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What's Love Got to Do with It?: Thinking about Democracy in Early Childhood Curriculum with Hannah Arendt

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This paper explores how Hannah Arendt's view of education as love (1958) can contribute to refreshed perspectives of democratic education. In recent decades, the task of contemporary early childhood education has gradually moved towards an enhanced focus on individual learning and freedom of choice, closely intertwined with an image of the child as an active participant with rights (e.g., Kjørholt, 2012; Sjöstrand Öhrfelt, 2019). The increased emphasis on subject knowledge, measurable achievements, and competition, mainly driven by a neoliberal agenda, is seen to affect and possibly reduce the role of care and democracy within education (e.g., Brogaard Clausen, 2015; Moss, 2017). Arendt's views on education as love offer a thought-provoking mirror to the changed landscapes of early childhood education. She was critical of the emancipation of children and claimed that, as newcomers, children need to be protected from the world, as well as the world also needing to be protected from the children. Through a theoretical conversation between Arendt and Joan Tronto's theory of democratic care (2015), I will argue that interdependency and vulnerability need to be acknowledged within contemporary democratic early childhood education, and that allocation of responsibility continues to be an essential issue within education.

Introduction

> *Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from the ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and the young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world. (Arendt, 1958, pp. 13, 14)*

This quote by Hannah Arendt seems quite abstract compared to the language of today's education policy, in which education is more often described in terms of measurable goals and quality (e.g. Biesta, 2020; Smith et al., 2016). However, this slightly poetic statement is very much related to the core of the contemporary educational debate and the main questions for curriculum theoretical inquiry: What is education for? How can education meet and combine the individual and societal needs, and how are

these needs expressed in education policy (Englund, 2012; Schiro, 2015; Biesta, 2015)? In this paper, these questions are explored in relation to the democratic task of education, with Swedish early childhood education (ECE) as an example.[1] The view that democracy is fragile and therefore cannot be taken for granted has time and time again been both argued theoretically (e.g. Dewey, 1937/2017; Mann, 1939; Young, 2000; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018) and supported through empirical data (Freedom House, 2024; V-Dem Institute, 2023). Democracy is declining globally and the advances made over the past 35 years have been "wiped out" (V-Dem Institute, 2023, p. 9). In this study the question of how education can counteract this decline is explored through the notion of love, as proposed by Arendt (1958). Arendt's writings on education were inspired by the American civil rights movement, but remain equally relevant today. In 2021, Sweden celebrated 100 years of democracy, and although Swedish democracy is still ranked as strong, there are challenges such as increasing political inequality and the segregation of the democratic arena (SOU, 2016, p. 5), as well as a weakened trust regarding politics and democracy within the younger population (Ungdomsbarometern, 2024). In 2022, the (Swedish) Committee for a Strong Democracy recommended that the democratic task of education be clarified due to the important role it plays in strengthening democracy (SOU, 2022, p. 28). In times of travelling policy ideas (e.g. Ozga & Jones, 2006) and the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) (Wasmuth & Nitecki, 2020), this paper aims to shed light on a wider phenomenon regarding democratic education and early childhood using the Swedish preschool curriculum as an example, as it is presumed to mirror international ideas and trends within ECE (Lindgren & Sjöstrand Öhrfelt, 2019).

Internationally, Swedish ECE has been seen as a model of *educare*, balancing education and childcare (Jönsson et al., 2012). Since its establishment in the 1970s, the purpose of ECE in Sweden has been balanced between the child's needs and society's needs for economic growth and labour, and social equality (Jönsson et al., 2012; Wahlström, 2015; Lindgren & Sjöstrand Öhrfelt, 2019). Today, preschool education is seen as a right for all children from the age of one, and as the first step in their educational journey (Lindgren & Söderlind, 2019). In recent decades, the task of Swedish ECE has, in accordance with global trends, gradually moved from a child-centred holistic pedagogy towards a more subject-centred curriculum with greater emphasis on quality work focusing on the documentation of children's development and learning (Lindgren & Sjöstrand Öhrfelt, 2019; Liljestrand, 2021). Intertwined with this shift are recent changes to the concept of childhood. Since the 1990s, ECE research has been influenced by a paradigm shift, whereby the child is no longer seen as a passive subject and childhood no longer a trajectory towards adulthood (Prout & James, 1997), but in which children are perceived as competent, adequate members of society with their own agency, contributing to their own growth as well as to the growth of society (Prout & James, 1997; Brembeck et al., 2004; Halldén, 2007).

Concurrently, images of the child within the contemporary Swedish ECE are contradictory and multilayered. The child is described as both a competent citizen (Liljestrand & Hammarberg, 2017) and a passive "becoming" (Billmayer et al., 2019). The Swedish ECE curriculum has been described as a "curriculum of the situated world child" (Vallberg Roth, 2006), a "curriculum of the pupil-to-be" (Wahlström, 2015), and "the market curriculum" (O'Dowd, 2013). Each of these "labels" describes a curriculum with an increased emphasis on lifelong learning, subject knowledge, and future workforce skills while toning down the role of care. Both Vallberg Roth and O'Dowd acknowledge a shift regarding individual responsibility. O'Dowd (2013) relates this to neoliberal politics, whilst Vallberg Roth (2006) describes an emphasis on the role of children as competent citizens with democratic rights to influence education.

