PURPOSES OF EDUCATION: FROM SOCIAL VALUES TO POWERFUL KNOWLEDGE

FINALIDADES DA EDUCAÇÃO: DOS VALORES SOCIAIS AO CONHECIMENTO PODEROSO

PROPÓSITOS DE LA EDUCACIÓN: DE LOS VALORES SOCIALES AL CONOCIMIENTO PODEROSO

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this article is to discuss the essential function of school education and its relationship with knowledge, using as a theoretical framework the works of key scholars in the study of school knowledge, including Durkheim (1975), Mannheim and Stewart (1974), Althusser (1983), Bourdieu (2002), Apple (2006), Young (2007), Saviani (1999a, 1999b), and Hutmacher (1992), as well as a documentary analysis of a UNESCO survey (2004) on the profile of Brazilian teachers. The results reveal a significant variation in the roles assigned to schools over time: as a mechanism of socialization, a tool of ideological domination, a transmitter of powerful knowledge, and a facilitator of competence development. The conclusion reached is that school knowledge is not neutral; however, overcoming obstacles and providing a quality, meaningful, and liberating education, which includes sharing values, transmitting relevant knowledge, and developing competencies, is possible. Nevertheless, to achieve these goals, it is necessary to reorganize schools.


Introduction

In 2002, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) conducted a survey to understand the profile of Brazilian primary and secondary school teachers in urban public and private schools. In this context, when asked about the most and least important goals to be achieved through education, teachers highlighted the most relevant: “to develop conscious citizens” (72.2%) and “to foster creativity and critical thinking” (60.5%). In contrast, the educational goals considered less relevant were: “to select the most capable individuals” (66.1%), “to establish behavioral habits” (27.9%), and “to prepare for work” (UNESCO, 2004).

In addition to these aspects, two additional points merit attention. First, few teachers identified knowledge as one of the most important purposes of education. In this regard, “transmitting updated and relevant knowledge” received a modest third place (16.7%), while “providing basic knowledge” ranked only sixth (8.9%) among nine possible options. Furthermore, many teachers considered knowledge, both “updated and relevant” (10.3%) and “basic” (21.4%), as among the less important goals of education (UNESCO, 2004).

The second point to address is the limited importance attributed to moral values and behavioral habits, two aspects traditionally linked to the functions of schools, as noted by Durkheim (1975) and Mannheim and Stewart (1974). In this context, only 3.9% of teachers included “creating behavioral habits” as one of the most important goals, while 27.9% identified it as one of the least important. As for “transmitting moral values,” only 10.8% considered it as more relevant, while 13.1% deemed it as less significant (UNESCO, 2004).

Although, from a certain perspective, these responses reflect the legitimate concern of teachers with valuing citizenship, creativity, and critical thinking, the marginal role assigned to knowledge is troubling, as the highlighted objectives are subjective and not measurable. Moreover, the teachers’ responses seem to overlook Brazil’s notable lag in reading, writing, arithmetic, and all other aspects related to learning.

Given the lack of clarity regarding the importance of knowledge for the comprehensive development of students, unfounded criticisms and systematic attacks on school content have emerged in recent decades. These attacks come from both sides of the political-ideological spectrum and include everything from intellectuals opposing the teaching of grammar in schools to lay influencers, lacking any theoretical basis, who argue that classic authors such as Machado de Assis and Álvares de Azevedo should not be read by adolescents (Barbosa, 2021).
Another consequence has been the proliferation of a genuinely profitable epidemic of pedagogical fads (Nóvoa, 2001), each marketed as a magical solution to the problems of contemporary education quality. Among these fads are blended learning, gamification, design thinking, maker culture, storytelling, peer and team knowledge, STEAM education, and many others. Undoubtedly, all of these play an essential role in the necessary diversification of teaching practices, but they are far from being a panacea for education. No isolated initiative would fulfill this salvatory role, as improving education requires systemic and long-term solutions.

In the context of the underfunded public school system, the situation is even worse, with various didactic confusions and a lack of clarity regarding the importance of what is taught. In this regard, Marin (2014) highlights the problematic trend of increasing restrictions on content, classroom reading, and writing, as well as the teachers’ lack of knowledge about didactic procedures and their implications for learning. This reveals “a didactics of producing inequalities in education across all age groups, the absence of awareness of what is the central activity of this place where children spend most of their lives when they are away from home” (Marin, 2014, p. 15, our translation).

