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Teaching citizenship: Civic experimentation and imagination

Ana María Salmerón*

Abstract

It is widely accepted today that democracy cannot exist without education. Furthermore, that any democratic project must be accompanied by an educational project, and that achieving the first depends—at least in some sense—on the second's possibilities for success. This article addresses the role that the current state of political and social life should play in relation to teaching and learning in school curriculums. The discussion is based on the idea that social life cannot be ignored in education when the latter is aimed at understanding it and making a commitment to its transformation. The author proposes that education for democracy only has meaning in the framework of two complementary conditions: first of all, civic experimentation, and secondly, an educational experience that promotes the development of imaginative capacities.

Introduction

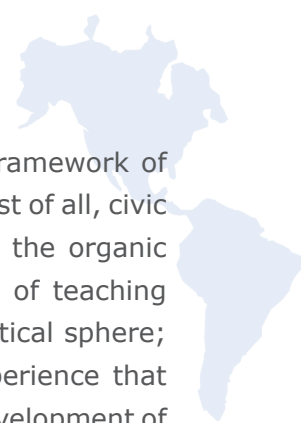
Education for democracy is perhaps one of the most notable concerns of democratic states. It is also one of the most complex tasks entrusted to schools, and at the same time, one of the tasks in which schools have perhaps the least control. This is because education for democracy is particularly regulated by the general political climate, the broader public culture, and the type of power relations prevailing beyond school walls.

Thus, to speak of education for democracy is to address a problem that is hardly

insignificant. Educators find themselves with their hands tied to some degree, due to the conditions of a social order. They must find modes for providing students with the tools and knowledge that will allow them to recognize this order and work in favor of its conservation, reproduction, transformation, reform or revolution.

We are certainly not deceiving ourselves by suggesting that the absolute destiny of societies depends strictly on the education of their citizens, but we should recognize that this education indeed has a place not to be underestimated in achieving progress or conserving the collective order. What takes

*Faculty of Philosophy and Letters. National Autonomous University of Mexico. Email: anasame@unam.mx. This article was developed under and with the support of the project IN-404011 PAPIIT of DGAPA, UNAM.



place in civic education is reflected in the forming of a moral and political climate, in the continuity or discontinuity of the relations and distribution of power and privileges, in levels of equilibrium and fairness in the distribution of well-being, in putting a stop to practices of discrimination and exclusion or allowing them to expand, and in the quality of the order of the general public sphere. Today, it is widely accepted that democracy cannot exist without education, that a democratic project cannot exist without an educational project, and that achieving the first depends—at least in some sense—on the second's possibilities for success.

This encounter of interferences and dependencies between social life and the education aimed at its improvement has been studied from many different perspectives, and dozens of sociological, political, philosophical, historical, anthropological, and of course, educational theories have described the exchanges and mutual subordinations between them. My interest here is certainly not to present all of them, but rather to explore one of the hundreds of facets in the current situation of relations between political life and the education designed to understand and enhance it.

The topic of this article is the role that the current state of political and social life should play in terms of teaching and learning in school curriculums. My intention is to examine the theoretical proposals in this regard from contemporary thinkers, in light of the assumption that in education it is not possible to ignore the very social life that education is aimed at understanding and developing commitments to its transformation.

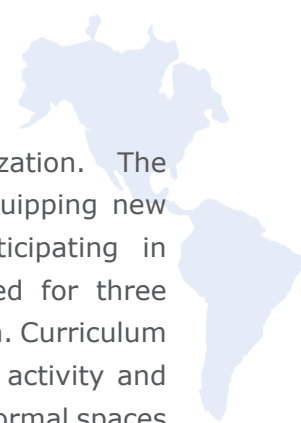
What I will attempt to demonstrate in this article is that education for democracy only has

meaning if it takes place in the framework of two complementary conditions: first of all, civic experimentation—in other words, the organic connection between the contents of teaching and the real conditions in the political sphere; and secondly, an educational experience that accompanies and promotes the development of imaginative capacities aimed at reconstructing social life and political practices in favor of more democratic ways of living.

Therefore, I will begin by briefly reviewing the way in which Mexico's public schools have conducted their education for democracy projects in recent decades, and I will attempt to highlight what constitutes its main deficiency in my opinion. On the basis of this analysis and some central theses from John Dewey's theory on education for democracy in the framework of civic experience, I will explore the proposals from two contemporary intellectuals: J. A. Crespo and H. Giroux. And from their most outstanding intuitions, I will extract arguments in favor of my thesis. I will conclude by appealing to the importance of stimulating imaginative capacities, as emphasized by Hannah Arendt in her exposition on the necessary conditions for the formation of political judgment and renewed participation in the public sphere.