In terms of the increased economization of all public spheres (Vandenbroeck, 2021; Brown, 2015, Säfström & Biesta, 2023), the "neoliberal turn" has had a profound influence on ECE, both on policy

[1] The term "early childhood education" and its abbreviation ECE are used instead of ECEC (early childhood education and care) to mark the standpoint of care as an ethical concept that is a prerequisite for all education, and is not therefore considered as additional to education or exclusive to education for the youngest children (cf. Moss, 2017).

and on practice, thereby shaping our understanding of childhood and the child (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). Through the neoliberal lens the child within ECE is viewed as an investment for future economic productivity (Sims, 2017), as an independent lifelong learner with responsibility for their own learning (Otterstad & Braathe, 2016), and as a free autonomous individual, who is enabled to make individual choices across all aspects of life (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). It is in light of this image of the child that Arendt's writings on education become relevant and thought provoking – due to both her critique regarding the emancipation of the child and her claim that education should be separated from the political (Arendt, 1958). The notion of love brings the issue of responsibility within education to the forefront; according to Arendt the ability to love the child and the world requires that education take responsibility for both. In times in which education is characterized by increasing accountability (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021; Sims, 2017) and the strong position of the autonomous child with political agency (Lindgren & Sjöstrand Öhrfelt, 2019), the allocation of responsibility becomes a central issue. How can contemporary ECE prepare the child for the renewal of the common democratic world whilst protecting both the child and the world of today?

This paper explores how the notion of love can contribute to refreshed perspectives of democratic education. Arendt's views on education are discussed in relation to contemporary ECE in which the child is seen as an autonomous and political subject (Lindgren & Sjöstrand Öhrfelt, 2019). The paper aims to develop a further understanding of the democratic task of ECE and to offer a vocabulary through which all democratic education can be understood through the notion of love.

The paper consists of three sections. The first presents contemporary movements regarding perspectives on ECE and the child, followed by an introduction of Arendt's views on education. The third and final section further explores the notion of love within contemporary ECE, using the Swedish case as an example. In order to develop Arendt's views on education I will then turn to Joan Tronto's theory of democratic care (2015). By employing a theoretical conversation between Arendt and Tronto I will argue that interdependency and vulnerability need to be acknowledged within contemporary democratic ECE, and that allocation of responsibility continues to be an essential issue within education.

Early Childhood Education: An Outlook

Early Childhood and Its Curriculum

Interest in ECE has increased gradually internationally among policymakers (Ringsmose, 2017; Wasmuth & Nitecki, 2020). This is due to the growing awareness of how significant the early years are for learning and development, both within education and for later in life, and also because of increased international comparisons and a competitive focus on academic outcomes (Ringsmose, 2017). The OECD (2006) outlines in *Starting Strong II* two curriculum traditions within international ECE: the pre-primary approach in France and English-speaking countries, in which the focus is mainly on "ready for school" skills, and the social pedagogy approach in Nordic and Central European countries, in which the purpose of ECE combines care, upbringing, and learning. Internationally, Swedish ECE has been seen as a positive model for the idea of educare (Jönsson et al., 2012), but in recent decades it has gradually moved from a child-centred holistic pedagogy towards a more subject-centred curriculum, with greater emphasis on individual learning and freedom of choice (Jönsson et al., 2012, Korsvold, 2012, Sjöstrand Öhrfelt, 2019, Liljestrand, 2021). In an international comparison, the Swedish ECE curriculum is described as a good example of a "mixed model," in which children's cognitive and social development are seen as equally important (Åsén, 2020). Due to this "middle way," the Swedish ECE curriculum is, in this paper, used as a contemporary example.

The core task of Swedish ECE has shifted from focusing on both individual and societal purposes to a predominant emphasis on the individual and their rights (Hammarström-Lewenhagen, 2013; Nilsson,

2023). This shift is in line with the OECD's approach, which emphasizes understanding the child as a freethinking agent (Mahon, 2016), and in which education is seen as a right for every child (Quennerstedt, 2010). This is also in line with the neoliberal image of human beings as being free, autonomous, and responsible for their own lives and therefore as self-mastering (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021; Tronto, 2017; Brown, 2005). A similar conception of the child is found within Reggio Emilia ideology, despite its resistance to neoliberalism. The child is described as a competent, active citizen, and as a bearer of rights, rather than a bearer of needs (Rinaldi, 2021). The image of the child as an active participant concurs with perspectives from childhood sociology that oppose the conception of the child as a "not-yet," as a (human) *becoming*, and instead promote the idea of the child as a (human) *being*, a person in their own right, here and now (Warming, 2020; Lister, 2017). The image of the competent child, as "being," emerged in reaction to the view of children as vulnerable, weak, and incapable (Elfström Pettersson, 2015; Dahlberg et al., 2014). It has been noted that within contemporary Swedish ECE, the ways in which the child has been presented have been shown to be contradictory and multilayered. The child is described as both educable (Lindgren & Sjöstrand Öhrfelt, 2019) and vulnerable (Sjöstrand Öhrfelt, 2019), and as both a competent citizen and a self-governing individual (Liljestrand & Hammarberg, 2017), but also as both "becoming" and passive (Billmayer et al., 2019).

A Market for Care and Democracy?

