. What can result from this?

S3: People get sick because they have dirty hands.

S4: All are dirty and eat dirty things.

S5: There are germs everywhere.

The activities of the discussed type play a particularly important role in the contemporary, complex reality, which requires from the young generation the skillful use of various sources of information and noticing ever changing living conditions.



#### 4. Formulating closed-ended questions and (dis)agreeing to formulate questions by children

Teachers' questions and reactions to questions formulated by children play a special role in initiating communication interactions. Their type and way of asking encourage students to share their personal knowledge and to build models of what they are supposed to learn in the course of interaction with the teacher and peers. The analysis of communication interactions in the observed activities shows that the questions posed by the teachers too often required from their students to go beyond the information provided. The questions are, among others: clarifying and exploratory (indicating ways of thinking, understanding things, phenomena and processes, e.g. "What do you mean?", "What is on your mind?"); affective (encouraging to share feelings related to a given issue, e.g. "What do you feel when ...?", "What emotions do you feel?"); reflective (e.g., "How do you think, how could this happen?"); exploring understanding of the issue (encouraging to examine it thoroughly, e.g. "How can you explain what happened?"); encouraging the study of relationships, predicting the consequences of actions (e.g. "What are the consequences of these actions?", "What happens if ...?"). The questions of the said type testify to the respondents' genuine interest in the experiences, personal knowledge and experiences of the students. In addition, students very rarely had the opportunity to ask questions during the class. Teachers, through their verbal overactivity and putting closed-ended questions, suppressed students' verbal activity, their freedom of thinking and initiative. An example of such a situation is given below:

- S1: In this picture, we can see how Dratewka the Cobbler made... he wanted to make a decision to release the princess, maid ...
- T: He wanted to save the princess.
- S1: ... and the witch asked him why he came there.
- T: And ...
- S1: And he said he came because he wanted to free the princess and then ...
- T: What did the witch tell him to do?
- S1: The witch ordered him to guess ...
- T: So what she made him do?
- S1: She ordered ....
- T: To perform ...
- S1: Can I say it differently?
- T: (Ignores the child's question) To perform a task.
- T: It was an order or something?
- S1: Yyyyy
- T: She told him to do what?...
- S1: He was to guess which of the maidens was the princess.

Teachers, fully controlling the course of communication, decide when and what a student can say. It can be stated that teachers exercise power over communicating in classes, whereas students have to adapt first and foremost to teachers' intentions and requirements (Kochanowska 2018). Meanwhile, putting open-ended, problematic questions by the teacher and respect for the students' questions and statements testifies to the democratic approach to education and understanding by teachers that there are many ways of perceiving and explaining phenomena and processes.

### 5. (Not) organizing common learning – faking group work on cognitive tasks

One of the manifestations of the democratization of education is to enable students to cooperate in groups in the learning process. Negotiations and social interactions are important elements of gaining knowledge and can help children exchange ideas about the topic being developed.

Common learning enables students to start discussions that provide them with information about their previous level of knowledge and the direction and scope of knowledge they need to acquire in order to gain a deeper understanding of the issues (Loyens, D. Gijbels 2008). While working in groups, students have no barriers in verbalizing their doubts and formulating questions that are a manifestation of their knowledge deficits (but also knowledge), and they freely report ideas for solving problems. According to the assumptions of the socio-cultural concept of Jerome Bruner (2006), learning achieves its greatest effectiveness when it is participatory, proactive, common, cooperative and focused on creating meanings rather than on taking them in a ready-to-use form. The research on the implementation of group work at the early education stage shows that in the practice of early school education, the activities of teachers focused on realizing the idea of learning in cooperation and creating conditions for peer cooperation are often superficial, because putting children in the situation of teamwork is insufficient operation supporting the development of their cooperation skills and acquisition of cognitive experiences (Pawlak 2009). In the case of the observed integrated classes, only a few students cooperated in groups in the process of planning, implementation, as well as control and evaluation of the results of the common cognitive activity.

- T: Do you have any idea how to show different groups of water concentrations to other groups? Think together.
- S2: We want to prove that water is not just a liquid. Water flows, leaks from the tap – this is liquid. But...
- S1: But water is also ice in the winter or in the fridge; it is also water. When we eat slowly ice cream and it is very warm, it also turns into water, only colorful ... (children laugh).

- S2: Rain is also water. As my mother cooks water in a pot at home and there is a lid on it, the water evaporates and then there are droplets of water on the lid.  
(Students plan their experiments together).
- S3: Listen, listen. We will do this: we will pour water into a pot and cover it with a lid. We'll boil water and show everyone that water is also gas.
- T: I will help you with boiling water, because it can be dangerous. You have to be careful not to get burned (students pour water into a pot and cover it with a lid).

The situations of this type, which testify to the organization of collective learning of children in the form of teamwork, were rarely noticed in the observed activities. It is even more disturbing because of the fact that the beginning of school education coincides with the developmental readiness to learn and master the principles of cooperation. As a result of taking actions based on properly understood principles of group work, children are prepared for selecting, organizing information, sharing knowledge and negotiating meanings in the course of social interaction, as well as for active and critical participation in non-school education.

