

EDUCATION, DEMOCRACY AND CHILDHOOD: THE REBIRTH OF AN EVERLASTING CONVERSATION?

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ABSTRACT

Building on a dialogue and an opportunity to open the conversation between Educational Theory and Philosophy and Sociology of Childhood, this paper departs from the emerging theories about common/s in education, proposing a new terrain (beyond public and private) where more collective educational experiences may emerge. We aim to contribute to revisit the field of education, democracy, and childhood. Considering Chantal Mouffe's conception of agonistic democracy and Jacques Rancière's plea for its eventful existence, we argue that education must embrace the tensions within democratic experiences, overcoming the modern and rational approaches that underlie its theory and policy. Our argument is strengthened when we bring forth the contribution of Sociology of Childhood to revise conceptions of childhood underneath the established theories of education and democracy. We argue for a view of education as a common good and a commoning experience that enhances children's opportunities to participate in a common world.

KEY WORDS

democracy; education; common/s; childhood.



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RESUMO

Construindo um diálogo e uma oportunidade para estabelecer uma conversa entre a Teoria da Educação e a Filosofia e a Sociologia da Infância, este artigo parte das teorias emergentes sobre o(s) comum(s) na educação, propondo um novo terreno (para além do público e privado) em que podem surgir mais experiências educativas coletivas. Pretendemos contribuir para revisitar o campo da educação, da democracia e da infância. Considerando a conceção de democracia agonística de Chantal Mouffe e o apelo de Jacques Rancière por uma existência plena de acontecimentos, argumentamos que a educação deve abraçar as tensões dentro das experiências democráticas, superando as abordagens modernas e racionais que fundamentam a sua teoria e política. O nosso argumento reforça-se quando incorporamos a contribuição da Sociologia da Infância para rever as concepções de infância subjacentes às teorias consagradas da educação e da democracia. Defendemos uma visão da educação como um bem comum e uma experiência comum, que amplia as oportunidades das crianças para participar de um mundo comum.

PALAVRAS - CHAVE

democracia; educação; comum(s); infância.



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¿EL RENACIMIENTO DE UNA CONVERSACIÓN ETERNA?**

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RESUMEN

Partiendo de un diálogo y una oportunidad para abrir la conversación entre la Teoría de la Educación y la Filosofía y la Sociología de la Infancia, este artículo parte de las teorías emergentes sobre lo común en la educación, proponiendo un nuevo terreno (más allá de lo público y lo privado) donde más experiencias educativas colectivas puede surgir. Pretendemos contribuir a visitar el campo de la educación, la democracia y la infancia. Considerando la concepción de democracia agonística de Chantal Mouffe y el alegato de Jacques Rancière por su existencia accidentada, argumentamos que la educación debe aceptar las tensiones dentro de las experiencias democráticas, superando los enfoques modernos y racionales que subyacen a su teoría y política. Nuestro argumento se fortalece cuando presentamos el aporte de la Sociología de la Infancia para revisar las concepciones de la niñez bajo las teorías establecidas de la educación y la democracia. Abogamos por una visión de la educación como un bien común y una experiencia común que mejora las oportunidades de los niños para participar en un mundo común.

PALABRAS CLAVE

democracia; educación; los comunes; infancia.



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Education, Democracy and Childhood: The Rebirth of an Everlasting Conversation?

Catarina Tomás, Elisabete X. Gomes, Carolina Gonçalves, Juliana Gazzinelli¹

INTRODUCTION

*Public. Private. Capital. Learning. Teaching. Schools. Management. Accountability.
Future. Goals. Curriculum. Needs. Development. Discipline. Knowledge. Competences.
Contents. Performance
Children. Adults. Men. Women. Rich. Poor. North. South. Black. White. Identity.
Citizenship*

Words like these are fragments of well-known debates about education. They exemplify the ingredients of theories made of dichotomies, of inclusion and exclusion, of success and failure.

What happens if we add

*Present. Common/s. Democracy. Life. Childhood. Plurality. Responsibility. Vulnerability.
Share. Conflict. Care. World. Sensibility. Belonging.*
to a conversation about education?

Wandering around debates about democracy and education, specifically the education of children, more than replacing dichotomies, we propose to add elements that allow the coexistence of conflicting ideas. With this in mind, the common's terrain emerged as an interesting context to nurture the rebirth of a conversation concerned with education.

Education has an inherent and undeniable urgency. (...) We are always already in the middle of education and need to make the best of it – which is precisely why we need artistry as educators, not recipes or prescriptions, irrespective of whether they are evidence-based or not. (Biesta, 2021, pp. 11-12)

The work of Hannah Arendt is a crucial departure point for a deeper understanding of this issue. For her, education is an institution that stands between the private domain and the public world, and she argues that children are required to attend it, by the state and not by the family, meaning that they are required by the public sphere and not by the private (Arendt, 2000; Lilja, 2018). According to Lilja (2018), Arendt considers that “educational activity must be shielded from the true public realm (...) in order for education to be truly emancipatory and not a tool for conformity and political passivity”

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(p. 545). In this safeguarded space, which exists in the intersection between the public and private domains, as well as between the past and the future, children's education should focus on imparting knowledge about the world to them, rather than merely preparing them for life.