Sweden stands out in a global context as one of the main proponents of marketization in education, along with Chile and New Zealand (Westberg & Larsson, 2020). The neoliberal influences, with an increased emphasis on freedom of choice, standardized learning, and quality assessment, have raised concerns about the position of democracy, care, and other "unmeasurable" values within ECE (Broström, 2012; Persson, 2010; Löfdahl & Folke-Fichtelius, 2014; Bradbury, 2019; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). A comparative study by Van Laere et al. (2012) showed a hierarchical relation between education and care, which can be observed in the status of different professions within ECE, in which the concept of education has largely been narrowed down to learning, with care as a subordinate aspect and as a simple task that does not require professional qualifications. The relationship between education and care is discussed by Moss (2017), using Sweden as an example of a successful integrated system, in which care is part of an educational institution with a holistic approach to the child. Moss also highlights the importance of understanding care not only as a commodity – as a practical service that is being provided to those who depend on it (i.e., children) – but also as a relational ethic that should pervade all relationships, regardless of age.

The position and meanings of care within Swedish ECE have been the subject of many studies over the years (e.g., Lindgren, 2001; Halldén, 2001; Löfdahl & Folke-Fichtelius, 2015; Persson, 2010; Josefson; 2018; Löfgren, 2016). It has been shown to be a concept that is not only neglected, but also elusive and regarded as inferior to learning (Josefson, 2020), as well as being controversial, largely invisible, and taken for granted (Löfdahl & Folke-Fichtelius, 2015). However, there is ambiguity regarding whether an actual paradigm shift from educare to an academic tradition has taken place (Jönsson et al., 2012, O'Dowd, 2013; Löfdahl & Folke-Fichtelius, 2014; Åsén, 2020). Löfdahl and Folke-Fichtelius (2014) have shown that preschool teachers and principals consider the notion of care to be important but a difficult thing to bring about in quality work. In a marketized system, care might also be considered as less of a "selling" concept than that of learning, which could explain why care is often transformed into the measurable terms of learning, knowledge, and skills.

Another ambiguity concerns the democratic task of ECE. In the Nordic curricula, democracy is expressed in contradictory dimensions. There are tensions regarding the individual and collective dimensions of the democratic task, and between educating for future democracy and viewing children as democratic beings here and now (Einarsdottir et al., 2015). According to Emilson, the concept of democracy is itself ambiguous and thus impossible to understand or practice in a unitary way (2011). In, 2020, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was incorporated into legislation in

Sweden to mark the strong societal position of children. Reinforcing children's legal rights can be seen as democratic progress and a step towards equality. Yet, due to the increased focus on individual responsibility, the notion of societal responsibility for one another can be lost (Tronto, 2013). A curricular focus on the individual, autonomous child has also been shown to reduce the role of community and belonging within education; in the contemporary curricula, the child is considered to be detached from their social context (Lindgren & Sjöstrand Öhrfelt, 2019), and as lonely (Nilsson, 2023).

Both Löfgren (2016) and Tronto (2013, 2017) uphold care as the foundation of a democratic society. Löfgren writes that if the notion of care is not made to be a more explicit part of professionalism in ECE, children will be trained to focus more on their own development than on their own wellbeing and that of others. Tronto argues that the relation between democracy and care is interdependent: a society without citizens who care and are cared for cannot remain a democracy (2013). According to Säfström and Månsson (2022), one consequence of the marketization of education is that the next generations are being educated as being *before the other*, rather than being *for the other*. They argue that the educational system of today is not about social togetherness, in which children learn to take responsibility for each other, but about developing competitive individuals who can meet the needs of the market. There is therefore a risk that this educational approach will neglect skills that are essential for keeping democracy alive (Säfström and Månsson, 2022).

This overview has aimed to show that democratic education is shaped by the changing landscapes of education and early childhood. The main concern for this paper is the democratic task of ECE in relation to the idea of the child as being self-mastering and responsible, rather than vulnerable and in need of others. In the following, I will turn to Arendt's views on education in order to explore what love's got to do with democratic education.

Hannah Arendt on Education

Education as Love

Arendt (1958) defines education as the point at which we decide to love both the world and the child, and to take responsibility for them both: for the life and development of the child and for the continuance and renewal of the world. The child requires "special protection and care" from the world, whilst the world needs to be protected and saved from the newcomers, except in terms of renewal (1958). These two responsibilities may come into conflict with each other – a conflict that within contemporary education is often defined in terms of the individual and society (e.g., Biesta, 2020; Hammarström-Lewenhagen, 2013). To Arendt, the essence of education lies in *natality* – the fact that human beings are born into the world and that the world is constantly renewed through their birth (Arendt, 1958). The child is new, in relation both to the world and to life. The newness to life is shared by other living creatures, whilst the newness to the world places demands on education regarding both the child and the world – they need protection from each other. The child and their newness need to be protected so that "nothing destructive will happen to him from the world" (1958, p. 182), and the world needs protection "to keep it from being overrun and destroyed by the onslaught of the new" (1958). It is this protection for which educators have to assume responsibility.