As if these effects were not enough, attention must be drawn to the concrete influence that delegitimizing views on knowledge exert on educational public policies, as evidenced by the recent reform of Secondary Education, which brutally attacked school content. To confirm this assertion, it is enough to note that the reformers did not concern themselves at all with improving reading and writing rates, despite knowing that only 12% of students in this educational level achieve proficiency on the Functional Literacy Index (INAF) (Instituto Paulo Montenegro, 2018). Instead, there was a reduction in the hours allocated to Portuguese, History, Geography, Philosophy, and Sociology to offer, in their place, fundamental subjects such as “What’s Trending?”, “RPG”, “Homemade Brigadeiro”, “World Pets Inc.”, and “Art of Living” (Lima, 2023). In this vein, it is important to emphasize that this authoritarian and exclusionary reform was only possible due to the current “zeitgeist” that condemns school content as useless or elitist, denying its relevance to contemporary students.

In reality, these negative views on school content are not new. In this regard, Michael Young (2007) explains that, in the 1970s and 1980s, left-wing scholars were already pointing out that the primary role of schools in capitalist societies was to subordinate working-class members, women, and other minorities by teaching them to be obedient and manipulable. Bowles and Gintis (1976, apud Apple, 2006), for example, asserted that education not only
allocated individuals to a relatively fixed set of positions in society but also socialized people
to accept the limited roles they occupied as legitimate.

On the other hand, since the 1990s, with the collapse of socialist regimes, neoliberal
ideas have come to dominate the economy, government, and education itself. These ideas
advocate that the market provides the best solutions for enhancing human capital and that
schools should align their outcomes with economic demands, viewing education merely as a
tool to achieve a specific goal: preparing a skilled workforce for employment (Young, 2007).

Given the contradictory pressures at play, it is not surprising that teachers, parents, and
students are confused about the purposes of education, and that this confusion leads to
discouragement, dropout rates, and mismatches. This underscores the need to understand how
these perceptions of the school’s functions have evolved over time, which is the rationale
behind this article. After all, as the Cheshire Cat would say: “If you don’t know where you’re
going, any road will do” (Carroll, 2019, p. 62, our translation). And it seems that the 21st-
century school is, more than ever, caught at a crossroads.

Thus, the primary objective of this research is to understand the essential function of
school education and how knowledge relates to this goal. Our hypothesis is that school
knowledge, although not neutral, is crucial for student development and constitutes an integral
part of teaching, forming a tripod that includes the development of competencies and the
enhancement of literacy.

Finally, the methodology is bibliographic-documentary, involving the analysis of the
aforementioned UNESCO survey and the review of the theoretical framework, which includes
representative names from the major investigations into school knowledge, such as Durkheim
The Role of Schools as Mechanisms of Socialization

According to Apple (2006), one traditional approach to investigating school knowledge focuses on the role of educational institutions as mechanisms for socializing individuals into the shared set of rules, norms, values, and principles of society. In this field, the contributions of Durkheim, Mannheim, and Stewart are particularly noteworthy.

David Émile Durkheim, the French sociologist often regarded as the father of sociology, defined education as “the action exerted by adult generations upon those who are not yet prepared for social life,” aiming for the methodical socialization of new generations. This entails awakening and developing certain physical, moral, and intellectual states demanded by the political community and the environment in which the child lives (Durkheim, 1975, p. 41, our translation).

Durkheim argued that each individual consists of two aspects: the individual self, composed of personal mental states and life experiences, and the social self, formed by the system of ideas, feelings, and habits that express the different groups to which one belongs. This includes religious beliefs, moral practices, national traditions, and collective opinions. The goal of education, according to Durkheim, is to develop this social self, thereby transforming the “selfish and asocial” human being into one capable of moral and social life (Durkheim, 1975, p. 43, our translation).

For Durkheim (1975), this function of schools is crucial for the very existence of society. The absence of pedagogical action in a social sense could potentially dismantle it, dividing it into a fragmented and incoherent multitude of private interests in constant conflict. Education ensures a sufficient community of ideas and feelings among citizens, a condition essential for the survival of any society and for the production, preservation, and transmission of accumulated human wisdom.

Furthermore, French sociologists viewed pedagogical diversity and the division of labor as natural, considering both necessary for the maintenance of society. According to Durkheim, there is no universal education adapted to all of humankind, just as there is no society where multiple pedagogical systems do not operate simultaneously to develop specific skills, special knowledge, and the practices and manners of various existing professions (Durkheim, 1975).