As a response to progressive ideas of education as a political tool for creating a desired future, Arendt claims that “exactly for the sake of what is new and revolutionary in every child, education must be conservative; it must preserve this newness and introduce it as a new thing into an old world.” (Arendt, 2006, cited in Lilja, 2018, p. 547)

Grounded on this argument of the need to protect and allow newness, Arendt refuses to regard children as political actors like adults, as she requires adults to represent the world as it is, even if they would rather live in a different one (Arendt, 2000; Lilja, 2018). In the late 1950's, when analysing the Little Rock that promoted violent reactions towards a child in the process of the publicly decided compulsory desegregation of schools, Arendt claims:

It certainly did not require too much imagination to see that this was to burden children, black and white, with the working out of a problem which adults for generations have confessed themselves unable to solve. (...) Have we now come to the point where it is the children who are being asked to change or improve the world? And do we intend to have our political battles fought in the school yards? (1959, p. 48)

From the author's perspective, this situation occurs since the public realm entered the school, which is a middle ground institution between private life and public. In this paper, we deal with the question of: what happens if, beyond the public and the private, we open space for the *common* in education? Does it widen and deepen the scope of children's democratic citizenship, belongingness, and participation? Does it transform the role of teachers, families, children, staff, and community in educational processes? Does it promote the emergence of different perspectives regarding democracy and education?

In literature, there is an emergent debate around education as a common good and a common's approach to education (Biesta, 2011; Collet-Sabé, 2020; De Lissovoy, 2017; Locatelli, 2018; Nicolaiewsky & Gonçalves, 2023; Ostrom, 1990; Pechtelidis & Kioupiolis 2020).

The notion of common goods suggests the transformation of public institutions through greater participation of citizens and communities in the introduction of viable policies and practices in order to overcome more utilitarian and individualistic approaches and build more democratic education systems. (...) Education as a common good calls into question the current utilitarian model which sees education as a mere individual socio-economic investment. It favors a humanistic approach which places people and their connections with the community at the center. (Locatelli, 2018, p. 11)



Considering this perspective, we argue for the need to deepen the concept of the commons for and in education, going beyond the idea of goods and services that are not owned by public or private, and problematize the notion of community as it runs the risk of aiming for a fixed and enclosed identity.

We see commons as fragile not only because they are vulnerable to enclosure, limited, and hard to sustain and regenerate: their fragility is also our own boundedness as humans exposed to each other, selfdispossessed and mutually vulnerable in never-ending problematic and unequal connections. (...) to focus on commoning as relational politics: the re-constitution of our-selves as subjects in relations of power. This approach suggests more attention to the internal processes of the commoning movements as well as to the subjectivities that are (re)produced through them. (Velicu & García-López, 2018, p. 67)

In what follows, we develop a panoramic perspective with the aim to contribute to the ever-going debate around democracy and education, reborn in the common/s's ground and from thicker approaches to children and childhood. Instead of continuing to perpetuate a set of dichotomies already inscribed, childhood is defended as a complex phenomenon, not easily reduced to one pole or another of a frontier (Prout, 2010; Spyrou, Rosen, & Cook, 2018). Recovering Loris Malaguzzi's argument - your image of the child is where our teaching begins - we argue for the need to build a perspective of children's role and place in education understood as a common good and as a commoning experience.

Therefore, in its three sections, this paper seeks to, first, contribute to the debate on democracy and education, dialoguing with ideas and concepts of democracy, from Dewey's approaches to Jacques Rancière's and to the agonistic model of democracy proposed by Chantal Mouffe.

In the second section, it considers children and childhood, from the viewpoint of Sociology of Childhood (Cockburn, 2010, 2013; Ferreira, 2002, 2004; James et al., 1998; Larkins, 2014; Sarmiento et al., 2017; Tomás et al., 2021) and Philosophy of Education (Biesta, 2013, 2021; Honet, 2020; Kohan, 2010; Larrosa, 2000) and their contributions to a critique of childhood's dominant and abstract conceptions that tend to ground theories of education, particularly those that deal with democracy and education.

The final section presents the main argument of this paper: the common/s theories as an opportunity to open the conversation on democracy and education, as it proposes a new terrain for educational experiences to flourish, once again. To make this idea an argument, a journey towards the common/s is presented, with the starting point of the emergence of the common/s in education, moving on to presenting it as a common good and a commoning experience, where children participate in the everlasting process of making a common world.

EDUCATION AND DEMOCRACY

In the context of western modern educational systems, the relations between democracy and education have occupied a central role, which has been anchored in abstract and universalizing ideas of both democracy and the subjects of education (Biesta, 2011, 2021;



Casséte, 2014; Gomes, 2015; Lima, 2021). This debate, and most of the ideas and theories of this relationship, is grounded on two reflections that need to be analysed. The first is concerned with the risk of democracy becoming an empty word, since there is a naturalised and neutralised understanding of it - as if we all knew what it stands for and how it relates to education (Baldachino, 2020). The second relates to a hegemonic perspective of formal democracy, linked to decision making, more representative than participatory, more rational than emotional, as a promoter of uniformity and consensus more than of plurality and dissent (Biesta, 2011, 2021; Mouffe, 2016).

DEMOCRACY IN EDUCATION: THICK AND CONFLICTING APPROACHES

John Dewey, more than a century ago, analysed democracy in its relation to education. For the philosopher, democracy, more than a form of government, is an associated form of life; of joint and mutually communicated experience. Democracy, according to Dewey (2007, p. 88) is “more than a form of government; it is, above all, an associated way of life, an experience shared together”. For him, society must adopt a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relations and direction and habits of mind which permit social changes without causing disorder. That is, building or improving a democratic society through education.

Referring to the purpose of education in a democratic community, Dewey (1959, p. 109) states that “the aim of education is to enable individuals to continue their education - or that the object or reward of education is the capacity for constant development”. But this idea of a democratic community can only be applied to all members when there is cooperation between humans and when there are convenient and adequate opportunities for the reconstruction of habits and social institutions through ample stimuli arising from the equitable distribution of interests and benefits, that is, a truly democratic society. This idea of democracy is guided by values of justice, equity, human rights, etc. These are important values, obviously, but it is important to add another thickness, another layer to this debate, based on more contemporary views.