Omissions in the practice of teaching for democracy

Current proposals regarding education for democracy in Mexico's teaching institutions have not been able to detach themselves from the unsuccessful attempts to maintain teaching disconnected from the real conditions of public life and its circumstances. The various projects initiated during the last four decades of the previous century, and so far this century,



have indeed been focused on different logical reasoning, but none of them have managed to overcome a common defect that unifies them: they have disregarded political reality in their didactic agendas.

Following the civic curriculum that dominated during the 1950s and that insisted upon the inculcation of values and attitudes, alongside legal rudiments and lessons on rights and obligations as part of the education for democracy project, we find that during the period from 1960 to 1992 Mexico adopted an organization of the curriculum by areas in its reform of basic education. In this context, the contents previously forming part of the subject matter designated as “civic education” were diluted among other social science subjects, and attention was diverted from relevant aspects of understanding public life and its possibilities for improvement. “Civism was neglected in terms of understanding and improving social life” (Latapí, 2002, p. 79).

Irrespective of the effects that, in other fields, would have resulted from the adoption of the curriculum scheme that switched from “subjects” to “areas,” the result in the field of education for democracy was devastating. While in previous years, some forms (precarious or not) of civic instruction had been attempted, the arrival of this transformation in curriculum disrupted such attempts, plus the long-established transmission of information on laws and regulations for public order disappeared, together with the higher principles of associative action, moral attitudes and emotions, etc., which for good or bad, had constituted the contents of citizen training.

Despite a clear lack of ethical and pedagogical justification, Mexican schools relinquished their responsibility to educate citizens and to promote projects, from

the classroom, for democratization. The curriculum explicitly aimed at equipping new generations with tools for participating in public life completely disappeared for three entire decades of public instruction. Curriculum contents associated with political activity and social action were silenced in the formal spaces for basic teaching.

This resolution of course constituted an education policy with a very simple logistical implementation. The offer of a negative resolution, in the Rousseauian sense of negative teaching, will always suppose a minimum waste of energy and resources. The fact that schools did nothing in favor of promoting individuals involved in public life became an apparently innocuous practice in a national project, whose outstanding characteristics of authoritarianism were translated in the educational arena to powerful tools for excluding the majority of the population from the possibility of judging or becoming involved in the country’s political destiny. The silence in the curriculum with regard to the public sphere extended for nearly 30 years in Mexico, and served to reinforce an anti-democratic national project that needed a population ignorant of its associative rights and obligations, voters who could be manipulated, and a limited political class with the capacity to take advantage of the generalized political illiteracy¹.

Nevertheless, and despite efforts in this regard, specifically the attempts to silence curriculum contents associated with social and political life, what we find is that the public situation did not remain outside the classroom or removed from learning. This would have been virtually impossible. The most prominent features of overall political life and practices of domination inevitably pass from the broader social environment into the everyday order maintained in schools. Schools, as part of



the public domain, can do little to resist the logic prevailing in that domain—if they do not specifically aspire to do so—or to reverse the signs and nature of the group and its ways of living. The de facto activities of political life per se spontaneously teach much more, and transmit the ways in which public action is taken in a much more profound manner than what takes place through deliberate, systematized projects for educational intervention. Omissions in an explicit *curriculum* do not naturally or necessarily become omissions in the actual *curriculum*.

Education for politics, as H. Giroux (2006, p. 36) maintains, is above all “a form of cultural production,” and something that occurs as a process impacted by the functioning of the ideology that undermines and governs the organization and understanding of images, space and time, for building—with and through that understanding—a particular type of subject immersed in a particular type of relations.

In this sense, even though the chalkboards would have been found seemingly empty, what was not written on them, what was silenced by erasing them, did not actually disappear. It is likely that only the place was mistaken, and that the message and legitimate meaning of civic action in public matters were blurred.

It is not pertinent, however, to spend more time in presenting a critical description of a model that, far from defending particular forms of educational action, was inclined to attempt to omit them—with very negative results—and that has fortunately disappeared almost completely from everyday practice in Mexico’s schools. I believe it will be more worthwhile to observe the practices that have been attempted in public teaching in Mexico during the last twenty years. The prevalence of these practices makes it necessary for

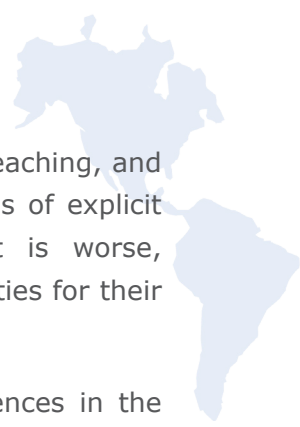
us to reflect upon their effects, study their mechanisms, critically review their limitations and rethink their possibilities for improvement.