In summary, Durkheim (1975) views the purpose of education as shaping each individual into the citizen that society requires, ensuring the essential homogeneity needed for social consensus through the inculcation of values, beliefs, and principles. In other words:
There is no people, in fact, in which there does not exist a certain number of ideas, feelings, and practices that education must instill in all children, regardless of the category to which they belong. This common education is generally regarded as the true education. It alone seems to fully deserve this name [...]. Each type of people has its type of education, which can serve to define it, as much as its moral, political, and religious organization. It is one of the elements of its physiognomy (Durkheim, 1975, p. 39, our translation).

Mannheim and Stewart, in turn, share many of Durkheim’s ideas, recognizing that “we are educated by the community and in its interest” (Mannheim; Stewart, 1974, p. 41, our translation), in the name of prevailing standards and ideas within society. In this context, the primary educational agent is the community, and education should be considered unified and indivisible, always connecting formal instruction with social education.

In this vein, the scholars understand that education arises from a social situation, that is, it emerges from the need for people to live together within each community, in order to allow them to coexist in the best possible way. Thus, educating is about adapting the individual to the demands of the society to which they belong, implicitly acknowledging the deliberate and widespread influences produced by the community itself (Mannheim; Stewart, 1974).

Both also reject the idea of a substantially uniform education for all, arguing that, since natural abilities and levels of understanding differ, the standard of education will also differ. They add that the variety of careers and interests necessitates varied educational provisions. Therefore, a democratic education accessible to all would not imply identical education for everyone (Mannheim; Stewart, 1974).

Finally, the authors, following Durkheim’s example, highlight the historical character of educational goals, demonstrating that each society, at a given time, has its educational purposes and values, shaped by the needs dictated by the era and circumstances. To substantiate this point, they provide various examples, such as the Greek ideals of the soldier, the bard, and the politician; the Roman ideal of the loyal and brave man; the Christian ideal of holiness, meekness, and obedience to God; the courteous and chivalrous ideal of the English nobleman; and the collective ideal of the Soviet man, characterized by strict personal discipline and self-submersion in the interests of others (Mannheim; Stewart, 1974).

In doing so, Mannheim and Stewart emphasize two essential points. First, current attitudes, values, and principles have historical antecedents and therefore need to be interpreted historically; second, educational goals change over time, and in a democratic society, this fluidity is a prerequisite that serves the interests of different groups and the maintenance of democracy itself. As the authors clarify:
To have a purpose or goal is to choose between values and persist in that choice. This is true whether applied to politics or education. The large-scale ideal purposes [...] are influenced by the context of the historical period. What can be achieved through education, both in terms of knowledge and the type of character it should help produce, was necessarily different in medieval England than today. The achievement of an integrated system of values at any time in history can only be attained through choices between competing values (Mannheim; Stewart, 1974, p. 68, our translation).

And how is the issue of knowledge specifically addressed by this line of thought? Durkheim clarifies that scientific culture is indispensable at the current stage of human evolution but makes it clear that “man did not come to know the thirst for knowledge until society awakened it” (1975, p. 44) and society only “awakened it when it felt it necessary to do so” (1975, p. 44). Furthermore, it is this same society that ensures the conditions for the accumulation and revision, generation after generation, of human wisdom, enabling man to “rise above the animal and himself” (1975, p. 46, our translation).

Thus, at the core of it all lies social life, as education fulfills social needs, and these needs either demand or do not require a solid intellectual culture and advanced scientific knowledge. According to the author, evidence of this is that rudimentary societies treat knowledge and curiosity with indifference or, at worst, as something dangerous. Therefore, there is no instinctive appetite for science; rather, it is a consequence of the demands created by communal life (Durkheim, 1975).

Mannheim and Stewart (1974), in turn, oppose the idea of turning education into vocational training or mere adjustment to an industrial order, warning against the danger of limiting educational work to contemporary demands, as this could destroy its sense of heritage, history, and tradition. In other words, they advocate for the humanistic value of curricular knowledge, which should not be degraded by new educational trends. For these scholars, schools need to prioritize the breadth of curricula, words, mathematical symbols, scientific concepts, historical and geographical knowledge, while acknowledging that it is entirely possible to teach human values through the study of science.

Thus, it seems that Mannheim and Stewart (1974) aim to align school content with human values, advocating for a social education that promotes the "development of the student's versatile approach" (1974, p. 54, our translation), combining intellectual progress with the enhancement of human understanding, instruction and learning with the development of living. In their words, education should represent the "richest possible contact between people and the
recognition of the relationships between people and the society in which they grew up” (1974, p. 54, our translation).