According to Arendt (1958), it is the nature of the human condition that each new generation is born into and grows into an old world. Whatever future utopia for which the "newcomers" are prepared through education, this utopia will always be older than the children. Allowing for the newness of every generation, making it possible for the newcomers to renew and repair the common world, means that they cannot be prepared for the new world. Their chance of undertaking something new and unforeseen is only possible if education involves a freedom for the newcomer to define the new world. This definition

of the new world cannot happen at once; it requires an introduction to the world. Education should therefore introduce the child to the world gradually and with care (1958).

The notion of love is a recurring theme for Arendt, and several different forms of love can be distinguished in her writings (e.g., Tömmel, 2017; Tatman, 2013; Stonebridge, 2024). In her dissertation on love and Saint Augustine, she writes that it is through *amor mundi*, love for the world, that we "make ourselves at home in the world" (1929/1996), which means understanding and reconciling one's self with the world as it is (Hill, 2021, p. 144). Love is also seen as a paradox in Arendt's thinking (Stonebridge, 2024). In *The Human Condition* (1958/1998), Arendt describes love as an antipolitical force, but love plays a central role in the political sphere, and *amor mundi* is seen as a prerequisite for human action (Fry, 2014; Kattago, 2014; Stonebridge, 2024). Both Ferguson (2022) and Tömmel (2017) show how the concept of love is developed throughout Arendt's work. In her readings of Arendt's *Denktagebuch*, Tömmel concludes that love may be worldless, but it is also world-creating. As a "catalyst of togetherness and plurality in the world" (Tömmel, 2017, p. 114), love becomes a crucial aspect within democratic education. Through his readings of Arendt's "Crisis" essays, Ferguson shows that *amor mundi* needs to take the form of care in order to conserve the world where politics takes place (2022, pp. 944, 939), which makes love as care a prerequisite for politics.

Regarding education, love is described by Arendt (1958) in terms of responsibility, protection, care, and security. In order to protect what is revolutionary and unique in every child, the futures of both the world and the child need to be left undefined and open; education as love can thus also be seen to be related to freedom. However, education is not a place in which freedom can appear, as it is only in the political sphere, Arendt claims, during action and when our actions are responded to by others, that we can experience moments of freedom (2018). An education that offers a promise of freedom needs to allow for learning about living together in the world, which makes it essential to acknowledge interdependency. According to Tömmel (2017), *amor mundi* needs to be understood in relation to the expression "amo: volo ut sis," which means "I love you; I want you to be." Following her argument, this would require that, when children are prepared for the task of renewing the world, their education needs to inspire in them a love of the world – not only because it exists but because they want it to be: "they love in order to create it" (2017, p. 118).

Education and the Political

Arendt makes a specific distinction between the private world and the public world. In the private world, we live in ways and do things that only matter to ourselves (1958/1998). The public world is the world that we share with others, where we can become people to each other by making public use of our private thoughts, by engaging in dialogue with opinions that are not our own (Hill, 2021, pp. 140, 175). Arendt describes the public world as being similar to a table – something that we gather around but that also keeps us from "falling into each other" (1958/1998, p. 85). This table cannot be taken for granted; according to Arendt the world is losing its capability to bring people together, due to a new kind of individuality in which we escape the common world and into ourselves (1958/1998). Plurality and the freedom to act are central conditions for the public sphere, which is a space for beginnings, in which the new and unexpected can happen. It is only in the public world that we can act as equals, in which our newness can make a difference, when other people respond to our actions with their actions in ways that we cannot predict (1958/1998). It is this shared experience that can enable the newcomers to contribute to the renewal of the common world. Interdependence becomes a central aspect in enabling action, as action is "never possible in isolation" (1958/1998, p. 188), because "to act is to weave our thread in a network of relationships" (Arendt, 1973).

The distinction between the private and the public helps clarify why natality is understood as being the essence of education. The entrance to the common world, the public world, is described as a second birth, in which we, through action, confirm the fact that we are born and take responsibility for the common world (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 233). Education should not pretend to be the world but rather

an institution that exists between the private domain of the home and the public world, and that teaches children what the world is like but does not instruct them "in the art of living" (1958/1998, p. 192). In this way, education becomes a safe space, a representation of the world that enables a child's transition from the family to the world, the private to the public. Educators must therefore assume responsibility for the child and the world as it is, not as they wished the world would be or should become. The educator should therefore resist the urge to try to control the "new" as well as how the child should express their newness (1958/1998).

The distinction between the public and the private has been criticized as being too rigid (e.g. Canovan, 1974; Pitkin, 1998). In some readings, the boundaries for the political sphere are seen as being more flexible due to the uncertainty and the element of surprise that Arendt describes as being characteristic of action and the political sphere – they can thus occur anywhere (e.g. Honig, 1995; Bexelius, 2011). The claim that education should not be political has also been discussed by many scholars (e.g. Levinson, 2001; Biesta, 2010; Schutz, 2019; Gordon, 2001a), as such a view can be seen to question the whole idea of education as a democratic force. Levinson suggests that Arendt is not actually attempting to separate politics and education into different spheres all together, but rather demanding that educators assume more responsibility than children have (2001, p. 30).