I am referring here to programs that—in the framework of curricular reforms, the first in 1992 and 1993, and later in 1999 and including those more recent—have inserted specific subject matters for addressing moral and civic education in elementary schools. These programs expand—almost without suspicion—a practice of transmitting moral “truths” and legal and procedural rudiments for democracy.

These programs represent an understanding of formal education for democracy that insists on teaching sets of accumulated information on norms and procedures, and on values and forms of predetermined moral and political behavior, almost always abstract in nature. This is a practice composed of teaching activities that gravitate toward the instruction of what has elsewhere been referred to as “democratic catechism.” It is described as catechism because it transmits—as if unquestionable “truths”—a set of legal, moral and procedural propositions regarding the order of individual and collective behavior of students in a public space, to be repeated, reproduced and endorsed.

This set of propositions assumes principles and values that are broadly recognized and generally accepted, and that adhere to an inexorable, intangible meaning of democracy and to forms of associated life identified with this meaning, but the practice of which is not only absent in the framework of general public life, but is actually totally unrelated to the genuine experience of coexistence in the school environment.

What we have here is a strategy for



predicting the principles and motivation for behaviors and predispositions for action in the framework of a discourse in which individual interests are sacrificed in favor of collective interests. It is a doctrine that has been created in the shadows of language for an ideal democracy and a notion of a citizen (who does not actually exist)² that is manifested consistently as a subject who is more concerned about the well-being of others than his or her own well-being. It is a guide for civic action whose spirit proclaims not only the need to follow doctrinary mandates but to do so based on commitment and conviction. It urges adherence to the law, not because of its punitive power, but due to its intrinsic value, and it calls for obedience to public institutions, not because their actions are effective, but due to the meaning that ontologically corresponds to these institutions in the context of utopian democracy.

Most of the attempts at civic education that have been promoted in Mexico in recent years can be identified as fitting within this perspective. It is a view of the citizenry and an interpretation of resources available for building democracy that can be applied equally to educational institutions at basic levels and at the higher level. It is shared by public schools, private schools and any other social or political entity. Democratic catechism, as a resource, functions identically whether in relation to electoral institutes, nongovernmental organizations, trade unions, businesses or clergy.

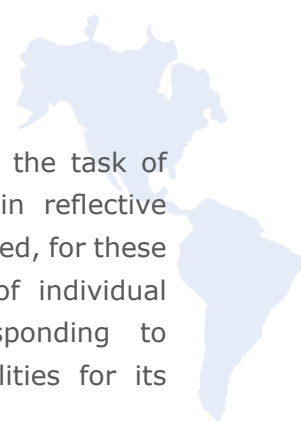
The common denominator of these didactic uses is the extraction of reality from the contents of teaching. The *de facto* living conditions, political culture and quality of moral climate prevailing in the social atmosphere in schools and communities are not an explicit

aspect of the subject matter for teaching, and instead are placed on the margins of explicit educational contents, and what is worse, outside the framework of possibilities for their understanding.

Nor can substantial differences in the spirit of the focus be detected in the profusion of terms used for describing the objectives oriented toward educating democratic citizens. Those who have focused on “developing abilities” or “skills” as well as those who have emphasized the “promotion of attitudes” or the promotion and refinement of “social” and “civic aptitudes;” those who have insisted on the transmission of “values” or who have pointed to specific “virtues,” as well as those who have preferred to direct their efforts toward the construction of what is referred to as the “culture of legality;” plus those, with less or more awareness of the implications, who have turned to the notion of “citizen competencies”—they are all committed, in the end, to the same project promoting “democratic catechism” and the identical doctrine-guide to what one must do to become a “Good Citizen” and to act “as democracy requires” in the few spaces in which civic action is permitted in Mexico’s political life.

It is also important to note that solid ideological distinctions are not evident in this exercise in “education.” Both those on the right, as well as those who identify themselves on the left, have pointed to substantial agreements in terms of objectives and intentions, and they have shared their adhesion to this doctrinary orientation in civic education.

Still, and despite the nearly generalized sympathy enjoyed by democratic catechism, the ineffectiveness and futility of this course of action have been confirmed. It does not matter how well the doctrine is learned by memory—



and as credible and perfect the promises made in its discourse—the crude reality of public life ends up revealing its falseness in everyday experience. If education has been reduced to the transmission of a “truth” that experience is unable to corroborate, then the result is alarming, since it amplifies the lack of trust in politics, promotes apathy and places citizens in the framework of an astonishing lack of resources for public action. A lack of resources that reinforces the vicious circle of a weak, poorly-constituted democracy with a tendency toward a poorly-educated citizenry incapable of participation and prevented from intervening in favor of political progress.