Role of Schools as Mechanisms of Reproduction

The perspective that the primary purpose of schools is the inculcation of values, beliefs, and principles has been widely criticized since the latter half of the 20th century, particularly by scholars from the critical-reproduction tradition. These critics argue that this view overlooks the political and economic context of social values, treating them as given, and ignores the latent functions of the form and content of the school curriculum (Apple, 2006).

One of the principal exponents of this thought is the Franco-Algerian philosopher Louis Althusser. He asserted that every social formation, in order to exist, must both produce and reproduce the conditions of its production, that is, it must reproduce the existing productive forces and relations of production (Althusser, 1983). In this context, the school, as one of the ideological apparatuses of the State, plays a crucial role: the reproduction of the qualification of the workforce.

In this sense, Althusser argues that the school teaches certain skills, such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, as well as elements of scientific and literary culture, the depth of which varies according to the student's social class. However, more than that, the school teaches the rules of good behavior:

[...] the conventions that must be observed by every agent in the division of labor according to the position they are "destined" to occupy; the rules of morality and civic and professional consciousness, which are, in reality, rules of respect for the social-technical division of labor and, ultimately, rules of the order established by class domination (Althusser, 1983, p. 58, our translation).

Thus, the reproduction of the workforce requires, in addition to the aforementioned reproduction of qualification, a reproduction of its submission to the norms of the existing order. That is, reproduction of the workers' subjection to the dominant ideology and a reproduction of the capacity for perfect mastery of the dominant ideology by the agents of exploitation and repression, who must ensure the predominance of the dominant social class (Althusser, 1983).

Therefore, schools, like the Church, the Army, and other state institutions, teach know-how but always in a way that ensures obedience to the dominant ideology. This ensures that all agents involved in production, exploitation, and repression remain imbued with this ideology,
so that they can perform their pre-assigned tasks obediently. Ultimately, it is a necessary and vital ideological submission (Althusser, 1983).

How Do Educational Institutions Promote These Ideals According to Althusser (1983), schools instill in their students, from early childhood education onwards, both the knowledge contained within the dominant ideology—such as arithmetic and literature—and the dominant ideology itself in its pure form—such as morality, civic education, and philosophy. The school is tasked with distributing the ideology appropriate to each social group's role in the class society.

At this point, one can identify the principal divergence between the two schools of thought examined thus far. While Durkheim (1975) views the transmission of values and principles as essential to the very existence of society, preserving the cohesion of the social fabric, Althusser considers that the school carries out a "mass inculcation of the dominant class ideology" (1983, p. 80, our translation), having replaced the Church as the primary Ideological Apparatus of the State.

Althusser also asserts that this mechanism of domination operates so naturally that most students, parents, and teachers are scarcely aware of it, since it is universally accepted that the school is neutral, devoid of ideology, and solely concerned with the welfare and the teaching-learning process of its students. Another aggravating factor, according to the author, is that no other institution has such a captive and innocent audience, required to attend from a very young age for more than a decade (Althusser, 1983).

In addition to Althusser, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (2002) is a prominent figure in the critical-reproductionist line of thought, offering essential concepts for reflecting on educational systems, such as ethos, a system of implicit and deeply internalized values, and cultural capital. The latter can exist in three forms: embodied, which becomes an integral part of the individual and is inculcated throughout the socialization process; objectified, which is materially transferable and includes cultural goods such as books, paintings, and sculptures; and institutionalized, which corresponds to institutional recognition through academic or educational qualifications.

In this reasoning, When entering school, children from working-class backgrounds are already at a significant disadvantage compared to those from economically privileged families. The latter, from a very young age, receive a favorable attitude toward school, as well as a much broader cultural capital that is closely connected to the school curriculum. Thus, the privileged
child inherits from their family a culture and a way of engaging with that culture, which makes their relationship with school knowledge simpler and more organic (Bourdieu, 2002).

In this logic, by failing to bridge the gap between the cultural capital of more and less privileged classes, educational institutions, while appearing democratic, actually perpetuate the reproduction of power structures, favoring some over others. Whereas in the past, schools excluded students at the entrance due to a lack of places for everyone, today, exclusion occurs in a more insidious manner, conducted in a subtle, gradual, and almost imperceptible way. As the authors highlight, “new beneficiaries gradually understood that merely having access to secondary education was not enough to succeed in it, or succeeding in secondary education was not enough to access the social positions that could be attained with educational certificates” (Bourdieu; Champagne, 2002, p. 220, our translation).

