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SCENARI E PROSPETTIVE PEDAGOGICHE

Educating Democratic Citizenship through Narrative Imagination: A Human Rights Perspective

Educare la cittadinanza democratica attraverso l'immaginazione narrativa: una prospettiva di educazione ai diritti umani

Manhusheva Kamilla
Università degli Studi di Roma Tre

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary democratic societies face increasing challenges related to social fragmentation, forced migration, and political polarisation, calling for renewed reflection on the educational foundations of democratic citizenship. Drawing on Martha Nussbaum's concept of narrative imagination and contemporary scholarship on Human Rights Education, this article argues that democratic citizenship is formed not only through the acquisition of civic knowledge but also through interpretative engagement with human experience. Particular attention is given to narratives of displacement, which are examined as educational contexts that foster democratic judgement, recognition, and responsible participation. Building on this perspective, the article introduces the concept of narrative responsibility as the educational capacity to interpret others' experiences with epistemic humility, ethical accountability, and democratic judgement. It is argued that Human Rights Education achieves its transformative potential when human rights become interpretative resources rather than merely normative principles. Narrative pedagogy is therefore presented as a framework for strengthening democratic citizenship, human dignity, and cultures of peace in increasingly plural societies.

Keywords: Democratic Citizenship; Human Rights Education; Narrative Imagination; Narrative Responsibility; Democratic Judgement; Peace Education.

Le società democratiche contemporanee sono chiamate ad affrontare sfide sempre più complesse, legate alla frammentazione sociale, alle migrazioni forzate e alla polarizzazione politica, che richiedono una rinnovata riflessione sulle basi educative della cittadinanza democratica. Muovendo dal concetto di *immaginazione narrativa* elaborato da Martha Nussbaum e dal dibattito sull'Educazione ai Diritti Umani, l'articolo sostiene che la cittadinanza democratica non si costruisce soltanto attraverso l'acquisizione di conoscenze civiche, ma soprattutto mediante processi interpretativi che consentono di comprendere criticamente l'esperienza umana. Particolare attenzione è dedicata alle narrazioni della migrazione forzata, considerate contesti educativi privilegiati per lo sviluppo del giudizio democratico, del riconoscimento e della partecipazione responsabile. In questa prospettiva viene proposto il concetto di responsabilità narrativa, inteso come la capacità educativa di interpretare l'esperienza altrui con umiltà epistemica, responsabilità etica e giudizio democratico. L'articolo sostiene che l'Educazione ai Diritti Umani esprime appieno il proprio potenziale trasformativo quando i diritti diventano risorse interpretative per comprendere la realtà e non soltanto principi normativi da trasmettere. La pedagogia narrativa viene così proposta come un quadro teorico capace di rafforzare la cittadinanza democratica, la dignità umana e le culture della pace.

Parole chiave: Cittadinanza democratica; Educazione ai diritti umani; Immaginazione narrativa; Responsabilità narrativa; Giudizio democratico; Educazione alla pace.

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Introduction

Democratic societies rarely collapse because citizens cease to know their rights. More often, they weaken when individuals lose the educational conditions that make critical judgement, public responsibility and reciprocal recognition possible. The contemporary crisis of democracy should therefore not be interpreted exclusively through institutional indicators or political instability. It also reflects a pedagogical crisis, one that concerns the ways people learn to understand difference, confront uncertainty and participate in a shared public world. In this respect, the educational foundations of democratic citizenship deserve renewed attention. Current debates on democratic education increasingly acknowledge that civic participation cannot be reduced to legal status or institutional literacy. International organisations have progressively expanded the scope of Human Rights Education and Global Citizenship Education, recognising their strategic role in promoting peaceful coexistence, social justice and democratic resilience (UNESCO, 2023). Yet the growing institutional recognition of these educational frameworks has not entirely resolved a fundamental pedagogical question. While educational policies continue to strengthen knowledge of democratic values, comparatively less attention has been devoted to understanding how such values become meaningful within the lived experience of learners. Knowing democratic principles does not necessarily generate democratic judgement. This tension reveals a broader limitation within contemporary educational discourse. Human Rights Education has often been developed through normative approaches centred on declarations, legal instruments and civic competences. Although indispensable, these dimensions remain insufficient if democratic education is conceived primarily as the transmission of principles whose validity is already established. Such an approach implicitly assumes that moral commitment follows naturally from cognitive acquisition. Educational research, however, increasingly suggests otherwise. Individuals do not become democratic citizens simply because they are informed about democratic institutions; rather, democratic dispositions emerge through educational experiences that reshape how people interpret themselves, others and the social world (Bajaj, 2011; Tibbitts, 2017).