According to Baldacchino (2020), Dewey's argument in favour of education is based on the idea that, as free and intelligent beings, we have the power to develop dispositions. Therefore, Dewey's idea of an associated way of life refers, according to Baldacchino (2020), to the presupposition of the democratic polis as a living space, where citizens live together in a mutually beneficial and cooperative way. For Dewey, education plays a crucial role in developing the dispositions necessary for citizens to overcome fear and reaction and engage in this associated way of life.

However, in a context where democracy is weakened by anti-politics, this ideal of associated life is effectively neutralised and democracy becomes just a shell (Baldacchino, 2020). For the author, the anti-politics:

proscribes our associated ownership of the polity and how we live as a society. Even while claiming to focus on personal liberty, the anti-political establishment that has gradually taken over several liberal democracies makes it a point to stop us from pragmatically asserting what are the basic truths on which we presume to engage with each other in the space of the polity. (p. 49)



According to the author, there is an urgent need to revisit Dewey's argument in favour of an experimental and experimental approach to the world. Lima (2021) problematizes Dewey's concepts of democracy and participation and uses them as a reference to understand current educational policies. According to the author, the current crisis of democracy in education is closer to post-democracy and minimal forms of participation than to Dewey's ideals of democracy, participation, and freedom.

Zyngier (2013) uses the concept of “thin democracy” and “thick democracy”. “Thin democracy” is a limited or restricted form of democracy that focuses only on formal voting and representation procedures, without addressing issues of social justice and equity. According to the author, this limited view of democracy is problematic, as it fails to engage citizens in meaningful participation and decision-making processes and perpetuates inequalities in society.

“Thick democracy”, according to Zyngier (2013), on the other hand, refers to a more comprehensive and inclusive form of democracy that goes beyond just the formal procedures of voting and representation. It involves active participation and engagement of citizens in decision-making processes, as well as a commitment to social justice and equity. Thick democracy is seen to address issues of inequality and marginalisation in society. For the author

thick democracy goes beyond just the formal institutional framework that outlines or governs how society should function and is a set of structures, concepts, habits and practices that reach out to the community as well as to the very core of individuals. (Zyngier, 2013, p. 104)

Another perspective of democracy, which is not always brought into the debate about education, is the agonistic model deepened by Chantal Mouffe's (2006) approach. The author presents criticisms of traditional liberal models and considers it important to remember that democracy is made of tensions. It's just not peaceful, harmonious, and rational. Moreover, she argues, we cannot master these tensions, nor is it democratically desirable. It is interesting to observe how it shows the need to think and thicken the concept of democracy. Mouffe evaluates the proposals offered by philosophers of democracy in the 20th century, based on their conceptions of democracy as rationalised and formal, and the renewed interest in the model of deliberative democracy, an already old theme.

Mouffe's democracy theory presents critiques of traditional liberal models, highlighting dimensions for a renewed theoretical model: radical or pluralist democracy. The philosopher's theory posits that plurality and inherent conflict are essential elements of an ideal democracy, as they are intrinsic to its essence.

For her, the liberal model brings with it the imposition of values, suggesting the use of a universalist model, as if it could be considered the ideal model for all countries and societies. This universalist ideology promotes an agony of politics, she argues. In this regard, the major problem of liberal universalist ideas is the inability to recognize diversity as the main element for improving human coexistence.

According to Borges and Aquino (2018), Mouffe's theory intends to demonstrate that it is impossible to reach political consensus or agreement in social relations, insofar as conflict, difference, or plurality, are intrinsic elements to the very idea of democracy.

Mouffe (2006) dialogues with different democracy models and argues that there is an alternative model to the aggregative model and the deliberative model, which is the agonistic pluralism.

The aggregative model sees political actors as being moved by the pursuit of their interests; the deliberative one stresses the role of reason and moral considerations. Both approaches, albeit in a different way, posit the availability of a consensus reached through rational procedures: instrumental rationality in the first case, communicative rationality in the second one. A central problem with both models is that they leave aside the central role played by 'passions' in the creation of collective political identities. (Mouffe, 2016, p. 2)

The agonistic plurality defended by the philosopher is characteristic of most contemporary societies, which should directly reflect on the conceptions of justice, State, law, and democracy. Her theory, contrary to several democracy theories that are situated on the threshold of political philosophy, considers the need to integrate the idea of pluralism into democracy, in the understanding that there is no consensus in a plural and democratic society. The philosopher intends to demonstrate that it is impossible to reach any political consensus or agreement in social relations, as conflict, difference, plurality are intrinsic elements of the very idea of democracy.

According to Borges and Aquino (2018), Mouffe indicates that there is an illusion in the conception that a "political consensus" would inhibit the tensions arising from social relations, and the theory in which such a "final result" is intended would be a "liberal utopia", which would hide, in fact, a pretension hegemony of the interests of certain groups holding political and economic power.

Making use of Hansberry's image of democracy as a "burning house"², Baldachino (2020, p. 56) confronts us with the need to "consider whether democracy is robust enough to signal an educational horizon on which a struggle against anti-politics could even begin to be conceived, let alone be had."

PRESENT TENSE DEMOCRACY

Rancière (2014) helps to question the idea of democracy as a state or the democratically organised institutions and political systems. Like Mouffe, Rancière considers that the idea of consensus points to the existence of a political regime that reduces politics to policy (Rancière, 2010). The philosopher's debate starts from a historical and critical analysis of democracy and discusses contemporary dilemmas about the viability of this social and political way of life, beyond a form of State and a policy regime.

In Rancière's perspective, the cleavages and inequalities of the social and economic sphere cannot be appeased, so that even if we can delimit a reality that is common to all, such reality is always marked by a deep and insurmountable existential conflict (Casséte, 2014). For the philosopher, there are events, moments in which democracy occurs and equality is verified. But there are times when we really do treat others as equals. Moments when the school manages to do this when focusing on people's intelligence and will to learn.

