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Learning to live together and to build a better world at school; Exploring the representations of pupils in a new didactic approach

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Introduction

UNESCO's international conference on Education in the 21st Century, with Jacques Delors as its president, set out four main targets for the education of the future. These were: (1) learning for knowing, (2) learning for doing, (3) learning for being and (4) learning for living together. The last of these targets is not new: in 1925 the need for the creation of a structure servicing the approachability and communication between people was the reason for the establishment of the International Office of Education. However, In fact, the 20th century did not meet that challenge and so the target remains timely.

In a global world that disputes the role of the nation-state, how can we plan an education capable of teaching us to live together harmoniously? How do we understand its role in building an educational community, which will be founded upon the conscience of the citizens and the forms of social coexistence and cohabitation (Scott, 1998)? This is a challenge that our schools needs to meet; more so as the school's role, as seen by society, is not only to transfer knowledge but also to find solutions to the problems and the various kinds of malfunction which are created within society¹. Learning to live together means becoming able to limit the conflicts and the misunderstandings between generations, between cultures, between rich and poor. This is a great responsibility for the school. Is it capable of rising to the challenge? Does it have the means to inspire indulgence, tolerance and respect towards different cultures? The increase of conflicts around the world, within countries and inside cities reveals that there is an urgent need for action. This paper asks whether the school is, in fact, the ideal place for people to learn to live together, and if so, how can it achieve the task?

Any attempt to give simple, definite and universal answers to these questions would be bot laborious and essentially misleading. It seems possible, however, to focus on some points of concern which revolve around the following three proposals.

The proposals: school is inevitably paradoxical

School is a utopia: it aims at creating an ideal world

The idea of a public school, a school for everyone, was first expressed by Descartes during the 17th century and was later outlined in its specifics by the French Revolution, which founded Public Education and made it a state function. This form of schooling was progressively moulded during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The idea of the public school was partly generated against the will of families, for which children often represented an important source of income, although before the period of compulsory schooling families were the providers of other, non-institutional, forms of education. This type of education school fulfilled, as it still does, the needs of the industrial society for

¹ This role was formally committed to school by the writings and decisions of the European Union and it took hypostasis by certain actions.

(1) moral socialisation through learning to live in a community; and (2) technological and mental socialisation, through the acquisition of knowledge and skills.

The school aims to build a new society, which will be modern as well as humanistic, a society that will allow for progress and tolerance. It represents a utopia within the positive meaning of the word, envisaging an ideal, perfect world. This form and this perception of education are consequences of modernism. Education within school is a voluntary and political action, which is based on a humane attitude, is inherited by the Lumières. This utopian view of the school remains widely acceptable, and it encourages and strengthens the effort of educators who believe that they can change people and through them the world.

School is a chimera: it aims at an unattainable goal

School is also a utopia within the negative meaning of the word, a hopeless enterprise because its essential nature is full of serious contradictions which conscience cannot tolerate. Some of these are:

- The school classroom is based upon the theoretical principle of equality, which contradicts the antagonism that is introduced by grade structure and assessment.
- The school maintains that it introduces pupils to a society in which they can learn to live together, but how can this be reconciled with the situation in the real world which is transferred within the school classroom by stereotypes, causing students to be in conflict with each other because of their cultural differences?

The school is also externally contradictory because:

- There is a gulf between arguments in favour of the ideal and the real world.
- The idea of making an ideal society with global and universal acceptance and recognition conflicts with the multiplicity and variety of special cases in the outside world.

Children have their own social identity, partly formed because they live in the real world. Consequently, there is a great distance between the ideal world of school and its representations of reality, between the arguments in favour of a global community and the personal identity of individuals.

For example, there are other means of attaining knowledge than the 'formal' subjects of history and geography taught in school, which are especially prolific and contribute to the creation of representations. One is narration within the family environment, deriving from a deep collective memory full of mental representations and that is very close to myth. There are also the every day experiences provided by the social life of the individual. The distance between intentions and fact is possibly one of the causes of serious tension in modern education. Conflicts become too sharp to be tolerated when the outside world and the school world distance themselves and when the usages of the one lies at the opposite end to the rules of the other.

School is a paradox: it excludes in order to integrate

School is not the ideal place to learn how to live together because paradoxically it cuts off children from the real world in order to offer them a perfect substitute for it. School is a narrow space social structure which isolates a social group (students) in order to teach

them the rules of their society and the 'tools' to learn about the world. School appears to be a protected 'state' - with the platonic meaning of the term - at the service of democracy and humanism.

Children are being cut off from social life in order to become part of a group in a small space, which is set off from the world, has its own rules and a mission to place children among the adult society. The paradox needs to be underlined: school is a space-social structure which isolates in order to integrate.

However, children are not *tabulae rasa*. They have their own social identity, which is partly constructed at school and partly in the world where they live in. It is important to remember that in addition to formal schooling there is informal, non-institutional learning which teaches children about the world and its rules and develops the skills to understand it. This is provided by family, friends, the neighbourhood, the church, cinema, television, and the press. They all offer children keys to understand and interpret the world. It is not at all certain that the world and society, as they are structured, are the as the ideal world of school. The attempt to make them so becomes impossible if the outside world and the school world diverge, the rules of the one contradicting those of the other.

School for learning to live together

Learning to live together is the challenge of the twenty-first century and school represents one of the means of meeting this challenge, even though it might be utopian, paradoxical and chimerical. In spite of its weaknesses, we accept that school has the power to shape people's minds and to change the world. Is the school capable of pre-empting social developments by suggesting representations of a community in which students can learn to live together; in spite of the fact that students have very different representations, formed in the outside world and in effect contradictory to social life as the school presents it?