Furthermore, the school reinforces the “ideology of talent,” which naturalizes inequalities:

In addition to allowing the elite to justify their status, the “ideology of talent,” a key component of the educational system and the social system, helps to confine members of disadvantaged classes to the destiny assigned to them by society. It leads them to perceive as natural shortcomings what is merely a consequence of an inferior condition, and persuades them that their social destiny (increasingly closely linked to their educational fate as society becomes more rationalized) is due to their individual nature and lack of talent. The individual success of a few individuals who escape the collective fate lends an appearance of legitimacy to educational selection and gives credibility to the myth of the liberating school among those very individuals it has excluded, leading them to believe that success is simply a matter of hard work and talent (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 59, our translation).

The following section will discuss various authors who each, in their own way, contribute to this important debate.

The Critical Pedagogy of Michael Apple

In his work *Ideology and Curriculum* (2006), American scholar Michael Apple clarifies that there is a growing recognition that the culture preserved and disseminated by schools is not neutral. He argues that educational institutions in advanced industrial societies may serve the interests of certain classes, particularly the dominant ones, more than the interests of subordinate classes. This leads to the crucial question: what is actually taught in schools? What are the manifest and latent functions of this taught knowledge? How do the principles of
selection and organization of knowledge contribute to the cultural and economic reproduction of class relations?

Apple explains that ideological and economic stability depends, in part, on the internalization in each individual's mind of the common-sense principles and rules that govern the existing social order. Schools contribute to this state of inequality by being organized in a way that distributes different types of knowledge unevenly. Moreover, schools teach a hidden curriculum aimed at maintaining the ideological hegemony of the most powerful classes (Apple, 2006).

Regarding the formal curriculum, Apple elaborates that schools value and seek to maximize high-status or technical knowledge, which is connected to the structure of corporate economies and is necessary for the effective maintenance of the economic apparatus and the enhancement of production. This knowledge is, by definition, scarce, meaning that not all students will be able to acquire it. The exclusion of a significant portion of students is part of the capitalist logic, and an effective school is not one where all students learn, but rather one that continuously and effectively produces technical knowledge. Thus, the educational institution itself contributes to the failure of its students, also playing a role in the stratification and selection of individuals based on presumed academic criteria (Apple, 2006).

Concerning the hidden curriculum, it is necessary, first and foremost, to define it. For this purpose, we will adopt the elucidative conceptualization provided by Walo Hutmacher:

It encompasses everything that students learn through their school experience (due to the progressive mastery of the formal curriculum, but also simply by attending school, engaging in student activities, and living within a mass social organization, an institutional and relational fabric that assigns them a place, allowing them a range of interactions and experiences with peers and teachers, etc.). For each student, attending school every day for years constitutes, in itself, a multitude of learning opportunities and self-construction that are not part of any formal program. [...] This set of osmotic learnings results more from the actions and experiences of the students than from formal schooling (Hutmacher, 1992, p. 49, our translation).

From this perspective, the forms of organization and relationships prevalent in schools both shape and distort students, conveying, through the very school routine, behavioral rules, beliefs, and principles. The body of knowledge itself, what is included and what is excluded, what is considered essential and what is not, also serves an ideological purpose. In the words of Michael Apple, the school functions, at least in one essential aspect: to impose the values and meanings of the dominant classes (Apple, 2006).
Michael Apple (2006) emphasizes that the hidden curriculum affects all age groups throughout the entire educational trajectory. From the first day of preschool, socialization includes learning norms and definitions of social interactions. Children are immediately introduced to the social dimension of the work world, where obedience, enthusiasm, adaptability, and perseverance are valued more than academic competence, skill, and excellence. The continuous and natural acceptance of authority and meanings, of working and playing, of normality and deviation, are the most important lessons, preparing them for the subsequent school years and for adulthood. There is little room for creativity, autonomy, and critical thinking.

Even in the face of the intense influence of elites over both the formal and hidden curriculum, Apple (2006) glimpses possibilities for overcoming these challenges. One such possibility is to change the perception of conflict, which is often presented as something negative and harmful to social peace. In this sense, he argues that conflict can be a legitimate means of seeking resources in an unequal society. He suggests that educational programs could be established to help students develop positive perspectives on dissent and change, equipping them to navigate the complex and often repressive political realities and power dynamics of society.

The scholar also argues that science, as presented in schools, contributes to students learning from an unrealistic and conservative perspective on the utility of conflict. He observes that a false idea of consensus is promoted in science, which does not emphasize disagreements in terms of methodology, goals, and other elements and overlooks the schools of thought and the historical and ongoing disputes between conflicting theories. For instance, it is never taught that science would not progress without disagreement and controversy, leading students to internalize a view with no potential to question the legitimacy of the assumptions governing their lives (Apple, 2006).