Education and Responsibility

Arendt is critical of the emancipation of children whereby they are seen as "nothing but an undersized grown up" (1958, p. 184). She claims that instead of children's inner nature and needs being considered, they are exposed too early to the adult world and its public aspects. This "destroys the necessary conditions for vital growth and development" (p. 183), as everything living has a need for security to grow, and this security can only be provided in the private sphere. Therefore, instead of a liberation, the emancipation of children can be seen as a betrayal and an abandonment. The idea that children should not be exposed to the public sphere too early involves protecting the child from being exposed to too much responsibility for the common world. Arendt questions the loss of authority within education and states that "anyone who refuses to assume joint responsibility for the world should not have children and must not be allowed to take part in educating them" (1958, p. 186). Children should not be held responsible for the old world – they need to be introduced to the world, and, within education, be allowed to grow and become unique human beings that can bring about the "new" to the common world. How this newness is expressed is for the new generation to determine, and is not something that the old world should dictate (1958). This joint responsibility for both the child and the world requires a form of conservatism that Arendt describes as being the essence of educational activity, as its task is to cherish and protect not only the child from the world but also the world from the child. To Arendt, the educational task regarding tradition is to "discover those ideas and values that, though they have undergone change, have survived in a different form and can be used to interrupt, critique, and transform the present" – that is, to create new beginnings (Gordon, 2001a, p. 3). This is why the world needs to be protected from the newcomers, who might destroy parts of it if they were left to their own devices (Gordon, 2001b). Kloeg and Noordegraaf-Eelens (2024) discuss the ambiguity and tension that are involved in the task of protecting the old world and the revolutionary newness of every child. They introduce the concept of educational responsibility, in which educators are constantly navigating these conflicting commitments towards the world and the child. To assume educational responsibility, they need to stay in this tension rather than try to smooth it over.

Thinking Early Childhood Education with Hannah Arendt: The Swedish Case

Early Childhood Education as Love

Arendt's views on education as love (1958) are here discussed in relation to contemporary ECE, represented by the Swedish example. Arendt argues that education should protect the children and their newness from the public and the political. The image of the child as a rights bearer with a "right to participation and influence" (Lpfö 18, 2018, p. 17)[2] makes the child in contemporary ECE at least partially a part of the public, political world. To protect children entirely from the public is not therefore possible, nor is it desirable; reducing their rights is hardly democratic progress. According to Schutz and Sandy (2015), Arendt did not oppose all public engagement within education, but rather she argued for an awareness regarding how far children could be pushed towards the light of the public, before it became dangerous and "blinding." They suggest that the division between the public and the private can be seen as a continuum rather than as separate spheres with strict barriers, thus making it important to further explore the question of how much light would be too much for the children to bear.

The idea that education should protect the child from the world is a perspective that seems distant from the perception of the child as autonomous, self-sufficient, and competent. The perspective of the child in need of protection is somewhat absent within contemporary ECE, in which the child is described in the context of their rights, agency, and competences, rather than as vulnerable and in need of care. The acknowledgement of children's rights and agency can be seen to portray an awareness of the child's newness – the unknown possibilities within every human being.

The Swedish curriculum for ECE raises the importance of encouraging children's curiosity and creativity (Lpfö 18, 2018, pp. 8, 11) by giving them time, space, and peace (p. 9). Children should also be "given the opportunity to marvel and develop their ability to explore, communicate and reflect," as well as be challenged to "try out their own and other people's ideas, solve problems and translate ideas into action" (p. 11). The strong belief in children's abilities that is expressed in these quotes can be seen to support the Arendtian view of protecting and cherishing newness. But if their vulnerability and need of other people are not acknowledged, children's newness may be left exposed and unprotected. In the curriculum, interaction with other children is described as being important to a child's learning and development (p. 11), indicating an instrumental view of groups and communities as a tool for individual learning. It could also be seen as a statement of the human condition, in which belonging and interaction are vital to the path towards the common world and finding a home there. The curriculum's overall emphasis on learning points away from the latter interpretation. The idea that preschool should be a "vibrant social community" is motivated by the idea that it should both provide security and create within the child "a will and a desire to learn" (p. 7). Acknowledging the need for security could indicate an awareness of the human need other people, but as the explicit motivations constantly focus on learning, the dominant interpretation becomes that other children are seen as merely a tool for one's own learning.

The curricular demands on the assessment of learning (Lpfö 18, 2018, p. 19) are yet another aspect in which the conflict between the protection of the world and the protection of the child's newness becomes apparent. Expecting children to develop certain skills could be seen as a way of protecting the old world, but it can also affect the possibility of making education a safe space in which something unexpected and unforeseen can happen. The increased focus on learning outcomes and assessment can be seen as contradictory to the idea of education as a space in which children can start something new. Young-Bruehl and Kohn (2001) contend that training children to learn predetermined skills can be seen

[2] "Lpfö 18" is an abbreviation for "Läroplan för förskolan, 2018" [Curriculum for the preschool, 2018]. The acronym is used in both the Swedish and English version of the title. I will use the abbreviation "Lpfö" to denote the curriculum.

as an expression for instructing children "in the art of living," instead of teaching them about what the world is like. And yet, predetermined skills and values in the curriculum can also be an expression of the tradition that Arendt advocated, in which children are introduced the ideas and values that have, in different forms, survived and that they can use "to interrupt, critique, and transform the present" (Gordon, 2001b, p. 50). This requires that educators make room for the unexpected and the unforeseen, both in addition to and in learning predetermined skills and knowledge. Education in which there are reduced possibilities for new beginnings diminishes children's ability to appear for others as well as their ability to make sense of others appearing in the common world. This is why it is equally important to protect the child's newness as it is to protect the world that has already been built by previous generations.