The distinction between instruction and formation becomes particularly significant in societies marked by increasing cultural pluralism, forced migration, political polarisation and digital communication. Contemporary democracies require citizens capable not only of defending rights but also of interpreting situations characterised by ambiguity, conflicting narratives and competing claims to justice. These educational challenges cannot be addressed through additional information alone. They require pedagogical processes capable of cultivating intellectual openness, ethical reflexivity and the capacity to engage responsibly with perspectives that remain different from one's own. Within this theoretical horizon, Martha Nussbaum's concept of *narrative imagination* offers an important, although often underestimated, contribution. Existing literature has primarily interpreted narrative imagination as a means of fostering empathy and intercultural understanding (Nussbaum, 1997; 2008). While these dimensions remain significant, reducing narrative imagination to an affective competence risks obscuring its broader educational implications. This article argues that narrative imagination should instead be understood as an epistemic practice through which democratic judgement becomes possible. Narratives do not merely encourage emotional identification; they enable individuals to interpret human experience critically, question inherited assumptions and recognise the contingency of their own perspectives. Democratic citizenship, from this standpoint, depends less upon consensus than upon the educational capacity to sustain responsible interpretation within conditions of plurality.

This argument also requires reconsidering the relationship between Human Rights Education and democratic formation. Rather than positioning narrative learning as an additional pedagogical technique, the article proposes that interpretative engagement constitutes one of the educational conditions through which human rights acquire

lived significance. Democratic dispositions emerge through educational experiences that reshape how people interpret themselves, others and the social world (Biesta, 2023; Gutmann, 1987; Osler & Starkey, 2010). Rights become educationally meaningful not because they are memorised, but because they are continuously interpreted in relation to concrete human experiences, social conflicts and ethical dilemmas. Narrative imagination therefore occupies a constitutive, rather than supplementary, place within democratic education. Methodologically, the contribution develops a critical theoretical analysis by placing educational philosophy, Human Rights Education and narrative pedagogy into dialogue. Rather than offering a descriptive review of the literature, the discussion seeks to identify the pedagogical assumptions that underpin contemporary approaches to democratic citizenship and to examine their limitations. Particular attention is devoted to experiences of displacement and forced migration, considered not simply as humanitarian phenomena but as educational contexts that expose the fragility of democratic categories while simultaneously revealing new possibilities for civic learning and human development.

The article is organised into four interconnected sections. The first critically examines the educational implications of democratic fragility and questions procedural conceptions of citizenship. The second analyses the limitations of normative approaches to Human Rights Education, proposing narrative imagination as an epistemic condition for democratic judgement. This article argues that democratic citizenship ultimately depends upon what we define as narrative responsibility, namely the educational capacity to interpret others' experiences with epistemic humility, ethical accountability and democratic judgement.The third explores displacement narratives as educational spaces in which recognition, vulnerability and agency are renegotiated. Finally, the fourth develops the concept of narrative responsibility as a pedagogical orientation capable of reconnecting democratic citizenship with the formative purposes of education. Through this perspective, the article argues that the future of democratic education depends less upon expanding civic instruction than upon cultivating citizens capable of interpreting complexity without abandoning their commitment to human dignity and democratic coexistence.

2. Democratic Fragility and the Educational Crisis of Citizenship

The contemporary crisis of democracy is frequently interpreted through institutional indicators: declining electoral participation, political polarisation, distrust in public institutions or the spread of misinformation. Although these phenomena undoubtedly deserve attention, they represent only the visible expression of a deeper educational challenge. Democracies become fragile not merely because institutions weaken, but because the cultural and educational conditions that sustain democratic judgement gradually erode. The question is therefore not only how democratic systems function, but how citizens learn to inhabit democratic life. This distinction has significant pedagogical implications. Citizenship has often been conceived as a body of knowledge concerning constitutional principles, political institutions and civic rights. Educational policies have consequently privileged curricular approaches aimed at strengthening civic literacy and democratic competences. Such initiatives remain necessary, yet they implicitly assume that democratic participation follows from cognitive acquisition. The persistence of intolerance, political radicalisation and social exclusion within highly educated societies suggests that this assumption deserves critical reconsideration. Possessing information about democracy does not necessarily imply the capacity to exercise democratic judgement.

John Dewey anticipated this limitation more than a century ago. For Dewey (1916), democracy could never be reduced to a constitutional arrangement or a legal order; it represented a mode of associated living continuously reconstructed through communication, participation and shared experience. Democratic education, therefore, was not primarily concerned with preparing future citizens but with creating educational environments in which democratic life could already be experienced. This insight remains remarkably relevant today. If democracy is understood as a lived form of social interaction, citizenship cannot be acquired once and for all through instruction. It develops through educational encounters that cultivate habits of reflection, cooperation and public responsibility.