It is a fact that schools, political and social institutions, the general public climate, churches and NGOs are all currently failing to contribute to educating the citizenry required in Mexico in order to strengthen the impoverished democracy prevailing in the country. There is no doubt that the discourses and principles accompanying the practice of this doctrinary enthusiasm for civism must be placed on trial.

Civic experimentation

From the not very effective nature of the essays on educating citizens for democracy that have represented the two practical tendencies in public education during recent years in Mexico, it is possible to obtain the lesson that the response to questions regarding how to confront this task cannot ignore two conditions, specifically:

1) The very subject matter of teaching cannot be ignored. In other words, the curriculum contents that address what real democracy is and what could strengthen its

functioning cannot be neglected; the task of motivating students to engage in reflective processes cannot be underestimated, for these processes are linked to forms of individual and collective behavior corresponding to real democracy and the possibilities for its improvement.

2) The importance of including real conditions that lend meaning to subject matter, and that directly address the problems involved in coexistence and participation in public space cannot be ignored. In other words it is not possible to sustain an efficient conception of teaching for democracy that is not grounded with civic experimentation in the context of real democracy and the social and political conditions that are at stake in schools and in communities.

The second condition is where the main interest of this essay lies, and is something that many thinkers in the past realized pointed the way to move forward in the field of education for democracy. Among those thinkers was John Dewey, who with great interpretative meaning, defended civil education within the framework of social experience. He is the source of one of the most profound proposals for both education for democracy and a moral and civil epistemology. For Dewey, training for living in community can be found in the fabric of collective life just as it in.

Dewey states:

The only way to prepare for social life is to engage in social life. To form habits of social usefulness and serviceableness apart from any direct social need and motive, apart from any existing social situation, is, to the letter, teaching the child to swim



by going through motions outside of the water. The most indispensable condition is left out of account, and the results are correspondingly partial. (1996, p. 205).

F. W. Garforth sustains:

Moral training given in school is meaningless [...] unless related to the wider life of society — not simply as ‘training for citizenship’, which is too narrow an interpretation, but for ‘serviceableness’ through the whole field of human relationships (1996, p. 197).

In effect the most outstanding texts on Dewey’s philosophy of education are replete with normative argumentations that sustain the power of civic experimentation in the context of education for public life and democracy.

It must be said that this is not only a matter of an epistemological formulation that vindicates a sort of logical impossibility of learning certain formalities of democratic prose without the de facto exercise of public life in which such prose operates. Instead, this is a matter, above all, of sustaining the importance of an organic connection between teaching and learning, on the one hand, with everyday problems in the real world, on the other. This is in virtue of the contribution made by this connection to the growth of individuals, the development of thought, the progressive transformation of schools, and improvement in the social order.¹

Now then, it is important to carefully analyze whether to assume it is necessary to consider the interplay of the actual conditions of overall social and political life for teaching and learning in schools what is moral and

what is public, since its implications and results depend on the interpretation given to this matter. The most pronounced differences are possible in relation to understandings of the role that may or should be played by the inclusion of what is real and the interplay of experience in the context of civic teaching for the goals of democratic education.

The recognition that social conditions and types of production and domination relations are manifested and reproduced in the places where instruction occurs reveals the need to reflect upon the potential effects from deliberate immersion in the nature and mechanisms of an anti-democratic public order in schools. In other words, if it is true that it is only possible to educate for politics in the context of experience from real conditions in public life, then how will we be able to educate for democracy if these real conditions turn out to be profoundly anti-democratic?

John Dewey offered some responses to this type of question, some of them associated with the powers of schools to filter, improve and liberate the environmental conditions that interrupt or obstruct the development of thought and progress in educational experience (Dewey, 1998). Thus, schools allow readjustments in the social order in virtue of their educational purposes.

As argued by Rosa María Torres:

In the Deweyan sense, the task of education cannot [...] ignore an action that produces real changes in institutions [...] schools must readjust, they must be living communities because social perceptions and interests can only be developed in an authentically social environment



in which there is give and take as common experience takes shape. In schools there should be points of contact because social interests in schools and those outside schools in an unrestricted interplay, since schools follow and reflect the existing order, while at the same time participate in the configuration of a new order (our translation) (2007, p. 312)

This Deweyan manner of situating social and political experience in the context of interests in educating democratic citizens has led to the most varied interpretations. I would like to address a couple of them below, in order to underscore the problems that arise in terms of their potential for application and that have unfortunately been granted only a secondary position—despite their importance—in the order of current reflections and debates regarding the epistemology of civism and the conditions for teaching that are appropriate for favoring the development of political judgment, citizen action and democracy.