According to Rancière (2001), democracy is not a government regime or a form of social organisation and, consequently, we do not live *in* democracies. He argues that

² Lorraine Hansberry's "burning house" image addresses the question of whether it is necessary to integrate into a society that is fundamentally flawed and oppressive. She used this metaphor to describe the state of American democracy in the 1960s, where systemic discrimination and hatred ran rampant. The "burning house" represents a society on the brink of collapse, and the question is whether it's worth trying to save it or whether it's better to start over.



democracy is more than a mode of government or a social regime, but it is a conflictive and dynamic movement of people's reconciliation with themselves. In this sense, the author presents fruitful perspectives for the analysis and understanding of democracy from the point of view of those who are outside the public logic, who cannot even be part of the idea of community. And because of that, democracy builds a form of common world that is revealed to individuals from a context of plurality: through these multiple experiences and perspectives that are voiced about a reality that can thus be shared.

Democracy, for Rancière, is a way of subjectivation through which political subjects come to existence. According to the author, “there is democracy if there are actors who are neither agents of the state apparatus nor parts of society” (2010, p. 127). For Rancière, education plays a crucial role in this process, enabling individuals to participate in public life and challenging the dominant power structures. Rancière's broader ideas about the distribution of the sensible and the role of the ignorant citizen suggest that he believes in the potential for all individuals, regardless of their social status or level of education, to participate in democratic politics. For the author “(...) whoever establishes equality as a goal to be achieved, based on a situation of inequality, in fact postpones it to infinity. Equality never comes after, as a result to be achieved. It must always be placed before” (Rancière, 2011, p. 11). This idea challenges traditional views, since the debate of democracy in education tends to be concerned with the future, with an idea of subjects and citizens to become. Now, by proposing this present tense democracy, Rancière defies education to be a context where people engage in as equals. And how can this be?

CHILDHOOD UNDERNEATH THE ESTABLISHED THEORIES OF EDUCATION AND DEMOCRACY

In the democracy and education debate, childhood appears to be naturalised and abstract. It is important, therefore, to analyse how recent studies in Sociology of Childhood and in philosophy of education have alerted us to conceptions of childhood that are neither neutral, nor domesticated, nor indifferent or abstract. Children, like any other human beings, are complex and evolving, not completely good or bad, neither entirely passive nor docile, as they are not uncritical individuals (Almeida, 2000; Ferreira, 2002, 2004, 2010; James et al., 1998; Liebel, 2020; Sarmiento, 2005; Tomás et al., 2021). In what follows, the place and contribution of children in democracy and education from a neutral and abstract idea to a critical and quasi-political idea of childhood will be put forward, taking children as a concrete and active figure able to engage in thick democratic experiences. Still, the idea of the citizen child in which they are seen as political actors with specific political actions that occurs in different contexts of everyday life. However, child citizens may face barriers to participation, such as lack of access to information, limited resources and social norms that discourage their involvement in politics (Sarmiento & Tomás, 2020; Tomás, 2011; Tomás & Fernandes, 2011; Trevisan, 2012).



A DOMINANT CONCEPTION OF CHILDREN AND CHILDHOOD

The conceptions of childhood and children carry stories, ideas, values, change over time and express what society understands, at a given historical moment, by children and childhood. An idealised, mythologized, naturalised, and maintained image of children and childhood still prevails (Ferreira & Rocha, 2009; Sarmiento, 2000; Tomás, 2007, 2011).

Predominantly, the child was conceived as a naturally kind and naive, docile, and uncritical being. James, Jenks and Prout (1998) conceptualise children as social actors and childhood as a socially constructed entity or institution. This image of childhood gives rise to paradoxes and contradictions, which strain the relationships between adults in schools and children, oscillating between an idealised, romanticised, and mythologized child, whose founding and symbolic image is that of purity, innocence, naivety, and children in their concreteness, in their multiple and diverse faces, conditions and productions. Conceptions that carry an idea of children as abstract and universal.

Critical Childhood Studies comes, according to Spyrou (2018), to promote a discussion on the entanglement between material and discursive forces in children and childhoods. According to the author, the new materialists criticise dualisms such as nature/culture, human/non-human, subject/object, or discourse (matter, among others). Instead of continuing to perpetuate a set of dichotomies already inscribed, childhood is defended as a complex phenomenon, not easily reduced to one pole or another of a frontier (Prout, 2010). The challenge is to pay attention to what is “in between”, to “excluded middle” (Prout, 2010), which constructs variants of childhood; to the materials and practices from which an endless stream of new phenomena is generated and emerges, including distinctions and dichotomies.

Relying on this ontological turn and new materialism, Spyrou (2018) claims that childhood is a fundamentally complex material-semiotic phenomenon, constituted through “assemblages”, that is, childhood is both real in its materiality and discursively constituted. Thus, by paying attention to what things do in their (intra) activities we can perceive, according to the author (Spyrou, 2018), how entangled relations produce their subjectivities in particular ways (p. 205). For Childhood Studies, this serves as an invitation to consider children's materialities – including their bodies and their material constitution – as well as their relationships with objects and artifacts that not only shape children but are also shaped by them. Examining the field of education from this perspective poses a significant challenge.

The Childhood Studies has contributed to the development of a new paradigm for social studies on childhood and children since the 1980s. In Portugal, Sociology of Childhood dates to the late 1990s (Fernandes, 2009; Ferreira, 2000; Sarmiento et al., 2017). It proposes a new paradigm for the social studies of childhood, which includes the social construction of childhood, the affirmation of the child as an actor and childhood as a social construction. The basic ideas that underpin most studies and research in Sociology of Childhood includes the recognition of children as social actors with agency, voice and participation and the need to challenge the predominant paternalistic and adultism approach to childhood.