A similar concern emerges in Hannah Arendt's reflections on judgement. Arendt (1968) argues that political life depends upon the human capacity

to think from the standpoint of others without abandoning one's own responsibility for judgement. Such a capacity cannot be confused with conformity or consensus. On the contrary, democratic judgement presupposes plurality. Citizens are required to confront perspectives that challenge their own assumptions while resisting both dogmatism and passive adaptation. From an educational perspective, this means that democratic formation involves learning to remain intellectually present within situations characterised by uncertainty rather than seeking premature certainty. (Allen, 2004). Contemporary educational research increasingly confirms this interpretation. Biesta (2022; 2023) criticises educational models that reduce democracy to the acquisition of measurable competences, arguing instead that democratic education should expose learners to the unpredictability inherent in living together with others. Education becomes democratic not because it transmits democratic values, but because it creates opportunities for individuals to encounter difference in ways that interrupt habitual patterns of understanding. Democracy, in this sense, is less an educational outcome than an educational practice.This perspective also challenges the growing instrumentalisation of education. Across many educational systems, public debate has increasingly emphasised employability, measurable performance and economic competitiveness. Although these objectives respond to legitimate social concerns, they risk narrowing the educational horizon within which democratic citizenship is cultivated. Citizens are implicitly encouraged to become efficient problem-solvers rather than reflective participants in public life. Nussbaum (2010) has warned that educational systems dominated by economic rationality may inadvertently weaken the very capacities upon which democratic societies depend: critical thinking, ethical imagination and the willingness to engage constructively with human diversity. The capability approach provides a further theoretical lens through which this educational crisis can be interpreted. Sen (1999) argues that democratic development should be evaluated not simply through formal rights but through the substantive freedoms individuals possess to participate meaningfully in social life. Educational institutions therefore contribute to democracy not only by transmitting knowledge but by expanding people's capabilities to deliberate, communicate and exercise agency. Citizenship, from this perspective, is neither a legal status nor an individual attribute. It is a social capability continuously developed through educational opportunities that enable individuals to participate responsibly in collective life. This interpretation invites a reconsideration of democratic fragility itself. Democratic institutions rarely disappear overnight; rather, they become progressively incapable of sustaining public trust, critical dialogue and civic responsibility. Educational processes inevitably participate in this transformation. When learners become accustomed to viewing social complexity through simplified narratives, binary oppositions or algorithmically reinforced information environments, opportunities for democratic judgement diminish. Recent discussions on democratic resilience have therefore emphasised the importance of educational experiences capable of fostering reflexivity, dialogue and critical interpretation rather than merely increasing access to information (Council of Europe, 2023). Seen in this light, the educational challenge is not primarily to produce citizens who know more about democracy, but citizens who are capable of interpreting democratic life responsibly. Such an objective cannot be achieved through procedural instruction alone. It requires pedagogical practices that cultivate the capacity to understand experiences different from one's own without reducing them to familiar categories. Democratic citizenship thus becomes inseparable from interpretation itself. Recognising this limitation also reveals one of the central tensions within contemporary Human Rights Education. Despite its undeniable contribution to democratic culture, much of its pedagogical development continues to privilege normative instruction over interpretative formation. The following section argues that this imbalance can be addressed by reconsidering the educational significance of narrative imagination, understood not simply as an instrument for developing empathy but as a condition for democratic judgement itself.

3. Beyond Human Rights Education: Narrative Interpretation as Democratic Formation

The progressive institutionalisation of Human Rights Education has undoubtedly strengthened the educational commitment to democracy, equality and inclusion. International organisations, universities and schools increasingly recognise

human rights as indispensable reference points for educational policy and curriculum development. Nevertheless, the widespread diffusion of Human Rights Education has not eliminated a fundamental pedagogical paradox. The growing availability of educational programmes dedicated to human rights has not always been accompanied by a corresponding increase in democratic participation, public responsibility or social cohesion. This discrepancy suggests that the educational question is not exhausted by determining *what* should be taught; it equally concerns *how* democratic understanding is formed. Much of the international debate has concentrated on defining the knowledge, values and competences associated with Human Rights Education. This effort has produced important normative frameworks and contributed to consolidating a shared ethical vocabulary. Yet, as Tibbitts (2017) observes, educational initiatives frequently remain centred on the transmission of principles whose legitimacy is presupposed rather than critically examined. Human rights are presented as universally valid norms, while comparatively less attention is devoted to the interpretative processes through which learners encounter situations in which those principles become contested, fragile or only partially realised. The result is an educational model that privileges recognition of rights over the cultivation of democratic judgement.

This distinction is far from secondary. Learning about human rights and learning through human rights constitute different educational experiences. The former primarily concerns conceptual understanding; the latter requires engagement with concrete situations in which dignity, justice and recognition are continuously negotiated. Recent pedagogical research has increasingly argued that Human Rights Education becomes transformative only when learners are encouraged to question inherited assumptions, confront moral ambiguity and recognise the structural dimensions of exclusion rather than merely memorising legal instruments (Berg, 2023). Human rights therefore acquire educational significance not because they offer definitive answers, but because they provide a critical language through which social realities may be interpreted.