The idea that education is increasingly regarded as a private good and an individual right (Englund, 2012; Biesta, 2015) could be seen to fit well with the great value that Arendt gives to the uniqueness of every human being. However, Arendt's idea of individuality is not individuality as in liberal thought, in relation to the collective; instead, for Arendt, individuality only occurs in relation to others, in a context in which we want to appear to others as distinct beings, and in which others are receptive to this appearance (Yeatman, 2011). Individuality thus only exists in action. The idea of the self-sufficient and autonomous child can paradoxically hinder contemporary ECE from creating the conditions for future action, and thus hinder the protection of the child. The "curriculum of the situated world child" (Vallberg Roth, 2006) may risk becoming a curriculum of "worldlessness," in which the free individual child also risks becoming disconnected from others and therefore from the world. To Arendt, being worldless is a type of loneliness that is not about solitude but about the lack of a feeling of belonging (Kattago, 2014). According to Arendt, the lack of a sense of belonging in the world played an important part in the rise of totalitarianism (1951/2020). Therefore, it becomes crucial to acknowledge the idea of interdependency – that we need each other – in democratic education. Education, as a transitory space between the public and the private, can play an important role as a shared space that is characterized by plurality – a space in which interdependent relationships can contribute to children's sense of belonging and community, in order for them to find a home in the world. As being at home in the world is essential to one's ability to renew the world, belonging and interdependence become important aspects in the educational task of protecting the world, as well as children's newness.

In conclusion, the focus on the individual child and their development could be seen as protecting the child's newness. The shift within ECE towards an increased focus on learning could be seen as an expression of a conservative attitude towards the world – that the child must be introduced to ideas and values that have survived from previous generations. However, since the protection of the world requires that education prepare children to be at home in the world, for *amor mundi*, then skills and knowledge decided in advance will not be enough. As isolation makes action impossible (Arendt, 1958b/1998), acknowledging interdependency and the importance of relationships becomes vital in a democratic education. But without acknowledging human vulnerability, the world can neither be protected nor loved. We need each other to act, and the world needs us to act in order for it to survive.

Early Childhood Education and Responsibility

The idea of education as love places the allocation of responsibility at the centre of educational conversations. As children should be introduced to the world gradually and with care (Arendt, 1958), education needs to acknowledge an asymmetry in responsibility, regarding both the child and the world. Arendt described the emancipation of children as abandoning children to themselves (1958). The idea of the autonomous, self-sufficient child risks making children increasingly responsible for their own choices. Combined with current efforts to recognize children as rights bearers, this may lead to neglecting children's need for care (e.g., Säfström & Månsson, 2022; Warming, 2020; Tronto, 2013). When vulnerability and the need of others are relegated to the background, there is a risk that children will be expected to take on too much responsibility, not only for themselves but also for the common world. The strong belief in contemporary ECE in children's abilities and competences can make it difficult to

recognize the possible side-effects of the changed position of the child – that it also risks leading to a shift in responsibility. An education in which the educator is not saying "this is our world" but rather "this is our vision of the new world" is, according to Arendt, a betrayal of the children, expecting them to solve problems that the adult world cannot solve (1958).

The increased focus on learning could be seen as a way of introducing children to the world, depending on the allocation of responsibility and whether it is done gradually and with care. The idea that the child has a right to influence their education and make choices within ECE can be seen as an expression of care and security – that the child can, at their own pace, approach different activities, materials, and issues. The possibility of many choices, combined with the view of children as self-sufficient and competent, can also lead to the idea that children do not need support from others, leading to expectations that they can handle more than they are able on their own. The lack of a focus on interdependency, children's needs, and their vulnerability can result in children being expected to take on too much responsibility for their own education. The question that education needs to address is how children's rights to participate and influence in all questions regarding them are introduced, and whether the responsibility for the consequences of their explorations, curiosity, and decisions is shared between adults and children. Is the child given opportunities to "marvel freely," or are they expected to instantly make use of their existing and developing competencies in renewing the world, both today and in the future? The answer to these questions is crucial for education, in determining the way it reflects a love for the child and the world.

Early Childhood Education and the Political

According to Arendt, education should not pretend to be the world, as it is not a world of equals, nor should it be (1958). The Swedish ECE curriculum contains explicit statements about the equal value of all people, regardless of "gender, transgender identity or expression, ethnic origin, religion or other belief, disability, sexual orientation or age" (Lpfö 18, 2018, p. 5). This does not necessarily contradict the required inequality in terms of responsibility, as this differs from the equality within education that Arendt objects to – the equality within the political sphere. To Arendt, equality is not something that we are born into, and is thus not a given. To treat each other as equals is a matter of values – a commitment and a principle that we need to adopt in order to form a political community (Waldron, 2010). The idea of education as an in-between space, a transitory room from the private to the public, allows for education to be seen as a practice space for the political – a space in which the principle of equality needs to be introduced and experienced. The point of this introduction is, as Levinson describes, "not to fix the world, but to motivate … to imagine new possibilities for the future" (2001, p. 20). Education could thus be seen as a space wherein children learn how the principle of equality can be adopted and acted upon. It is a central value, and one that cannot be taken for granted. To do this without "dictating the future" requires that education not be perceived as a solution to everything that is wrong with the world, but rather, as Korsgaard suggests, as a place that "shelters the young from the hustle and bustle of the 'adult' world," wherein children are given the opportunity to practice thinking, judging, and being with others (2016, p. 936). Again, the question of responsibility becomes central. Arendt's distinction between the realm of education and the political life means that there *is* a line between children and adults, though not a "wall separating children from the adult community as though they were not living in the same world" (1958, p. 192). Where this line is drawn will vary, and it is only drawn if we love the world enough to accept this complex and ambiguous responsibility (Elshtain, 1995). Educators therefore need to acknowledge that the line exists, but due to its ambiguity it needs to be drawn over and over again, depending on the situation.