## 6. (Not) engaging children in choosing learning methods

The democratic approach of teachers to children's learning in the school space may also be demonstrated by the creation of classroom conditions for children to decide on the independent choice of the method of gaining knowledge and solving tasks, the content of which refers to everyday life situations. Difficulties included in the task have a chance to acquire a personal dimension, which encourages students to apply strategies of intuitive solution and thinking. By appropriate selection of the content and type of tasks, teachers organize situations in which children can use their experience in creating their own representations corresponding to the personal meaning of the tasks. During the analyzed integrated classes, the teachers often limited the freedom to choose the way of solving tasks, thoroughly instructing children step by step. Excessive verbalism, a kind of the monologue attitude of the teachers, prevented the free expression of the children and the choice of ways to solve problems.

- T: First, what will you do when you come back home – and when you come back, you are often alone... I smell something; I do not know what kind of smell it is, I look at the cooker tap, or the gas water heater because the flame can die and the gas may escape. And now what should I do? I turn off the gas so that there is no further volatilization and explosion. Before I inform my mother, I do not sit in the room where there is a volatile gas, but what should I do instead?
- S1: I open the window.
- T: Yes, I open the window wide. Do not let it asphyxiate you, or suffocate you. Or if there is a room in which you cannot open the window, you go out, for example to the staircase hall, outside the house, because the most important is your life and safety. Never, never try to set fire! Don't even think about that, because what

would happen? Boom! Explosion. Half of your block of flats may go off, or even the whole building. Do you understand? Well, try to remember this well.

In the above discussed case, the teacher did not ask questions to check the way of thinking of children and to identify the strategies they used. She imposed on them a specific mental representation. Children have a chance to develop independent thinking in negotiating situations, when it is possible to compare their own ideas with other people's proposals and to find solutions.

### 7. Teachers' (not) taking up issues related to democracy in real life

A child living in the contemporary complex and multifaceted reality does not remain indifferent to the problems that occur in it. Some of them deal with issues and values related to democracy, such as tolerance, social inequalities, etc. However, the analysis of the course of the observed integrated classes shows that their subject matter and scope of issues often diverge from the problems of everyday reality, among others in the area of democracy. During some of the classes that were watched, topics related to democracy were planned and implemented. Their content referred, among others, to the children's rights.

After having read the poem by Marcin Brykczyński *On the Children's Rights*, the teacher presents the figure of King Matt the First and initiates a discussion on the rights of children.

T: King Matt The First wanted all children to have their rights, that is why he proclaimed the manifesto and sent it to the children of the whole world. Look at what it was like: (The chosen boy sits down on the throne with a crown on his head, spreads the roll of paper and reads the text of the manifesto, and after reading the text, he gives out similar rolls to his envoys (other students) and sends them to specific groups of children).

T: Today, King Matt is in our school and he asks you what rights you would like to have. Think about it in groups and discuss it.

*Children in groups speak about the rights they would like to have. They discuss the proposals, present the results of the work in the class forum. Proposals are discussed by the whole class.*

As a result of such actions, students perceive the school as a place where they can gain knowledge and share doubts about current social problems.

## Conclusions

The essence of learning in democracy is that it "must be" a way of life "both on the personal and collective level, the natural relationship that embraces all members of the community, based on cooperation, solidarity, mutual respect and enrichment"

(Gawlicz, Rudnicki, Starnawski, Turner 2014: 9). The condition for shaping and developing democratic attitudes in children is the openness of school education to issues related to the changes and problems of the modern civilization. Based on the results of the research carried out so far (Bałachowicz, Witkowska-Tomaszewska 2015, Gawlicz, & Röhrborn 2014; Nowak 2015; Olczak 2010a, and others) in the area of implementing the idea of democracy in elementary education, it follows that conditions for the development of democratic attitudes in children, and the actions of teachers are characterized by resistance or uncertainty in the sphere of recognition of the child's autonomy and subjectivity, his or her rights, and the possibility of participating in decision-making processes.

In the context of the learning process, the educational value of children's knowledge and out-of-school experiences is underestimated (Klus-Stańska 2007, Kochanowska 2018, Nowak-Łojewska 2011 and others). Furthermore, on the basis of the research results presented in this article, it can be concluded that the opportunities for children to experience democracy in the learning process are exploited too little. The basic areas of the teachers' activities that require changes in the discussed area include:

- a) lack of students' participation in setting the goals of the classes, and thus in the learning process;
- b) making it impossible for children to share their intellectual resources;
- c) underestimating the value of students' questions and inappropriate responses to questions asked by children;
- d) domination of closed-ended questions over open-ended questions posed by teachers, and encouraging children to express their opinions, ideas and negotiation of meanings;
- e) faking group work;
- f) limiting children's ability to choose strategies and methods of learning;
- g) avoiding conversations with children about current social problems related to the democracy of the social space.

The types of the above mentioned teachers' actions require strong changes towards the democratization of the intellectual space of early school education. The basis of a democratic relationship in the learning process is the teacher's attitude based on the acceptance of the child, cooperation with them, trust in their competence, and at the same time ensuring reasonable freedom and recognition of the student's rights. The assumptions of the core curriculum of early school education show that education at this stage is to enable children to participate fully and consciously in the education process, as well as to optimally use their potential. For this to happen, however, the teacher should create an intellectual space, which is a platform for exchanging ideas, judgments, arguments, negotiating, controlling and reflecting on one's own thinking. The teacher of democracy inspires and encourages his students to take on intellectual challenges.

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## ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE

Dr Ewa Kochanowska  
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Technical and Humanistic Academy of Bielsko-Biała  
e-mail: ekochanowska@ath.bielsko.pl