“Political realism”: a pedagogical model of citizen education

I would like to present here a proposal made by José Antonio Crespo, a renowned Mexican researcher and political analyst, who has attempted to recuperate the importance of experience from the real conditions of public life in the ordering of contents and forms of democratic education in schools, using as a starting point a teaching model based on understanding the behavior of political actors.

There are a number of pedagogical traditions that have demonstrated that

in almost any field, if the starting point is the direct, immediate experience of children that is then linked to broader topics, learning is easier, more profound, more long-lasting [...] Perhaps this scheme will not create model citizens who are highly politicized [...] but at least it will be possible to understand in an essential, rational manner the great principles and processes of politics in general and of democracy in particular (our translation) (Crespo, 2004, p. 13).

The proposal, referred to as “political realism” by its author, consists fundamentally of demonstrating to the young generations the *de facto* manner in which public life operates, and the abuses committed by actors in the political sphere.

According to Crespo, the conditions of political transactions in modern states have no other possibility for restraint aside from that which is defined by way of institutional democratic arrangements; by the division of powers and mutual oversight; by the balances and counterbalances of the game played by social actors; by punishment to those guilty of infractions, etc. And this is the reality that should be demonstrated, without reserves, to students, to allow them to understand these dynamics, and analyze the value and dimension of their potential.

If students who have been socialized from this perspective are able to understand the way this complex institutional mechanism operates, in order to put an end to the abusive, corrupt inclinations of nearly everyone, and therefore conclude that this regime, despite its limitations and imperfections, is better than any other for protecting the collective interest, we will have created democrats based on their convictions (not on the basis of ethics, but rather on rational logic) and



on what they deemed convenient. And with these citizens, true democracy (not ideal democracy) has genuine possibilities of functioning satisfactorily and becoming consolidated (our translation) (idem).

Therefore, building a citizenry consists of motivating young people to attempt to understand the public behavior of the various political agents and social institutions. This is a “crude” proposal, according to the author, but the only one that can convoke new generations to become more familiar with democratic life. Showing reality to students, with its defects and limitations, is practical advice to follow.

It appears to me that the potential of Crespo’s proposal is evident. I have no hesitation in applauding its power to combat the current postures that have been demonstrated to be useless and that insist on democratic catechism. And I welcome any attempt to escape from strongly-rooted strategies of indoctrination; from narrow instruction on rules and values; from attempts at merely affective refinement; from projects for mechanical extinction of anti-social behaviors; from experiments in unconscious modification of motivations; and from any practice that punishes the exercise of thought and obstructs the habilitation of autonomy (understood in the most clearly Kantian sense).

It is important, however, to critically contemplate each new attempt, and in this spirit, I would like to indicate here what I judge to be a weakness to be taken into consideration in this perspective that aims to establish civic education on purely “political realism.”

It is not my intention to question the proposal in terms of recognizing the need to orient citizen education toward promoting

capacities for making political judgments. I believe, in fact, that this aspect is where the greatest potential of Crespo’s proposal lies. Also, I do not question the potential formative power characterizing the practice of assisting young generations in seeing political reality up close, learning more about it and attempting to understand the behavior of political actors. I also concur with the formative power that Crespo grants to the examination of the dialectics of powers that mutually limit themselves to the democratic game of confrontation between diverse, irreconcilable interests. I am convinced that this is a powerful aspect of the proposal. And I perceive the crucial connection that Crespo reveals between the goals of encouraging critical thinking and promoting the refinement of political judgment through the strategy he suggests, in terms of its implementation in the contemplation of public life and the exercises of understanding the actions of public actors. And I recognize the need to link knowledge of de facto occurrences in the public sphere, as an indispensable condition for understanding and for making political judgments.

Hannah Arendt has offered a point of theoretical support to this posture that is quite resistant to criticism. According to this author, it is possible to distinguish between logical reasoning and a political judgment to the degree that the first claims reliability that is independent of the world and of the existence of others. “It has been frequently observed that the validity of the affirmation ‘2+2=4’ is independent of the human condition (Arendt, 2005, p. 385). Political judgment, on the other hand, is unavoidably tied to experience in general.