In conclusion, following Arendt, because children need the security of darkness to grow, they should not be exposed to the public light too soon. An education whereby children are seen as free rights bearers, with the competence to make their own choices and influence their education, can be seen as being on the verge of this kind of exposure. To avoid exposing children too far toward the public,

education should not only be characterized as a "practice space" for the political, it should also make room for some aspects of the private. One aspect that the private and the public have in common is the fundamental human condition of needing others. In the private sphere, we need each other to feel safe and secure; in the public, common world, we need each other in order to act. Although the child of today is in a different position than the child that Arendt wrote about, it can be argued that this basic human condition, the aspect of interdependency, persists. It possibly becomes even more crucial in contemporary ECE, in which the child is moved further along on what Schutz and Sandy describes as the continuum across the private and the public (2015). As reducing children's rights or diminishing their agency would hardly be democratic progress, I will now turn to Tronto's theory of care as a democratic ideal (2013). Whereas Arendt (1958, 1958b/1998) argued that it was essential to separate the public from the private, Tronto brings the political into the private, and vice versa (2013). By discussing Tronto's views in relation to Arendt's, I aim to show how Arendt's views on education hold their relevance even in a time when the boundaries between the public and the private, and between education and politics, are blurred.

Caring Democracy

According to Tronto (2013, 2015), care is a fundamental part of everything we do in our lives, and it should not therefore be seen as solely a private matter, but as political as well. The very meaning of democratic citizenship lies in caring – caring for other citizens and caring for democracy itself – both in terms of political institutions and the community shared with other human beings. Tronto's definition of care goes beyond individual (human) needs and relationships to also involve the world itself:

> Care is a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we may live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. (2015, p. 3)

Thus, to be able to live well requires that we care not only for ourselves and each other but for our world as well. This requires an understanding that, in order for us to live as free individuals, we need to acknowledge that we exist in relation to one another. This idea of interdependency assigns a collective responsibility to each and every one of us (2017). We need to assume responsibility for one another and for our common world. Tronto's notion of care and Arendt's notion of love share the same viewpoint regarding protecting the common world and assuming responsibility for it. As Ferguson (2022) demonstrates, Arendt's notion of *amor mundi* takes the form of care in her writings on education. In education, *amor mundi* means caring in the form of protection – and protection of the child is also a way to care for the world (2022). Tronto's views on care as a central democratic ideal show how Arendt's ideas of protecting the world and the child from each other can contribute to relevant perspectives on contemporary education, whether it is perceived as a pre-political or a political sphere. Tronto's idea of democratic care shares several viewpoints with Arendt's views on education. Aspects that I argue as essential for contemporary ECE are responsibility, interdependency, and vulnerability.

Both Arendt and Tronto argue for the importance of taking responsibility for the world and other people, and therefore emphasize the basic human condition of needing other people (Arendt, 1949/2017b, 1958, 1963/2017a; Tronto, 2013, 2015, 2017). Their writings have 60 years between them and display well the importance of both collective and individual responsibility. Both types of responsibility are needed in order for us to live well in the world and for the renewal of the world. Arendt raised the importance of individual responsibility in addition to collective responsibility, arguing that one main reason for the horrors of the Second World War was that people failed to take individual responsibility for their actions and stopped seeing each other as unique individuals (1951/2020), whereas Tronto writes out of an understanding of neoliberalism as "an ethical system that posits that only personal responsibility matters" (2013, p. 38). Tronto suggests democratic caring as an alternative to the neoliberal

idea that self-mastering individuals and the market can provide the solutions to all societal needs. She points out that the neoliberal worldview does not represent a "natural state" of society, and that there are alternatives, one of which is to organize the world around care. For this, people need to be reminded that "they are not just economic actors, but *homines curans* [caring people] as well" (2017, p. 39). Tronto does not deny the importance of personal responsibility, but contends that seeing it as the only form of responsibility can have an antidemocratic effect (2015).