Such an interpretation invites a broader reconsideration of narrative within democratic education. Narratives should not be understood simply as pedagogical resources capable of making abstract concepts more accessible. Their educational value lies elsewhere. Narratives reorganise experience, reveal relationships between individual biographies and collective histories, and expose learners to perspectives that cannot be fully captured through normative discourse alone. As Bruner (1991) argues, narrative thought differs fundamentally from paradigmatic reasoning because it explores contingency, intentionality and the plurality of human action rather than seeking universal explanatory models. This distinction becomes particularly significant in democratic education, where understanding human experience requires more than analytical competence.

It is precisely at this point that Martha Nussbaum's concept of *narrative imagination* assumes its full pedagogical significance. Existing interpretations frequently describe narrative imagination as an educational strategy for fostering empathy. Although empathy undoubtedly represents one possible outcome, such a reading risks narrowing Nussbaum's argument. Narrative imagination should instead be understood as an epistemic disposition through which individuals become capable of examining the world from perspectives that challenge the apparent naturalness of their own beliefs (Nussbaum, 1997; 2008). It is not primarily an emotional exercise but an educational practice of judgement. This distinction deserves greater emphasis because contemporary educational discourse often conflates empathy with democratic responsibility. Emotional identification may encourage solidarity, yet it does not necessarily generate critical understanding. Individuals may feel compassion while leaving intact the interpretative categories that produced exclusion in the first place. Narrative imagination operates differently. It interrupts established certainties by exposing learners to experiences that resist immediate moral classification. Rather than asking individuals simply to feel with others, it requires them to reconsider the conceptual frameworks through which others have previously been understood.

Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic philosophy provides an important extension of this argument. Interpretation, Ricoeur (1991; 1992) reminds us, never consists in reproducing another person's experience as if it were one's own. Every narrative preserves an irreducible distance between narrator

and interpreter. Educationally, this distance is not a limitation but a democratic resource. It prevents narratives from becoming instruments of emotional appropriation and instead encourages learners to recognise the legitimacy of perspectives that remain partially inaccessible. Democratic judgement emerges precisely from this willingness to inhabit uncertainty without eliminating difference. Understanding another narrative always presupposes what Gadamer (2004) defines as a fusion of horizons, a dialogical movement that never eliminates difference but enlarges understanding. This understanding also resonates with contemporary debates on recognition. Honneth (1995) argues that democratic societies depend upon social relations in which individuals experience themselves as recognised participants rather than invisible subjects. Recognition, however, cannot be legislated exclusively through rights. It develops within everyday educational interactions through which persons become capable of acknowledging one another as legitimate interlocutors. Narrative interpretation contributes to this process because stories reveal dimensions of human experience that institutional categories frequently obscure. Learners encounter not abstract social groups but concrete biographies that complicate stereotypical representations and invite more reflexive forms of understanding.

Consequently, the educational contribution of narrative imagination extends beyond Human Rights Education itself. It transforms the very meaning of democratic formation. Human rights no longer appear as static principles awaiting application but as interpretative horizons continuously reconstructed through dialogue, historical reflection and ethical deliberation. Democratic education thus becomes less concerned with producing agreement than with cultivating the intellectual virtues necessary for living responsibly within plural societies. This perspective ultimately challenges one of the most persistent assumptions in contemporary citizenship education: that democratic coexistence depends primarily upon shared values. Shared values undoubtedly matter, yet democratic life requires something even more demanding—the capacity to interpret disagreement without reducing opponents to enemies or differences to deficiencies. Narrative imagination contributes to this educational task because it expands the horizons within which recognition becomes possible while preserving the plurality that democratic societies necessarily entail.

The implications of this argument become particularly evident when educational encounters are shaped by stories of forced migration, war and displacement. Such narratives do not simply illustrate violations of human rights; they question the categories through which citizenship, belonging and democratic responsibility are ordinarily understood. It is precisely within these educational spaces that the relationship between vulnerability, agency and democratic learning becomes most visible.

4. Reimagining Democratic Citizenship through Narrative Pedagogy

The educational significance of narratives emerging from contexts of war, forced migration and displacement extends far beyond their testimonial value. They do not merely document violations of human rights or illustrate situations of social vulnerability. Rather, they expose the limits of educational paradigms that continue to conceive democratic citizenship as a stable condition acquired through legal recognition or civic instruction. Experiences of displacement reveal that citizenship is never exclusively a juridical status. It is also a fragile educational process through which individuals negotiate belonging, recognition and participation under conditions of profound uncertainty. Educational discourse has often approached forced migration through humanitarian frameworks centred on protection and inclusion. While such perspectives remain indispensable, they may unintentionally reinforce asymmetrical relationships between those who educate and those who are educated, between those who offer recognition and those who receive it. Refugees and displaced persons risk appearing primarily as objects of educational concern rather than as subjects capable of producing educational knowledge. This epistemological asymmetry deserves greater critical attention because it shapes not only educational practice but also the very categories through which democratic citizenship is imagined.