In terms of the capacity of logical reasoning, she states the following:



It operates, in fact, under conditions of complete separation from the world and from experience [...] it is rigorously 'internal' for us, without any link to anything 'given,' is incapable of understanding 'nothing,' and left on its own, is completely sterile. Only under conditions in which the shared realm among men is destroyed, and the only reliable aspect remaining are the tautologies [...] may this human capacity once again become 'productive' and develop its own lines of thinking (our translation) (Arendt, 2005, p. 386).

Even so, it does not seem that a mere immersion in the phenomenology of public life is sufficient for the exercise of forming political judgment (and above all, not in countries—like Mexico—where the experience of democratic life is so precarious). Political criticism demands an accompanying normative undertone; a scheme with a place for observation of and judgment on the de facto conditions and behaviors of actors in public life, with a compass that guides the construction of a better, progressive, more democratic social order.

In this sense, Henry Giroux rightfully defends the need to maintain civic education in a framework of utopian construction. For this author the notion of “unrealized possibilities” provides:

[...] a foundation for analyzing and constituting critical theories of schooling and citizenship. [...] Both schooling and the form of citizenship it legitimates can be deconstructed as a type of historical and ideological narrative which provides an introduction to, preparation for, and legitimation of particular forms of social life in which a vision of the future, a sense of what life could be like, is given a central place [...] the incorporation of a utopian logic as part of a project of possibility

represents an important advance in rethinking the role of teachers (2006, p. 58).

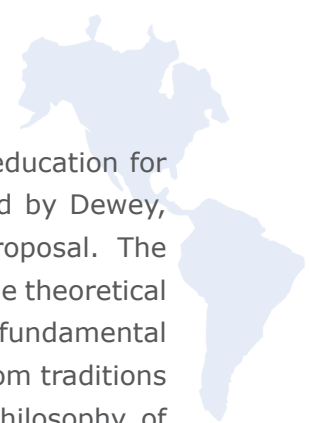
We find, therefore, more than a subtle distance between Crespo's call to construct education for democracy in mere political realism, and Giroux's suggestion to add a utopian perspective to the act of exercising vigilance over public events and social experience. The utopian logic offered in reference to the role of citizens and their responsibilities in the public sphere seems essential. The task of schools may only be understood based on the goals of improving public life, transforming social life, making progress in moral and social conditions, focusing on general well-being, and perfecting democratic life.

In the following section I will examine this feature of Giroux's proposal as it relates to this article.

The radical critical pedagogy of H. Giroux

Henry Giroux is, without a doubt, one of the contemporary thinkers whose understanding of the Deweyan precept on civic experience and its intervention in civic epistemology is particularly important in current debates.

In his book entitled *Schooling and struggle for public life. Critical pedagogy in the modern age*,² Giroux acknowledges the ways in which the concept of citizenship is established as a historical construction and becomes meaningful in a framework of practices closely linked to power relations and mechanisms of domination. The idea of democracy is, at



the same time, a historized construct that is important to understand as a “place” of constant struggle and social transformation.

Therefore, research associated with possibilities for the understanding and evolution of the citizenry and democracy is something that, according to Giroux, must be undertaken with a focus on producing ideological discourses expressed and experienced in different forms of the mass culture, in places of work, in social and family exchanges, and of course in schools.

With this historized understanding of the notion of the civic subject and the possibilities for this subject’s transformation and the modification of social structures in favor of a radical democracy, Giroux designs a “critical pedagogy” that emphasizes—as did José Antonio Crespo—the importance of taking real social and political life into the classroom, as an authentic form of experience that makes it possible to turn the political into pedagogical contents and the pedagogical into a political tool.

While there is not enough space here for a detailed explanation of the general educational proposal for educating citizens in the radical democracy imagined by Giroux, I believe it is fundamental to point out one of the features in his discourse that addresses head-on the focus of this article. I am referring to the strong insistence of this US thinker to introduce into the explicit school curriculum a form of civic experience accompanied by a substantial, preconceived ethical-political vision.

I believe it is essential to mention, before entering into the subject matter, that Giroux’s adequate understanding of the place for civic experimentation and his acknowledgement of the indispensable connection between the

real conditions of public life and education for democratic citizenship, as inspired by Dewey, is not the only virtue of his proposal. The author also adds other cutting-edge theoretical referents and a series of fundamental attributes of the best examples from traditions of Marxist thought, the critical philosophy of the first Frankfurt schools, the most renowned representatives of contemporary political philosophy, and Freirean literacy experiences. All of these provide his theory of critical radical education with dignity based on justice and a progressive spirit—which are difficult to step back from for analysis. Nevertheless, and despite the powerful theoretical apparatus available to Giroux for supporting his posture, the suggestion to introduce a specific political project and a particular ideological approach in a classroom requires, in my opinion, some examination.