According to Tronto, we underestimate the interdependence between care and democracy at the expense of democracy, and that to maintain democracy we need to rethink its relationship with care (2013). This makes it essential to consider care and its role within democratic education: the role that care is given will depend on how we understand it – whether there is always an embedded asymmetry between the caregiver and care receiver, or whether we instead perceive ourselves and others as "equally needy citizens" (Tronto, 2013, p 29). Care as a democratic ideal therefore requires acknowledging all citizens' vulnerability, needs, and interdependent reliance on others (2013). To Arendt, the vulnerability of the child is an argument for not exposing them to the public too soon and too quickly, and is also the reason why adults must assume responsibility for the child. Vulnerability can even be a way of thinking about the state of the common world, which Arendt describes as being in need of love and protection (1958). If vulnerability is an aspect within both the private sphere and the public sphere, this makes it important to acknowledge within education. The idea of interdependency is described by Arendt as children needing adults to prepare them for the task of renewing a common world, while protecting "their chance of undertaking something new" (1958, p. 193). Interdependency is thus acknowledged as existing both between human beings and between human beings and the common world. Tronto points out that both autonomy and human dependency need to be seen as a part of human reality; the balance between these is therefore a core issue within a democratic society (2013). This question of balance can be found in Arendt's descriptions of children needing other people for security in order for them to grow, while also acknowledging the "new" and revolutionary that exists in every child. This balance can thus be seen as a vital aspect within democratic education, requiring educators to remain in the tension of this dual task, as suggested by Kloeg and Noordegraaf-Eelens (2024).

If vulnerability and interdependency are not included in our conception of education, as is the case with contemporary ECE, the idea of the competent, self-sufficient child may actually weaken the ability for education to protect the child and help ensure the survival of the common world. I therefore suggest that democratic education, characterized by the recognition of care as a democratic ideal, must provide a space wherein children can learn *about* the world, and learn to engage *in* the world and *with* the world as it is, without constantly being expected to influence the development of the world. This does not mean that children's abilities should be diminished, but rather that educators should acknowledge the line between children and adults. This is not to suggest that the "adult always knows best" – the line is about responsibility, not necessarily ability or experience, and certainly it does not mark a distance between children and adults. On the contrary, the line regarding responsibility can enable a togetherness between the educator and the child. Similarly, to Arendt's description of the public world, education could be seen as a table of its own, gathering children and adults to learn about the world and others' perspectives of it. As Korsgaard suggests, viewing education as an in-between-space enables education to stand "at a distance from the world, which makes it possible to be together to appreciate and examine the objects of the world in a communal reconsideration of the world" (2016, p. 939). Schutz and Sandy (2015) argue that education needs to encourage children to develop an understanding of the unique worldviews of others, as well as the ability to listen and consider other perspectives beyond their own. In this way, mini public spaces are unavoidably created within education. Schutz and Sandy suggest that an education that prepares children to enter the public common world should help make children aware that the continuum between the private and the public exists in the first place (2015). A democratic education therefore needs to acknowledge this continuum, as well as unequally allocated responsibility. Making this awareness a part of education could provide protection for both children and the world, as it would enable children to

engage in dialogue with others, and thereby develop an understanding of the world and their *future* responsibility – that is, caring for the common world by renewing it.

Democratic care makes demands on our ability to take care of ourselves and each other. Acknowledging the inequality of responsibility can open up for a freer approach with less pressure on children, as well as a feeling of being taken care of – of feeling safe in the world. This can create a foundation for a society in which citizens trust in one another, as they know that they will receive care when they need it, which, according to Tronto, leads to them being both willing and able to reciprocate this feeling in others, to feel solidarity with their fellow citizens (2013). In a world that is "always out of joint," the revolutionary within every child (Arendt, 1958) becomes vital and needs to be secured. When we are acknowledged as equally needy, we are all also recognized as being important for one another. Thinking about democratic education through the notion of love offers a perspective that I find to be important for contemporary ECE: that there does not have to be a contradiction between vulnerability and capability. They co-exist as interdependent aspects of human life and should therefore be acknowledged equally in a democratic education. Arendt's writings on education as love offer an important statement for today's ECE: we cannot abandon children by leaving them to themselves. Their ownership of rights should not come at the expense of the asymmetry of responsibility between adults and children within education. While recognizing children as rights bearers, education also needs to recognize their need of care.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to contribute a refreshing perspective on democratic ECE through Arendt's notion of love, and to offer a vocabulary through which all democratic education can be understood in terms of love and care. By using the Swedish example and Tronto's views on care as a democratic ideal, I have aimed to show how interdependency, vulnerability, and responsibility are central aspects that need be acknowledged within contemporary democratic education, in which both the world and the child are loved and thus cared for. The paper has approached democratic education through early childhood, but, as the need of care is seen to be a fundamental aspect of human life, it is not limited to the early years. Therefore, the conclusions made in this paper are relevant for all education, and the notion of love is likewise a core component in all democratic education. Today, the idea of protecting the world and the child from each other is challenged by the fact that the child is, in many ways, already part of the public world, although without having been properly introduced. According to Arendt, it is this introduction, this evolving relationship between the child and the world, for which education needs to take responsibility. This paper suggests that, in a democratic education, this ongoing introduction needs to be approached through care, characterized by interdependency, vulnerability, and unequally allocated responsibility.

Viewed through the notion of love, democratic education can be understood as a space that may bring about solutions to the issues that the world is facing, although the challenge is that we cannot know for sure how, or *if*, that might happen. It challenges the adult world to acknowledge both this uncertainty and its own responsibility to bear it. Taking responsibility for both the child and the world is only possible by acknowledging the fundamental condition of human life: that we need each other in order to act, and the world needs us to act in order for it to survive. In this way, both the world and the newness of the child can be loved and protected, and the common democratic world can become a home for the children of both the present and the future.

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