The dominant conception of childhood works as an almost abstract idea that appears in theories of education in the debate with democracy, which disregards children's materialisation. The specificity of children, their materialities as shown above, is not considered in the debate. It is important, therefore, to bring to the debate the thickness and complexity of the new conceptions of children that see them as critical beings, participants, and not neutral in education processes.



Research developed in Childhood Studies has made a decisive contribution to conceptualising the “child” as a social actor, capable of shaping their identity, producing, and communicating credible views of the social world, while retaining the right to actively participate in it. The belief that children can be autonomous producers of meaning challenges traditional ideas about child development, which present children as passive, weak, and dependent, immature and, therefore, incapable of making responsible decisions about their lives. Such approaches, child development centred, legitimise the exclusion of children from decision-making processes and public life in general (Fernandes, 2009; Ferreira, 2010, 2002; Pechtelidis, 2018, 2021; Sarmiento, 2000; Tomás, 2011).

The idea of children as a citizen with rights was developed based on the perception of children as an active subject with the right to participate in the public sphere and in the socio-political context (Baraldi & Cockburn, 2018). Pechtelidis (2018) also argues that children, with their public interventions and mobilizations, such as the recent ones on the protection of the environment and the planet, appear active, critical, complex, with skills and social skills. They discuss the problems they face in family, community and school life and therefore challenge the dominant western narratives that children are immature and irrational social beings, lacking the ability to think critically.

CHILDREN AS CRITICAL ACTORS

Discussions about children as political and critical beings in guaranteeing their right to have rights, as citizens, are referenced in studies of Sociology of Childhood. The denial of the child as a political being, however, has been defended by its social invisibility and indifference. As indicated by Sarmiento, Fernandes and Tomás (2007):

It is therefore important to assess the meaning and possibilities of children's participation in social life. Not only does the visibility of children as recipients of public policies pass through it, but also their full assumption as peculiar political subjects. (p. 190)

According to the authors, the school can also be configured as a space for intervention and political action for children, enabling and considering their participation in the organisation of this space, emphasising that:

The full assertion of children's participatory capacities depends on how adults organise their conditions, whether within the scope of school organisation, local policies, or society in general. (...) But the political action of children is carried out in accordance with childhood cultures, that is, with their own way of interpreting, acting, and interacting in the reality that stems from the alterity of the generational condition of childhood. (Sarmiento et al., 2007, p. 203)

It is necessary to consider and debate the idea that children are social actors who must be guaranteed the possibility of political action in their own ways, according to their unique cultures. Sarmiento, Fernandes and Tomás (2007) contribute to the discussion



and broaden the understanding of children's political participation by stating that they truly constitute the only social group to remain excluded from expressed political rights, above all, from the form of representative choice of political leaders. They point out that the political invisibility of childhood is characteristic of Western modernity and is therefore not universal.

For children to be conscious agents of their social practice, they need to become able to dominate and produce the existing knowledge in the society in which they are inserted. As Tomás and Fernandes (2011, p. 259) argue, “participation is a means of learning with value in itself and a fundamental right that reinforces democratic values”.

Participation is a gradual process, in which the participation of children is a means of learning with value and a fundamental right of childhood that reinforces democratic values (Cockburn, 2010, 2013; Larkins, 2014). Democratic participation “brings, however, advantages of greater involvement and responsibility of children and increases their critical sense and sense of belonging to society” (Tomás, 2007, p. 53).

CHILDREN AS FIGURES OF THE UNKNOWN

Federici (2019) makes a fundamental contribution to our understanding of childhood:

There is almost a desire to erase childhood itself as a nonproductive state, for instance by teaching toddlers—as some economists recommend—how to manage money and become wise consumers and submitting them to ‘attitude tests’ as early as age four, to presumably give them a good start in the race for economic competition. The erasure of childhood is also proceeding apace in working-class families, as parents are more and more absent from home and face severe economic crises that are a constant source of despair and rage. Adults, whether parents or teachers, have neither time nor energy and resources to dedicate to children. (p. 182)

Somehow childhood is being erased from our lives and from children's lives since childhood is not tameable. Based on the premise that construction of knowledge about childhood must consider children, authors of the *Sociology of Childhood* (Fernandes, 2009; Ferreira, 2010, 2002; James; Prout, 1990; James et al., 1998; Sarmiento, 2000; Tomás, 2011; Tomás et al., 2021) understand the child as a social actor, with a socially relevant action, as a subject with rights and a competent being in their worlds of belonging.

Childhood, according to Gomes (2015), is a complex and multifaceted concept that is shaped by historical, cultural, and social factors. The author highlights some contributions from the area of philosophy of education, on this concept, from philosophers such as Jorge Larrosa (2000), Jacques Rancière (2002), Walter Kohan (2010), among others. The philosophers understand that childhood is a cultural and historical construction that is shaped by social and political factors. For Larrosa (2000), childhood is a unique and unpredictable experience that cannot be fully captured or understood through traditional educational practices. He argues that childhood is not a fixed and stable entity, but rather a figure of the unknown (Gomes, 2015).

Gomes (2015) also brings the perspective of Rancière, who challenges the traditional hierarchical relationship between teacher and student and proposes an alternative approach to education based on intellectual equality. He challenges the idea that



children are passive recipients of knowledge and argues that they can create their own knowledge through their experiences and interactions with the world around them. Kohan proposes a pedagogy of the concept, which seeks to understand childhood as a philosophical concept shaped by social and political forces. For the philosopher, childhood is a complex and multifaceted concept that cannot be reduced to a single definition or understanding. Kohan's approach to childhood emphasises the importance of critical thinking and reflection in the educational process (Gomes, 2015).