Social studies, in turn, propagate a false notion of society as a fundamentally cooperative system, in which conflict is not seen as an essential characteristic. A social reality is depicted that accepts harmonious cooperation as normal and the best way of living. There is an attempt to legitimize the existing order, with a strong tendency towards conformity, reflecting a conservative perspective that views internal conflict and dissent in society as unethical to the smooth functioning of the social order (Apple, 2006).

Therefore, according to Michael Apple (2006), schools could transcend their historical role as reproducers of the prevailing order, provided they allow students to understand conflict
as a fundamental and often beneficial dimension of society. This includes a special focus on the hidden curriculum, which should offer a greater number of everyday learnings related to political socialization, avoiding the inculcation of passive attitudes such as obedience and conformity. Instead, schools should value leadership and social proactivity.

The Value of Powerful Knowledge

Another significant contribution comes from British sociologist and politician Michael Young, who acknowledges that “those in positions of power will attempt to define what is accepted as knowledge, the extent to which any knowledge is accessible to different groups, and the accepted relationships between different areas of knowledge and between those who have access to them and make them available” (1977, apud Apple, 2006, our translation). However, in his text “Para que Servem as Escolas” (2007), he argues that it is possible to distinguish between knowledge defined by those in power and powerful knowledge, with the role of educational institutions being to enable young people to acquire the latter.

In this context, Young (2007) asserts that powerful knowledge, also referred to as high-status or specialized knowledge, is that which can provide reliable explanations or new ways of thinking about the world. It is theoretical or context-independent knowledge developed to offer generalizations and seek universality, serving as a basis for making judgments. This type of knowledge is characteristic, though not exclusive, of the sciences.

To effectively promote social equality, schools must consider the foundation of the curriculum and evaluate whether it truly acts as a means for students to acquire powerful knowledge. Young (2007) emphasizes that for children from working-class backgrounds, active participation in school may be their only opportunity to access this knowledge, enabling them to advance intellectually beyond their local and particular circumstances.

Furthermore, Young (2007) challenges criticisms directed at the school’s role as a transmitter of knowledge in various specific areas. He acknowledges that criticism of the mechanical, passive, and unidirectional learning model often associated with the idea of transmission is legitimate. However, he argues that such criticisms overlook the fact that schooling, as a disseminator of knowledge, explicitly presupposes the active involvement of students in the teaching-learning process. Thus, Young clarifies that the school is fundamentally

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a cultural or knowledge transmission agent, which is only possible with the effective participation of students.

To ensure the learning of powerful knowledge, Young (2007) suggests that schools, teachers, researchers, and educational policymakers must, among other measures, maintain stable conditions for acquiring this knowledge, resist political and economic pressures that could lead to curricular losses, and rethink both the relationships between powerful knowledge and disciplinary divisions and the relationships between schools and knowledge-producing communities, whether they are professional, academic, or local.

**Contributions of Historical-Critical Pedagogy**

According to Brazilian professor Demerval Saviani, Historical-Critical Pedagogy is the “commitment to understanding educational issues based on objective historical development” (1999a, p. 76), with a conceptual framework rooted in historical materialism, which involves understanding history through the determination of the material conditions of human existence. Throughout the 20th century, Historical-Critical Pedagogy, particularly as articulated by Saviani, diverged from both the critical-reproductive conception of education and the ideas of the New School movement.

As previously noted, critical-reproductive theorists such as Althusser and Bourdieu criticized schools for their role in reproducing prevailing production and social relations, asserting that, in a capitalist society, education would inevitably reproduce the interests of capital. According to Saviani (1999a), this perspective lacked a pedagogical proposal and opposed all those presented, failing to offer an alternative for educators concerned with promoting an education aligned with the interests of the majority.

Saviani disagrees with this fatalistic position, criticizing its non-dialectical and ahistorical nature for treating capitalist society, divided into classes, as something impervious to transformation. He argues that this same society contains internal contradictions and dynamic elements whose development leads to transformation and eventual overcoming. In this context, education is also shaped by the internal contradictions of capitalism and can be more than a mere element of reproduction; it can foster the tendency towards societal transformation. In other words, “education is indeed determined by society, but this determination is relative and operates through reciprocal action, meaning that what is determined also reacts upon the determinant” (1999a, p. 80, our translation).
Given this, Saviani (1999a) contends that it is possible to articulate a pedagogical proposal committed to societal transformation, which contrasts with current trends of devaluation and marginalization of schools, a reflection of the contradictory nature of capitalist society, where the dominant classes have little interest in promoting widespread education for the population.