Judith Butler's distinction between shared precariousness and politically produced precarity offers an important conceptual resource for overcoming this limitation (Butler, 2004). Human vulnerability is a universal condition; exposure to violence, exclusion and dispossession is not.

Educational encounters with narratives of displacement therefore invite learners to examine the political structures that distribute recognition unequally rather than interpreting suffering as an exclusively individual experience. From this perspective, narratives become pedagogically significant because they reveal how democratic institutions simultaneously protect certain forms of life while rendering others socially invisible.

Such a shift also transforms the educational meaning of recognition. Honneth (1995) argues that recognition constitutes one of the fundamental conditions through which individuals develop autonomy and social participation. Yet recognition cannot be understood simply as moral acknowledgement or emotional solidarity. Educationally, recognition requires creating conditions under which individuals become legitimate participants in the production of knowledge. Narratives of displacement therefore acquire democratic relevance not because they generate compassion, but because they challenge established hierarchies regarding whose experiences are considered capable of interpreting social reality. Recognition also requires attention to questions of redistribution and political representation (Fraser, 2008).

Recent educational research increasingly supports this perspective. The UNESCO Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development (UNESCO, 2023) explicitly moves beyond transmissive approaches by emphasising dialogue, critical inquiry and learner participation as constitutive dimensions of democratic education. Similarly, recent work on critical Human Rights Education argues that educational transformation depends less upon the acquisition of universal norms than upon the capacity to interrogate the historical and political conditions through which rights are unevenly realised (Duffy, 2025). These developments reinforce the argument advanced throughout this article: democratic education becomes transformative when it cultivates interpretation rather than compliance.

This interpretative orientation is particularly important when educational practice engages with narratives of war. As Vesterdal (2023) observes, stories of conflict do not automatically educate for peace. Narratives may humanise, but they may also reinforce collective victimhood, simplify historical responsibility or reproduce antagonistic identities. Their pedagogical value therefore depends less upon the events they describe than upon the educational conditions under which they are interpreted. Peace education cannot be reduced to the circulation of emotionally powerful testimonies. It requires opportunities for learners to analyse competing narratives, confront ambiguity and recognise the ethical complexity that characterises contemporary conflicts.

For this reason, narrative pedagogy should not be confused with storytelling as an educational technique. Stories become pedagogically transformative only when they generate interpretative responsibility. This concept refers to the educational disposition to approach another person's narrative without attempting either to appropriate its meaning or to reduce it to familiar moral categories. Ricoeur (1992) reminds us that interpretation preserves the distance separating narrator and listener. Such distance is not an obstacle to democratic understanding; it is precisely what protects recognition from becoming assimilation. Democratic education requires learners capable of remaining intellectually accountable before experiences they cannot completely comprehend.

This argument has significant implications for Global Citizenship Education. Discussions surrounding global citizenship frequently emphasise intercultural competence, international awareness and global solidarity. While these objectives remain valuable, they risk becoming educationally superficial if they neglect the epistemic dimension of democratic participation. Global citizenship is not simply the expansion of civic identity beyond national borders. It also concerns the capacity to revise one's own interpretative frameworks in response to encounters with radically different human experiences. Narrative pedagogy contributes to this process because it destabilises inherited assumptions regarding identity, belonging and responsibility without dissolving democratic commitments into relativism.

From this perspective, democratic citizenship emerges as a practice of continuous interpretation rather than as the application of predetermined principles. Citizens learn to participate democratically not because they possess definitive moral answers but because they acquire the intellectual humility necessary to confront questions

for which no final solutions exist. Such humility should not be confused with indecision. On the contrary, responsible judgement becomes possible precisely because individuals recognise the provisional character of their own perspectives while remaining committed to justice, human dignity and democratic coexistence. Arendt (1968) considered this capacity for judgement one of the defining features of political life; education remains one of the few social institutions capable of cultivating it systematically. This asymmetry can also be interpreted as a form of epistemic injustice, whereby some social actors are systematically denied credibility as knowers (Fricker, 2007).

The pedagogical proposal developed in this article therefore does not advocate replacing Human Rights Education with narrative education. Rather, it argues that Human Rights Education reaches its democratic potential only when rights cease to function as abstract normative references and become interpretative resources through which learners examine concrete human experiences. Narrative imagination acquires educational significance because it connects rights with biographies, institutions with lived realities and democratic ideals with everyday practices of recognition. In this way, narrative pedagogy repositions education as a space where democratic citizenship is not merely explained but continuously enacted.