According to Gomes (2015), Kohan argues that childhood should be understood in terms of “time like Aion” rather than “chronos”. By this, the philosopher means that childhood should be seen as a time of possibility and potential rather than a fixed and predetermined period of development. Kohan believes this perspective can help challenge dominant discourses on childhood and create new possibilities for education and social change.

Biesta (2013) brings three concerns about the purpose of education: qualification, socialisation, and subjectification. Qualification refers to the acquisition of knowledge and skills, socialisation refers to the process of becoming a member of a given social group, and subjectivation refers to the process of becoming a subject, which involves the development of one's own identity and the ability to make choices. The author argues that subjectivation is the most important concern of education, as “without a concern for the subject-ness of the student, that is, for the possibility for the student to exist as subject, education ceases to be educational and becomes the management of objects, effective or otherwise” (p. 8).

Biesta (2021), based on the question “What will we do with the children?”, highlights the existence of the category “the children” and who, in fact, is included in this category. The author questions what our notion of children is in the context of education and why “we” would assume that “the children” really need education. Biesta (2021) points to the question of the presumption of how it is supposedly up to “us” to decide and “the children”, simply to accept. According to the author, in a very fundamental sense, education ceases to be a request from “the children” and becomes an unwanted and unjustified intervention, as an act of power.

COMMON/S IN EDUCATION

The conceptions of democracy and education appear as a way of guaranteeing equal rights to education to all. In fact, talking about democracy in education and for education allows us to understand that, today, one cannot live without the other. However, attention must be put on both the threats brought by thin approaches to democratic experiences (Zyngier, 2013) and to its anti-political (Baldachinno, 2020) conceptions, as referred above. At this point of the paper, we will analyse how the debate on the common/s makes it possible to assign a place to a more democratic education, with more participatory and more involved children, with more collective communities and more co-responsibility for the education processes.

COMMON GOODS AND COMMONING PROCESS

According to Ostrom (1990), the term 'commons' or 'common resources' relates to goods and resources of collective use or production with equal access conditions. Common goods are managed in a collective, egalitarian, and participatory way by the communities that create and/or use it. The author's theory of "common pool resource" (p. 30), defends that the ideal way to manage a set of common goods is in a community and in a sustainable way, and considers that privatisation or regulation by external entities are not the only, nor the most efficient solutions. Ostrom argues that if the set of principles and rules of collective property are well defined, accepted and respected by all, it is possible to avoid over-exploitation of common goods. For the author, both the public/state ownership and the private are subject to failure in some circumstances (Ostrom et al, 1999). Also, Bollier (2018) considers:

A commons is not the resource alone, as many economists seem to think; it is not just 'un-owned resources': it is the resource plus the community that governs it, plus a set of rules or protocols which regulate its use. (...) A commons is a social system that manages resources sustainably, and which has regulations and boundaries that its members can enforce, through penalties if necessary, to make sure that the resources do not get over used. So, a commons has ways of dealing with people who want to appropriate them for their own gain, or free-loaders who want to use them without playing a part in their upkeep... (s.p.)

Regarding the aspect of common use of resources, Ostrom (2011) prioritises the theory of collective action of common use of resources which focuses on the existence of norms, rules and mechanisms organised within a community regiment built by the collective, with the aim of experiencing the common use of resources.

Federici (2017) underscores the significance of the commons, community, and collectivity as counterforces to the individualistic and competitive ethos promoted by capitalism. She argues that the closure of the commons and the destruction of communal ways of life were essential to the development of capitalism and the creation of a working-class dependent on wage labour. Federici also highlights the role of women in creating and maintaining communal ways of life, through their work in subsistence agriculture and domestic work and through their historical exclusion of rights of property and of participation in the public domain. She argues that the struggle for the commons and the defence of communal ways of life are crucial to building alternatives to capitalism and creating a more just and sustainable society.

Federici (2017) shows how women lost access to community and were tamed throughout the process of capitalist development, which involved the closure of commons and the destruction of communal ways of life. This process forced women into the home and the dependence of men for their survival. Women were deprived of political rights and property rights through laws and customs that reinforced their subordination to men. For example, women were excluded from participation in political life and were not allowed to own property in their own name. This process of domestication and deprivation of rights is essential for understanding the development of capitalism and the deprivation of rights, namely political rights and property rights.



The author makes a fundamental contribution to thinking about the different meanings of commons, repositioning our gaze on forms of co-governance and the ways in which communities manage their resources (Federici, 2019). In her political view, common goods are a paradox if there are no community relationships that support them, and without women in this concrete plan of action, this idea of community is an illusion devoid of meaning. From this perspective, common goods are not just a set of material resources, but also must be perceived as a set of social relations that allow the collective reorganisation of the reproduction of work and the transformation of everyday life. Federici (2019) responds with the articulation of two dimensions that are crucial to what the commons are: the need to reappropriate collective goods and the fight against the processes that cause the phenomena of fragmentation and social isolation.

These two dimensions are fundamental to create alternatives regarding the reproduction of work, health, education, and care relationships. Federici argues that there is an identification and analysis of the growing trend of neoliberal policies towards the elimination of childhood itself. The author also states that one of her main objectives is to demonstrate how the potentialities of communal relations are not only a form of survival or constant gain of resistance forces, but also a process to transform our own subjectivity, thinking about the way in which we see the world and life around us.

Revel (2008) starts from the principle that the term “common” is not understood from the perspective of private/public, the “private” as an individual appropriation and the “public” the appropriation of the State. What does not belong to a person, belongs to the State, that is, to everyone. And what belongs to everyone but to no one, it is, what belongs to the State. The term “common” is also not understood simply as individual/collective.

Based on these theories, it is possible to think about the tension between common goods as something stabilised and the construction of the common as a way of being collectively, in the field of education. These resources can be natural, material, or immaterial, and commoners work together in a network of cooperation and interdependence to ensure the survival and prosperity of each member and of the common goods. To transform the existing system into a steward of the commons, it is necessary to introduce new forms of education, which goes beyond the public and private issue, and opens space for the commons.