The professor also criticizes the ideals of the New School movement, which accused traditional methods of being pre-scientific, dogmatic, and medieval, while viewing education as a process of inquiry and shifting the focus from educational goals and content to pedagogical methods and techniques. Saviani (1999b) demonstrates that the traditional method is indeed scientific, though this does not imply it is without issues, that teaching is not the same as research, and that the outcome of the New School propositions was, in practice, an exacerbation of educational inequalities and a dilution of education for the lower classes.

Saviani (1999b) counters these conceptions by advocating for the enhancement of education for the lower classes, which implies a priority on content. According to him, mastery of culture is an essential element for political participation by the lower classes. Without a grasp of cultural content, these groups will be unable to assert their interests and will remain vulnerable to the dominance of others. Therefore, a revolutionary pedagogy entails a focus on content.

But which contents are truly relevant in this context? For the aforementioned Brazilian scholars, these are the classic elements of the school curriculum, such as mathematics, natural sciences, history, geography, and the classics of literature. In this framework, "classic" refers to content that has withstood the test of time and whose validity extends beyond the period in which it was proposed. Thus, the essence of education is to teach timeless, socially essential knowledge, developed understandings, and scientific content. This education must never be relegated to a secondary status, as doing so would turn education into a sham and further marginalize socially disadvantaged groups (Saviani, 1999b).

Everyone should have access to this knowledge under equal real conditions, in well-functioning schools, through effective teaching methods that stimulate student activity and initiative without negating the teacher's role. There should be a dialogue between students and teachers, as well as with historically accumulated culture, while maintaining discipline, logical systematization of knowledge, and the connection between education and society, viewing both teachers and students as social agents and using social practice as both a starting and ending point (Saviani, 1999b).
The Balance Between School Knowledge and Skills

At the end of the 20th century, in response to the unsatisfactory outcomes presented by many educational systems and the significant changes occurring in society, such as globalization, accelerated digitalization, and the employment crisis, educational demands also evolved. Maria do Céu Roldão (2007, p. 95, our translation) notes that the “understanding of teaching as synonymous with transmitting knowledge ceased to be socially useful [...] in an era of expanded access to information and the structuring of societies around knowledge as a global capital.”

In line with these new demands, Brazil, following the example of other countries, made a clear choice, as embodied in legislation such as the National Curriculum Parameters (PCNs). Rather than a decontextualized, compartmentalized education based on the accumulation of information, the focus shifted to the acquisition of basic knowledge, general education, and the development of competencies (Brasil, 2000). The National Common Curricular Base (BNCC) specifies that, throughout Basic Education, essential learnings should promote the development of ten general competencies, in addition to specific competencies for components and areas, defining competency as “the mobilization of knowledge (concepts and procedures), skills (practical, cognitive, and socio-emotional), attitudes, and values to address complex demands of everyday life, full citizenship, and the world of work” (Brasil, 2018, p. 8, our translation).

In this context, Walo Hutmacher (1992) clarifies that the recent changes in the educational field aim for quality education for all and reflect the recognition that the limit of additive logic and the consequent encyclopedic inflation of teaching subjects has been reached. The author emphasizes that it is not a matter of abandoning the acquisition of knowledge by students but of understanding that schools should, in addition to transmitting knowledge and providing operational mastery of various languages and discourses, encourage the development of a range of dispositions and attitudes, enabling students to learn how to learn, research, analyze, conclude, argue, cooperate, invent, among other skills.

Thus, one of the major challenges of education in the 21st century has been set: to develop competencies without diminishing the value of school knowledge, recognizing that both are necessary for the comprehensive formation of students.

Hutmacher (1992) highlights the magnitude of this challenge by acknowledging that “no one knows exactly how competencies are developed” (1992, p. 48, our translation). However, there are some agreements: competencies are largely learned within families, which may exacerbate social inequality; they are not acquired by all students; they are not assimilated...
through systematic and organized training in schools; and their acquisition depends primarily on how students are guided and encouraged to learn.

Therefore, it is not a matter of planning specific lessons on, for example, cooperation or communication, as these skills are not acquired merely through courses or lectures. For the development of these and other competencies, students need to practice them in meaningful situations, which only happens if the school provides a wide range of learning opportunities in everyday life. To achieve this, in addition to renewing pedagogical practices, it is necessary to pay attention to the hidden curriculum, the organization of time, work, knowledge, groupings, and other aspects that constitute the school's way of life (Hutmacher, 1992).