Giroux rightly maintains, together with the great sociologists and thinkers on education in the 20th century, that schools constitute an apparatus for transmitting ideology and culturally reproducing forms and relations of domination, of power structures and social imbalances. In his view, the cultural transmission that occurs in schools constitutes not only a mechanism of reproduction, but in fact a mechanism for legitimizing the empowerment of a few groups and the subjection of others, through the most blatant and the most subtle means of reproduction in a system based on exclusion.

Given the indisputable fact that there are structural influences in the social realm that transfer the hegemonic ideology and political posture into everyday activities in schools and into teaching practices, Giroux suggests inserting a liberating pedagogy in the classroom, accompanied by a political leftist



discourse that promotes an intervention capable of transformation beyond the classroom. In his opinion, it is not enough to reveal the nature of the dominant prose that is filtered in from social relations and that contaminates the school curriculum; it is not enough to reveal the social, not natural, character of the ways in which the logic of capitalism is reproduced in the classroom. It is necessary, according to Giroux, to interject a type of counterbalance to the status quo and invade education with an ideology that contradicts the dominant and denaturalizes the existing system.

The “radical ethical vision” in which he situates his proposal is presented not only as an antidote to the school’s reproductive task, but rather as a scheme of anti-hegemonic action that is committed to social movements and specific partisan discourses and that crosses the border beyond merely pedagogical tasks. Thus the function of teachers is not limited to teaching traditions of thought and the development of the necessary tools of judgment for criticism and action. The work of those who do the teaching is not limited to activities contained in the school’s physical space, and in fact assumes political militancy and even proselytism.

In order for teachers to function as intellectuals who have the capacity to transform and who legitimize the role they play through a form of emancipatory authority, they will have to do more than achieve greater control over their working conditions and teach critical pedagogy. It will be important to open up all aspects of formal education to active, popular impugnation by social movements as well as by other vanguard groups (our translation) (Giroux, 2006, p. 172).

Without going any further in presenting Giroux’s notion of a militant teaching faculty that takes advantage of its place of authority in schools to put forth a particular political discourse, it is not difficult to find elements to argue against the imposition of a doctrine, even if such a doctrine has the most appreciable features of a progressive discourse and even if it is couched within the greatest promises of liberation. Paulo Freire, one of the theorists in whom Giroux finds support for his thesis, would have objected to the doctrinal transmission of political postures and ideals in instruction or literacy processes.

[...] education must be either liberating or domesticating. (However [...] we probably never experience it as purely one or the other, but rather as a combination of both.). [...] Thus we have to recognize ourselves as politicians. It does not mean we have the right to impose on students our political choice [...] Our task is not to impose our dreams on them, but to challenge them to have their own dreams, to define their choices, not just to uncritically assume them (Freire in Corbo, 2007).

The distance between Freire and Giroux is, once again, considerable. Although it appears that both support the emancipatory goal of political literacy, the difference between them is not based only on a different understanding of what one supposes utopian logic must have at stake in relation to the theory and practice of education on citizenship. The logic each one uses is not only different because Freire urges teachers to “challenge” students to have dreams for the future, while Giroux “imposes” a dream for them. In particular the greatest difference is that Freire’s challenge educates, while Giroux’s imposition indoctrinates.



This indoctrination reminds me of the objections made to attempts at civic literacy that have prevailed in Mexico in recent decades. Without belittling the progressive nature of Giroux's intentions, or underestimating the value of his liberating proposals, it is important to prudently review the meaning of his intentions.

Education for democracy involves imagination

Allow me to briefly summarize the ideas presented here. I believe it is important, first of all, to focus once again on the acknowledgement made at the beginning of this article: that education for democracy projects conducted in Mexico in recent years have failed, and they have done so to the same degree as the failure in the nation's own democratic life⁵. It is also important to reclaim the idea that while the responsibility for school failure lies with the state's inability to sustain democratic forms of associated life, it also corresponds to schools in general because, among other reasons, they have engaged in their task while omitting some relevant curriculum contents, and omitting the indispensable organic connections between teaching and social reality.

After the need was established for a type of teaching that connects the contents of ideal democracy with the conditions of real democracy, a review of José Antonio Crespo's political realism proposal led to two observations: first, the viability of a pedagogical model that considers the phenomenology of public life as a necessary condition for the development of political judgment, and second, the absence of a second condition necessary

for civic teaching: the progressive perspective for a future.

Thus, the reference to Giroux's theoretical development supported the need to promote the formation of thought on what is public within a normative framework arising from a future perspective, or from "utopian logic" (to use Giroux's term). Lastly, it was established, with support from Freire's thesis, that such utopian logic cannot be sustained as a pre-established set of ethical-political values and options, but rather as a space in which students make free choices.