EDUCATION AS A COMMON GOOD

Nóvoa (2002) brings a discussion about education and points to a need for a new public space in which the solution does not lie in organising schools in private networks, but in finding a middle ground that can give rise to a new public space for education and not just being at the service of the state. Biesta (2021) argues that education, as a common good, should be accessible to all and should contribute to the development of a fairer and more equitable society. The author contends that education should not be regarded as a commodity subject to market transactions but rather as an indispensable public good that contributes to the well-being of individuals and society at large. Biesta also emphasises the importance of responsibility in education, arguing that teachers must create spaces of disruption in their teaching and encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning.

By revisiting the journey of education from the private and public debate onto the common’s approach, Locatelli (2018) helps understand the prevailing tensions and



crossroads. She emphasises the principle of education as a public good as a shield considering current trends of privatisation and commodification of education, allowing to question the current utilitarian model, which sees it as a mere individual socioeconomic investment. The author reframes the theoretical debate about education in the public domain and argues that the concept of education as a common good can represent a useful complementary framework for the governance of education. Locatelli (2018), therefore, points to a humanistic approach that places people and their connections with the community at the centre and, at the same time, the State must be democratic in its own way of functioning to respect, protect and fulfil education as an individual right that corresponds to positive obligations.

According to Locatelli (2018, p. 2), the principle of education as a common good such “as a humanistic vision, a policy focus or as a principle of governance, (...) refers to the definition and preservation of collective interests of society and to the central responsibility of the State in doing so”. Following Coccoli’s ideas about the concept of commons, Locatelli (2018) points it as “minimal semantic core” that can be considered common in all socio political demands and that can be identified in the following characteristics: “(1) the opposition of the concept of commons to the dynamics of neoliberalism; (2) the re-composition of cooperation networks within communities and (3) the development of instruments of participatory democracy” (Locatelli, 2018, p. 10).

Following the ideas of Hardt and Negri, in Declaration (2012), Pechtelidis and Kioupiolis (2020) also argue that the “common” singular form “offers a principle of organising society and collective activities that enjoins that social and natural goods and activities are made, governed, and shared by communities on the basis of egalitarian, horizontal participation” (p. 3). This idea assumes that all people are included in decision-making and questions the “established inequalities of class, race, gender and all types of hierarchy, such as those between leaders and followers, specialists and non-specialists, professionals and amateurs” (Pechtelidis & Kioupiolis, 2020, p. 3).

Considering this set of arguments, education, itself, is claimed as a common good: going beyond the public responsibility and the private interests, it emerges as a collective issue, contributing to the making of a common world.

EDUCATION AND COMMONING PROCESS

Korsgaard (2019), building on the concepts of common(s) from an educational perspective, discusses how these refer to a shared, communal, and non-privatized spaces and activities. He points to a way of conceiving the school as “a common space – spaces not yet appropriated, closed or privatised by political and economic interests – and schooling as a common process – of teaching and learning about the world in common” (p. 446). The author disclosed the concept of commons and the practice of commoning in connection with an understanding of schooling in terms of a specific way of being together in a specific time and space as human beings. He then suggests that educators should consider incorporating common practices into their teaching methods to create more equitable and participatory learning environments, highlighting the potential benefits of a common based education.

Pechtelidis and Kioupiolis (2020, p. 4) consider commoning as a “practice of making and managing a collective good in a manner of openness, equality, co- activity, plurality, and sustainability”. For the authors, the educational commons refer to the collective ownership and management of resources and educational processes by a community.



This includes the various dimensions of identity formation in political, cultural, and economic life, rather than the transmission of formal knowledge about rights and duties. The concept of educational commons is linked to the idea of citizenship, although it differs from traditional citizenship understood in formal education. According to Pechtelidis and Kioupkolis (2020), one can understand the educational commons as an alternative pedagogical paradigm that can contribute to democratic transformation. This is so because the structure of the commons brings together common goods, rules, and “commoners”, which, in the case of education, are adults and children. Both must play a role in determining and constructing community practices and rules through their involvement and participation in decisions.

It is important to think about a different perspective of education to build the common/s. When we talk about education as a common good, it is almost as if these common goods pre-existed the educational process. According to Pechtelidis and Kioupkolis (2020), education, as a common good, is a fundamental instrument of political empowerment for both children and adults. Unlike conventional education, educational commons are not reduced to a private good or a commodity, under neoliberal hegemony, nor does it consist of human capitalization.

CHILDREN AS COMMONERS

From Revel’s perspectives (2008), the common is a democratic construction of singularities, complex and changeable relations of power, struggle, new ways of living, new institutions that emerge from political modernity. Echoing Chantal Mouffe’s agonistic model of democracy, when she emphasises the importance of creating a democratic culture that encourages citizens to identify with democratic values and participate in democratic processes. Democracy, thus understood, is a space for the expression of different values and interests and encourages the confrontation of these values and interests in a respectful and constructive way. Conflict and disagreement are not necessarily negative but can be productive and lead to the creation of new ideas and solutions.

For Honneth (2020), education is based on mutual recognition, a fundamental element in the constitution of human subjectivity, as an essential characteristic of social identity. However, the author defends the idea that it is necessary to understand “freedom” as the primary objective of education, which consists of being together with the other, the “cooperative partners”, to help the child to develop a “communicative attitude”. For Honneth (2020), at school, children should have “social freedom” (p. 101), an individual freedom obtained only and exclusively together and in cooperation with others. The author defends the idea that children have “imaginative powers” (p. 102) and “creative potentials” (p. 102) that adults no longer have and that, therefore, children should be raised to become future democratic citizens, cooperatively endowing them with capabilities.