5. Narrative Responsibility as a Pedagogy of Democratic Judgement

The educational use of narrative is often justified through an apparently straightforward claim: stories bring distant experiences closer and therefore make learners more empathetic. This assumption has become so familiar that it is rarely examined critically. Yet proximity does not necessarily produce understanding, just as emotional involvement does not guarantee democratic judgement. Narratives may reinforce stereotypes, invite voyeuristic attention to suffering or provide the listener with the reassuring impression of having understood a life that remains, in fact, largely inaccessible. The pedagogical question is therefore not whether narratives generate emotion, but what kinds of relations to knowledge, difference and responsibility they make possible.

This article proposes the concept of *narrative responsibility* to address that question. Narrative responsibility does not refer to the moral duty to tell one's story, nor to the expectation that learners should identify emotionally with every narrated experience. It designates the capacity to interpret a story while remaining accountable for the categories, assumptions and asymmetries involved in that interpretation. The listener is not a neutral recipient. Every act of listening selects, frames and assigns meaning. Democratic education must consequently make interpretation itself an object of reflection.

Such a perspective complicates the conventional educational language of "giving voice". Individuals and communities do not lack voices simply because institutions fail to hear them. The problem lies more often in the conditions that determine which voices are considered credible, intelligible or pedagogically useful. Spivak's critique of representation remains relevant here: speaking on behalf of marginalised subjects may reproduce the very hierarchy it seeks to challenge (Spivak, 1988). In educational settings, the benevolent desire to include excluded narratives can become another form of appropriation when teachers or researchers retain control over selection, interpretation and circulation. Democratic interpretation also requires forms of epistemic resistance capable of challenging dominant interpretative frameworks (Medina, 2013).

Narrative responsibility therefore requires a redistribution of interpretative authority. This does not imply abandoning pedagogical mediation or treating personal testimony as beyond criticism. Narratives are never transparent accounts of reality; they are shaped by memory, language, genre and the circumstances in which they are produced. Critical education must preserve the possibility of historical verification, conceptual analysis and ethical disagreement. What changes is the position assigned to the narrator. The person whose experience enters the educational space cannot be reduced to raw material for someone else's moral learning.

The issue is especially delicate in relation to war and forced displacement. Testimonies may offer indispensable knowledge about violence, loss and institutional failure, but their inclusion in education raises questions of consent, exposure and repetition. Narrators may be asked, implicitly or explicitly, to reproduce painful experiences in order to satisfy institutional expectations of authenticity. Trauma then becomes a credential. A pedagogy

oriented towards narrative responsibility must resist this demand. The right to speak must be accompanied by the right not to narrate, to remain silent, to revise an account or to limit its circulation.

Recent work on trauma-informed education has rightly emphasised safety, trust and learner agency. Nevertheless, the language of trauma can itself become reductive when it interprets displaced persons primarily through psychological injury. Zembylas (2024) warns against pedagogical approaches that individualise suffering while neglecting its political and historical production. Narrative responsibility therefore requires a double movement: attention to the affective conditions of educational encounters and critical examination of the structures that have made certain experiences traumatic. The same caution applies to resilience. Educational discourse frequently celebrates the capacity of refugees and displaced learners to adapt, continue studying and reconstruct their lives. While such accounts may challenge victimising representations, resilience can become an ambiguous category. It risks transforming institutional abandonment into individual virtue and treating adaptation as evidence that unjust conditions have been overcome. A democratic pedagogy should recognise agency without using it to obscure the responsibilities of states, institutions and educational systems. The capability approach clarifies this distinction. Sen's emphasis on substantive freedom directs attention away from abstract opportunity towards what individuals are actually able to do and become (Sen, 1999). Nussbaum similarly insists that human development requires social and educational conditions that support agency rather than merely formal recognition (Nussbaum, 2011). Read through this perspective, narratives of displacement do not simply display personal strength. They reveal the conversion factors that enable or obstruct participation: legal status, language, access to schooling, recognition of qualifications, economic security and freedom from discrimination. Narrative responsibility thus connects interpretation to institutional critique. Stories matter not because they personalise otherwise abstract problems, but because they reveal how institutional arrangements are lived. A narrative may expose the gap between a declared right and its practical accessibility, between inclusion as policy and inclusion as experience, between citizenship as legal category and citizenship as participation. The pedagogical task is to move from the singularity of a narrated life to an examination of the structures that condition it, without dissolving that singularity into a sociological example. This movement is central to contemporary Human Rights Education. The UNESCO–OHCHR review of effective Human Rights Education stresses that transformative programmes combine knowledge with participation, reflection and action (UNESCO & OHCHR, 2024). Yet the language of transformation remains incomplete unless education also interrogates who defines the problem, who is authorised to speak and whose interpretation carries institutional weight. Narrative responsibility supplies this missing critical dimension. It links human rights learning to the politics of representation.The concept also responds to a limitation in competence-based models of democratic education. The Council of Europe's framework identifies values, attitudes, skills and critical understanding as dimensions of democratic culture (Council of Europe, 2018). These dimensions are useful, but they may be interpreted as properties possessed by the individual learner. Narrative responsibility points instead to the relational character of democratic judgement. One does not become responsible in isolation. Responsibility emerges through encounters in which one's interpretations have consequences for how others are recognised, classified and included.