To begin with, we must understand that school is the place where knowledge and skills are developed. Some school subjects, such as history and geography, have a very important role in the attempt to guide and strengthen national or social identity, integration into broader geographical terrain, the imparting of moral and political values, getting to know and acknowledge fellow humans. However, it is not enough to disseminate a culture that is based upon the scientific way of thinking, which classifies the industrial world. Moreover, the appeal to logic and justice is not enough. That is because our perception of others and the image we have of them are based on the social representations that were formed outside the school environment. One of the aims of education is to make children understand the intimate family environment as a structure, which is full of symbols and subjectivity. The role of teaching is to create scientifically the representations that people have about their own space and the world. Learning to live together needs to (again) become the subject of a designing society which has school as its 'vehicle' and which will be founded on new knowledge.

Nevertheless we must take into account that the school's ability to surpass the structural and cultural antinomies and, in effect its ability to integrate the contradictions of the world, lies more in theory than in practice. Therefore, the school should be open to the community, but at the same time it 'must consider itself as a political community where the conflicts and the negotiations will have a place and will be recognised for their role.

This community will aim at the creation of a school deontology through a political code of behaviour' (Dubet, 1991).

How can we act?

Introducing the social antinomies in school in order to confront them

We must stress here that the more education becomes harmonised with a social plan and schedule, the more it is being legitimated. The construction of the nation, the consolidation of the state and the understanding of the natural environment were some of the aims of teaching in the twentieth century. However, as globalisation overturns the underlying structures, as well as many geographical facts, the school must reorient itself in order to give meaning to people's lives, since our everyday existence is unfolding at both a topical and a global level.

School is at the crossroads of these changes of society. Social changes, the development of family structures, cultural peculiarities and professional mobility are all encountered at school and they compose the mosaic of student life in every classroom. It is no longer possible to ignore the wealth and the contradictions of this differentiation and to act as if they did not exist.

Students are different from each other and the school must take these differences under consideration in order to create an education based on the ideals of democracy and which recognises and accepts people's rights. The school becomes the place for the inter-mediation between the complications and the contradictions of the world, the need and the desire to build a better world in which we live together, and the doubts and the beliefs of the students.

Creating a place for dialogue

Teaching political behaviour and learning how to live with other people cannot be limited to theoretical analyses. One has to work with the students by examining cases and by encouraging them to resolve crises through dialogue. The experience of countries tearing each other apart contributes at this point in a very suitable way.

Since 1992, in Northern Ireland 'Education for Mutual Understanding' (EMU), is included in the curricula of those schools that have a contract with the State. EMU aims to the development of self-respect, respect for others and the improvement of the relationship between people with different cultures. This presupposes the acceptance of someone else's difference, irrespectively of whether that difference is cultural, political, of gender or racial and the desire of people to live together. It is also about teaching children edifying ways of managing crisis. For that reason teachers have to invent imaginary scenarios of teaching, which are referring to the relationship between Protestants and Catholics and they end in a mutual understanding (André, 2001).

This role play is particularly sensitive and delicate and demands exhaustive preparation on the part of the teachers in addition to careful handling of the situations that are created. The results, however, meet our expectations, as one student admitted: 'I am very pleased that I was able to discuss all these things in the classroom, because they are happening around us but no-one is trying to explain them to us' (CCEA, 1997: 36). What is even more interesting is that besides resolving crises these role play games destabilise

representations by destroying the internal coherence of those subjective structures of reality. When adopting a different point of view one realises that other people too are restricted by their own subjective representations.

The educational community and teaching that starts from the bottom

In order to learn how to live together, students need to understand the complications of society's problems, which they encounter in a detached and incomplete way in their everyday life. It is necessary to establish an educational continuity between school, the community and society. For instance, when teaching about the city phenomenon in geography, the school approaches the city's function, landscapes and networks on a theoretical basis. However, the city is for students an emotionally charged place, full of representations. It is for young people something familiar full of those little corners that mean something. It is also a place for entertainment: all of this differs considerably from the geographer's approach which usually analyses buildings and their functions. It is a mistake to neglect or reject as poor in content, the city's space representation, which refers mostly to action and with which young people can identify. Every approach to the city phenomenon should have as its starting point a connection with the experiences of the students. We need to enrich these representations further, while being careful not to cause students to withdraw in indifference and oblivion.

We therefore need to reverse the order of much current teaching and to begin with students' representations of space, to focus on their experiences, to engage them in the teaching process and to show the connections of this geography from the bottom with the theory of geography from the top (André, 1998). This is a chance to build bridges between the community and school. The analysis of the city planning, the elaboration of a design for town or neighbourhood planning in the classroom and afterwards its comparison with the choices of the City Administration Office, the discussion with an expert, makes geography (and every other subject that we approach in this way) digress from the books and become a practice. It also places the community within the educational practice, which in this way becomes its extension and becomes transformed into an educational region.

Conclusion

In a world that is characterised by mobility, the citizen's status becomes volatile and connected at the same time with the place that she/he lives (Scott, 1998). The place where we live influences our political behaviour, overturning the facts of decades; we have shifted from the 'birth nationality' to the 'residence nationality'. This new reality demands the creation of new civil, political customs and presuppositions for social coexistence. We can surmise the fundamental role that school and community must each play within its range of competence, but also the collaboration for the adoption of those new political behaviours in order to learn to live together.

If we can take lessons from globalisation, it will be the realisation of the complications emerging from the relationship between the individual and her/his environment. Living together also means becoming more sensitive to nature and education towards continuous equal progress on a city level as well as on a global one. '... it is about the contribution to the world of a frame for respect for identities and cultural peculiarities. A border, which

guarantees the rights of the minorities, mobility at the same time towards a balanced globalisation' (Touati, 2000).

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