If what has been stated thus far is accurate, it seems wise to affirm that the epistemic possibilities of a democratic citizenry should be presented in a type of indispensable fluctuating between knowledge of the public reality, exactly as it is, and the possibilities for thinking of it alternatively in the interest of progress and improvement.

If this is so, Hannah Arendt has contributed a significant element for contemporary reflection on education by stating that the only indispensable capacity in the development of political judgment is imagination:

Imagination alone enables us to see things in their proper perspective, to put that which is too close at a certain distance [...]. The "distancing" of some things and bridging the abysses to others is part of the dialogue of understanding, for whose purposes direct experience establishes too close a contact and mere knowledge erects artificial barriers [...]. This type of imagination is the only internal compass we have (2005, p. 393).



If Arendt is correct, then in order to promote political judgment and also ethical judgment, it is absolutely necessary to fully consider what *is*, but always in lucid contrast with a perspective of what *could be*, which, once imagined, may be enhanced by the intervention of action.

And, in this sense, it is not enough, in terms of ethics or politics, to know and understand how that which is real operates, how phenomena behave, or the motivations for others' actions.

It is also indispensable to respond with discontent to what does not take place in line with an imagined "must be" and to maintain the possibility of condemning forms of human events and action that betray the highest expectations and imaginary ideals. Only the imagination of a perfected reality and the expectation of enhanced forms of social relations and more sensitive, convenient forms of associated life will be able to restore the lackluster democracy in which we live, confront defective social and political practices, and suggest perhaps unsuspecting mechanisms for individual and collective transformation.

The distance that prevails between Crespo's and Arendt's postures is, at first glance, only a matter of tone. However, while it is true that both maintain the importance of real public life experience in the formation of civil development, it is also true that between the proposal to educate through merely one's "political realism" and the other's insistence on the indispensable nature of an additional framework that offers distance to enable

criticism, theoretical development and action itself, there are indeed substantial pedagogical differences and very distinct formative procedures and proposals.

The additional framework that Arendt refers to in her discourse is of a magnitude that includes a wide range of possibilities for pedagogical selection, but all of them require the exercise of imagination. For this task it is necessary to seriously dedicate educators' imaginative capacities. Only with the help of schools' imagination will it be possible to foment the imagination of future generations. And this, as stated by John Passmore, is perhaps one of the most difficult tasks, but as educators, we cannot do anything less than make a serious effort in this regard.

To teach in a way [...] to exercise the imagination is extraordinarily difficult [...] but the teacher cannot be fully satisfied with any lesser ambition, at least until he is prepared to be a mere servant of an authority bent on preserving at every point the established order of things, whether that authority be the State, a Church, or, what can be quite authoritarian, a profession. Imaginativeness, disciplined fantasy, lies at the very centre of a free society. For [...] all routines have to be learnt, information acquired, habits formed, capacities developed, we must not allow ourselves [...] an education in which nothing counts except getting pupils to do well what they are told to do, getting them to conform to a pattern. That is the path to despotism (1983, p. 198).



Endnotes

- 1 Editor's note: An example of this is provided by a former Superior Auditor of the Federation, Arturo González de Aragón: "In terms of elections, one of the most worrisome crimes being observed and of which its true dimension is unknown is what is referred to as electoral tourism. It consists of transporting people from another state to the place where elections are being held. According to information provided by the Specialized Attorney's Office for Addressing Electoral Crimes, cases were detected in the 2010 elections in which mass numbers of people from Morelos and San Luis Potosí were transported to Veracruz, with falsified voter IDs, to vote and modify the results. Similar cases have been detected in Chihuahua, the state of Mexico, Hidalgo and Tabasco." (González, 2012)
- 2 Editor's note: Reference is made here to a non-existent virtuous, moral citizen, or to what Fernando Escalante (1999) referred to as imaginary citizens.
- 3 For a broader explanation of this connection, it is recommended that the reader consult the texts by Salmerón (2011).
- 4 In its version in Spanish (Giroux, 2006).
- 5 Editor's note: Jorge Carpizo, who served as UNAM Rector, Federal General Attorney and Interior Minister during the 1990s, stated that "it is necessary to speak of material democracy, in which we have failed...in these years opposition parties have won governorships and mayorships [...] but nothing has changed! It has turned out the same: corruption, impunity, businesses, assistance to friends and family members [...] thus a material change has not taken place—a formal change, yes" (in Aristegui and Trabulsi, 2010, p. 68).

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