This relational understanding is close to Biesta's argument that democratic education involves the difficult experience of existing with others who cannot be reduced to extensions of the self (Biesta, 2022). Education becomes democratic when it interrupts egocentric ways of relating to the world. Narrative encounters may contribute to this interruption, but only if they do not invite learners to consume difference as an enriching experience. The purpose is not to enlarge the self through contact with otherness. It is to accept that the other places limits upon the self's interpretative sovereignty.

For this reason, narrative responsibility should not be confused with interpretative relativism. Respecting the partiality of understanding does not require suspending ethical judgement. Narratives may contain prejudiced, exclusionary or historically false claims. Democratic education must preserve the capacity to contest them. The decisive issue is

how contestation occurs. A responsible pedagogy distinguishes between criticising an interpretation and denying the narrator's dignity, between examining a claim and delegitimising the person who makes it.

This distinction is particularly important in polarised educational contexts. Appeals to dialogue often conceal an expectation that participants should converge towards moderate agreement. Yet some conflicts concern genuine inequalities, incompatible interests or unresolved historical responsibilities. Narrative responsibility does not promise reconciliation. Its educational value lies in enabling learners to sustain disagreement without abandoning inquiry, recognition or accountability. Democratic judgement is formed not by eliminating conflict but by learning how to remain responsible within it.

Arendt's reflections on enlarged mentality are instructive in this regard. Judgement requires the capacity to consider standpoints other than one's own, but it does not entail surrendering the responsibility to decide (Arendt, 1982). Narrative imagination can support this enlargement only when it remains connected to critical examination. Otherwise, perspective-taking risks becoming a simulation in which the learner imagines understanding others while remaining untouched by the political implications of their stories.

Narrative responsibility can therefore be translated into four pedagogical principles. The first is **situated interpretation**: narratives must be read within their historical, political and cultural conditions. The second is **reflexive listening**: learners must examine the assumptions through which they assign meaning. The third is **shared authority**: narrators should retain meaningful control over how their accounts are used and interpreted. The fourth is **public implication**: narrative learning should lead beyond private emotion towards reflection on institutions, rights and collective responsibilities.

These principles do not constitute a fixed instructional model. Their purpose is to establish criteria for evaluating narrative practices. A classroom discussion, oral-history project, literary text or digital storytelling activity may all contribute to democratic education, but none is democratic by virtue of narrative form alone. The decisive question is whether the practice widens interpretative possibility while reducing asymmetry, or whether it converts other people's experiences into consumable educational content. This criterion also helps distinguish narrative responsibility from the instrumental use of literature. Nussbaum's defence of the humanities remains indispensable because it identifies narrative imagination as a capacity necessary for democratic life (Nussbaum, 1997). Yet the contemporary educational context demands a further step. The circulation of narratives now occurs through digital platforms, news media, short-form video and algorithmically curated environments. Stories are abundant, but attention is fragmented. Learners are exposed to innumerable accounts without necessarily acquiring the habits required to interpret them critically.

In this environment, narrative responsibility includes resistance to immediacy. It requires time to examine context, compare accounts, identify omissions and reconsider first impressions. This slower interpretative practice runs against the communicative logic of platforms that reward emotional intensity, simplification and rapid judgement. Educating democratic citizens today therefore means cultivating not only access to narratives but disciplined forms of attention. This asymmetry may also be interpreted as a form of epistemic injustice, whereby some social actors are systematically denied credibility as knowers (Fricker, 2007).

Such attention has a political dimension. What societies choose to hear, archive and teach shapes the boundaries of public memory. Narratives excluded from curricula do not simply disappear; their absence contributes to a selective understanding of citizenship. Conversely, inclusion without critical mediation may turn marginalised stories into symbolic gestures. Narrative responsibility asks educational institutions to move beyond representational inclusion towards epistemic participation: the recognition that persons historically positioned at the margins may alter the questions through which democratic life is understood. This alteration is the most demanding outcome of narrative pedagogy. The educational encounter is transformative not when learners report greater empathy, but when inherited categories become inadequate. A story of displacement may unsettle the assumption that belonging follows naturally from nationality. A testimony of war may challenge narratives of collective innocence. An account of educational

exclusion may expose the distance between equal rights and unequal capabilities. In each case, the narrative does not merely add information. It changes the terms of judgement.