In that sense, Honneth (2020) explores the opposition between freedom and autonomy that resides in the fact that autonomy, as understood in the Kantian tradition, tends to see the individual subject individually from all others, while freedom, as understood in the tradition of Hegel and Dewey, emphasise the importance of cooperation and communication with others. Honneth (2020) argues that the danger of focusing only on autonomy in education is that it ignores the importance of our intellectual development depending on cooperation with others. Therefore, Honneth



suggests that the educational objective should be to help children develop a communicative attitude and a sense of the advantages of a cooperative model of problem solving over an individualistic style of dealing with cognitive or moral challenges. The best word for the kind of freedom that children should know at school, according to Honneth (2020) would be “social freedom” (p. 101), an individual freedom that can only be achieved through cooperation with other people.

For Biesta (2021), the world is the only place where our existence takes place. Therefore, the idea of world-centred education aims, first, to highlight that educational issues are fundamentally existential issues in a natural and social way.

If the ‘gesture’ of learning, understanding, and sense-making goes from me to the world, there is, therefore, another ‘gesture’ that runs in the opposite direction, from the world to me. And one of the things that I seek to articulate in the idea of world centered education is that both gestures matter; they matter for education, and they matter for our (co-) existence as human beings on planet with limit capacity to fulfil everything we may desire from it and in societies where not all desires can be realized in equal measure all the time. If the gesture of learning therefore puts me in the center of the picture, the other gesture – which I have referred to as the gesture of ‘being taught by’ – puts me in the spotlight, so to speak. (Biesta, 2021, p. 91)

The author posits that education should revolve around the world rather than being child-centric or curriculum-centric. From this perspective, the author contends that human existence unfolds within the context of the world, thus necessitating education to equip individuals with the requisite knowledge and skills for effective engagement with the world. Additionally, the author underscores the significance of the interplay between education, democracy, and the public role of schools within this framework.

CONCLUSIONS

The common’s approach to education opens space for a radical philosophic and pedagogic gesture and sociological context/analysis: overcoming the drive for utopia and assuming present tense education and democracy. Ostrom (1990) understands that education as a common good can help to promote social cohesion, reduce inequality, and promote democratic participation. Therefore, we need to reflect on the way in which we relate to what is common to us and, with that, we also build an idea of the world, an idea of our relationship with the world, how education does this work and to enhance an inversion of traditional positions and roles at school, which implies a reflection on the unequal power relations between adults and children. Only in this way is it possible to promote the participation of children in decision making and management of their activities and in the planning of their daily lives.

It is necessary to reflect on the openness of the idea of the common, and to think that we, as a society, have not yet built this common place, the place of common life. And, in this context, education can be a place where the common is built, because not only common goods are worked on, but an existence is built, in some way, a common world that does not pre-exist. It’s almost as if we needed to make room for this construction of the common as a world that belongs to all of us but belongs to no one (Biesta, 2021).



The usual debate on education and democracy sees democracy as an organised, formal, and pacified entity, more representative than participatory, a deliberative democracy known by all, based on the idea of justice, equity, and equality. These are important values, but they lack some thickness that add to this debate and that can be understood as another dimension of democracy that is not always brought up, which is a conception of democracy also made of tensions. Mouffe (2016) considers it important to remember that democracy is not just a peaceful and organised system and shows that there is a need to think and densify the concept of democracy in which there are these tensions. The article, therefore, brought the discussion about the commons as one of those tensions that democracy brings us considering, according to Rancière (2014), the idea that democracy is not only a democratically organised State, but are moments/events in which we are capable of to live this democracy.

Mouffe (2016) proposes a critical reformulation of the fundamental principles of democracy to make room for conflicts, passions, and politics. The author defends an agonistic model of democracy, in which opponents who share a set of ethical-political values and principles engage in a contest of interpretations. This model challenges the naturalisation of the borders of democracy and the conflicts between its actors. Chantal Mouffe's insights into the nature of democracy and politics may be relevant to rethinking educational processes in a way that recognizes and engages with the conflicts and contestations inherent in any democratic society.

When Rancière says that “all men have equal intelligence” (2011, p. 38), he starts from a fundamental principle of his philosophy of education, the recognition of intelligence as a power of knowledge common to all human beings. The article uses this sociological conception to understand that children are also political and critical beings who occupy a place and have an active voice. This represents a significant contribution to understand the role of children in the debate of democracy and education.

Biesta (2011), in the debate on Democratic Education, challenges, based on Mouffe and Rancière, the conventional way in which education, citizenship and democracy are connected. The author argues that the socialisation conception of civic learning and democratic education, which assumes that subjectivities and political identities can be fully formed before democracy can “take off”, is flawed. Instead, they propose a conception of subjectivation of citizenship education and civic learning that focuses on how democratic subjectivity is engendered through engagement in ever-indeterminate political processes. This approach makes room for thinking about the current transformation in educational processes and not just projecting the transformation into a future time, which ultimately never arrives and remains utopian. Biesta suggests, drawing on the theories of Mouffe and Rancière, that we should focus on the process of being democratic citizens, rather than trying to produce a preconceived notion of what a good citizen is.

The debate on the common/ones allows us to seek out and identify and characterise what already exists in common and what can be shared, even with all the tensions, imperfections, and incompleteness. The emergent paradigm of the “commons” can therefore be seen as an alternative system of values and actions in the field of education, based on the behaviour of children according to the ethics and logic of the commons. It is important to think about this logic to challenge the dominant beliefs and ideas about children's political capacity and start from an expanded notion of politics, which is crucial to empower children and increase their participation in communal life. That is, education must embrace the tensions within democratic experiences, overcoming the modern and rational approaches that underlie its theory and policy, to reconfigure itself as a commoning process and a common good, which is collectively governed by its community in terms of freedom, equality, active and creative participation.

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