Hutmacher (1992) also emphasizes that students learn through their school experience, and that daily attendance at school offers a multitude of learning opportunities not covered by any formal curriculum. The author states that “it is at this level that students build competencies and attitudes towards themselves and others, as well as towards knowledge and learning” (1992, p. 49, our translation). Therefore, it is crucial to invest in a school whose modes of organization, functioning, and interaction offer students a range of situations and activities that foster the development of desired competencies.

The obstacles are, undoubtedly, considerable. This is due to the invisibility of the hidden curriculum, which is deeply internalized and thus almost immune to critique and reflection, the individualistic culture present in schools, the lack of opportunities for dialogue and sharing, and the dominant common-sense representations in schools that organize and restrict the institutional framework of teaching practice (Hutmacher, 1992).

The path to change, as emphasized by the author, will not be paved individually or by decree, but must be built collaboratively, breaking the usual isolation of teaching practices to encourage investigation, the exchange of ideas, observation, comparisons, experimentation, and the right to make mistakes. It is a shared endeavor aimed at the “reorganization of collective school life, seeking to reconcile rigor, efficiency, and conviviality” (Hutmacher, 1992, p. 75, our translation).

**Final considerations**

At the beginning of the article, the question posed by the Cheshire Cat to Alice was mentioned, reflecting on the situation of schools in the 21st century. These institutions seem to be at a crossroads, going in circles and making little progress, unsure of which path to take and pressured by a range of demands, ideologies, and educational trends. In an era marked by
radicalism and instability, this indecision can be fatal, subjecting schools to momentary pressures and keeping them trailing behind the interests of the moment.

It is important to highlight that no serious scholar questions that schools reproduce the interests, values, beliefs, and principles of economic elites, whether in their formal curriculum or hidden curriculum. However, it is believed, as many of the authors analyzed suggest, that it is possible to overcome the obstacles and offer all students quality, liberating education that makes a difference in their lives, which will only happen with a minimum social consensus and a focus on powerful, classical, or high-status knowledge.

According to the conception defended here, it is crucial that schools share fundamental values and principles to avoid a constant war of everyone against everyone. In educational institutions, it is urgent to reach some consensus on fundamental values, such as respect for democracy and human rights, environmental protection, and the appreciation of knowledge. Otherwise, the social fabric and cultural heritage may disintegrate. Although the logic of transversal themes encompasses these values, it is essential that they go beyond mere discourse and integrate into the practices of all educational agents, aiming at the inclusion of minorities and the promotion of equal learning rights for all.

Moreover, there is a shared concern, as expressed by some authors, about the risk of limiting educational work solely to contemporary demands, which could compromise the sense of heritage and tradition in curricular content. In the current scenario, it is essential to defend the humanistic value of school knowledge, to prevent it from being undermined by new educational trends that replace content with form, thereby diminishing the importance of knowledge and further widening the gap between rich and poor. Despite the need to diversify teaching practices, this need should not overshadow the central importance of knowledge itself, which must remain at the core of pedagogical concerns.

Therefore, it is necessary to be attentive to the trend of simplifying education aimed at the lower social strata, so as not to exacerbate inequality and exclusion further. Prioritizing robust, relevant, and meaningful content is essential, as mastery of culture is an indispensable tool for political participation and for the underprivileged to fight for their rights. Despite intense pressures on education, it is crucial that each teacher maintains this conviction: abandoning the transmission of knowledge condemns the school to irrelevance and consigns students to social, economic, and intellectual stagnation.

Finally, education must always correspond to the needs of a given society at a particular time, without ignoring contemporary demands. Therefore, it is extremely important to also
reflect on the development of competencies. As evidenced throughout the text, developing competencies goes far beyond curricular changes or the promotion of specific classes, requiring special attention to school organization forms, the hidden curriculum, to provide as many everyday learning opportunities as possible, aimed at political socialization, autonomy, creativity, and student participation in the community in which they live.

Thus, the school faces a significant challenge: it needs to reorganize to promote more dialogue, interaction, participation, and autonomy, without losing sight of the need to provide full literacy, share values that enable societal coexistence, and transmit relevant and meaningful knowledge. This knowledge should enable students to understand the world they live in and to take a critical and reflective stance on contemporary and urgent issues, such as the crisis of democracies, social injustices, and global warming. In this context, it is even more critical to have clarity about the purposes of educational institutions and to navigate the winding paths of knowledge with fewer stumbles in this tumultuous and surprising 21st century.

REFERENCES


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