Narrative responsibility therefore joins imagination to action without reducing education to activism. Democratic learning should create opportunities for participation, institutional dialogue and public inquiry, but it should not predetermine the learner's political response. Its task is more fundamental: to form the conditions under which action may become informed, reflective and accountable. The passage from story to action must remain open to deliberation. Understood in this way, narrative responsibility offers a critical extension of Human Rights Education. It preserves the universal claim of human dignity while refusing the illusion that universality can be taught outside history, power and interpretation. It recognises narrative imagination as indispensable but insufficient unless joined to reflexivity, contextual knowledge and institutional critique. Above all, it redefines democratic citizenship as a practice through which individuals become responsible not only for what they believe, but for how they interpret the lives and claims of others. The educational promise of narrative lies neither in the certainty of identification nor in the comfort of moral consensus. It lies in the more difficult possibility of learning to judge without possessing, to listen without appropriating and to act without erasing the plurality from which democratic life draws its meaning.

6. Conclusions

The contemporary debate on democratic citizenship has rightly recognised that democracy cannot be sustained through institutional arrangements alone. Yet educational research still tends to oscillate between two partially unsatisfactory positions. On the one hand, citizenship is frequently reduced to a set of measurable civic competences; on the other, Human Rights Education is often presented as the transmission of universal normative principles whose educational effectiveness is assumed rather than critically examined. Both perspectives make important contributions, but both risk underestimating the interpretative work through which democratic judgement is actually formed.

The argument developed throughout this article has sought to reposition democratic education within a broader pedagogical horizon. Rather than considering narrative as an auxiliary strategy for promoting empathy or intercultural awareness, we have argued that narrative imagination constitutes a distinctive mode of democratic knowing. Educational encounters with stories of displacement, conflict and social vulnerability do not simply enlarge learners' emotional horizons. They expose the historical contingency of social categories, challenge inherited assumptions about belonging and recognition, and require individuals to exercise judgement in situations where predetermined answers are unavailable. Democratic citizenship, from this perspective, is less a body of knowledge than a practice of responsible interpretation.

This shift also invites a reconsideration of Human Rights Education itself. Rights acquire educational meaning not when they are presented as abstract legal guarantees, but when they become interpretative resources through which learners critically examine the conditions under which dignity, participation and recognition are either realised or denied. Such a perspective moves beyond the traditional distinction between learning *about* rights and learning *for* rights by emphasising a third educational dimension: learning *through interpretation*. Human rights become pedagogically transformative when they help learners interrogate the relationship between institutional norms and lived experience rather than merely confirming the legitimacy of existing democratic ideals.

Within this framework, the concept of **narrative responsibility** represents the principal theoretical contribution of this article. Narrative responsibility has been proposed as a pedagogical disposition that combines interpretative reflexivity, ethical accountability and democratic judgement. It neither celebrates emotional identification nor promotes interpretative relativism. Instead, it recognises that every educational encounter with another person's story requires attention to historical context, epistemic asymmetries and the political conditions under which narratives are produced, circulated and recognised. Democratic education is strengthened not when learners believe they fully understand others, but when they become aware of the responsibilities that accompany every act of interpretation.

The educational implications of this perspective extend beyond Human Rights Education. In increasingly polarised societies, where public discourse is shaped by accelerated communication, selective exposure and simplified representations of complex social realities, education is called upon to cultivate forms of attention that resist immediacy and intellectual closure. Narrative pedagogy contributes to this task only insofar as it encourages critical inquiry rather than emotional consumption, dialogue rather than consensus, and reflexive participation rather than passive agreement. Democratic life depends not on the elimination of conflict but on the educational capacity to inhabit disagreement without abandoning the commitment to human dignity and the common good. The educational challenge therefore concerns not only democratic participation but democratic hope (Freire, 1994). The theoretical framework advanced here also opens several avenues for future research. Further empirical studies could investigate how narrative responsibility may inform educational practices across different settings, including schools, higher education, adult learning and community-based programmes. Comparative research could examine how narrative pedagogies operate within societies marked by different historical experiences of conflict, migration and democratic transition, thereby testing the transferability of the conceptual framework proposed in this contribution. Equally important will be exploring how digital environments reshape narrative learning, particularly at a time when algorithmically curated information increasingly influences public judgement and democratic participation. Ultimately, educating democratic citizens requires more than preparing individuals to participate in existing democratic institutions. It requires cultivating the intellectual and ethical capacities through which democracy itself may be continuously reinterpreted, questioned and renewed. Narrative imagination, understood as an educational practice of responsible interpretation, does not offer definitive solutions to the tensions that characterise contemporary democratic societies. It does, however, create the conditions under which those tensions may become occasions for learning rather than sources of exclusion. In this sense, democratic citizenship is neither a status to be acquired nor a competence to be measured. It is an ongoing educational achievement, sustained by the willingness to interpret plural human experiences with critical judgement, epistemic humility and an enduring commitment to justice.

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