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CROSSING THE THRESHOLD OF MATERIAL AND SYMBOLIC ENTRY TO SCHOOL REPRESENTS THE POSSIBILITY OF SUSPENDING SOCIAL INEQUALITY

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Abstract: This paper presents a theoretical research into the role of school in the modern western society of the 21st century characterized by social inequality. It takes as a central reference of theoretical analysis the contributions of some contemporary educators of relevance such as Philippe Meirieu, Jan Masschelein, Maarten Simons and Gert Biesta. The conceptual categories selected are those linked to the theory of school culture, namely: material school culture in its space-time dimension, school culture symbolic, teaching, learning and educational research. In this sense, a conceptual review of the role of teachers (from their teaching and research) in this unequal social structure is realized in terms of the possibility that the school will again be the space-time recovery of the right to education as a public and national good. It is understood that school can restore its democratizing state function if it manages to restore free time as the one necessary for people to succeed in free, participative and cooperative education.

Keywords: School culture, teaching, learning, educational research, social inequality.

INTRODUCTION

Simons and Masschelein (2014) write that “the main and most important act that “makes school” has to do with the suspension of a presumed unequal natural order” (p.28). In this way they argumentatively introduce an alternative conceptual proposal for the absolution of the school in the face of certain accusations of which this social institution has been the victim. Suspension of ordinary time implies generating free time, that is, time that is deprivatized and disappropriated from the exclusivity of certain elites. In this sense, the authors present four frequent accusations against the school: “alienation”, “consolidation of power and corruption”, “demotivation of youth” and “lack of efficiency and usefulness”.

“Alienation” refers to the recurring accusation of not preparing young people for the world they live in, the world of work or even the demands of higher education. Young people are alienated and cut off by the school from the world they inhabit. The “consolidation of power and corruption” has to do with the school abusing its power openly and arbitrarily in a masked way. It generates a process of cultural reproduction that is related to social and economic reproduction. Therefore, it perpetuates power by masking this process in the teaching of supposedly neutral contents and in the generation of neutral judgments under the justification of the principle of equal opportunity. Regarding the accusation of the “demotivation of youth”, Simons and Masschelein (2014) synthesize: “Young people do not like going to school. Learning is not fun. Learning is painful” (p. 18). To this is added that teachers are boring and that what they teach is not useful for everyday life. Finally, in relation to the “lack of efficiency and usefulness” of the school, it refers directly to teaching linked to productivity and learning in terms of school performance. The school efficiency-effectiveness formula has as its main defendant the teacher and places the bureaucratic-organizational base as a central element that has not been addressed. Educational management, in collusion with teachers and their teaching, is responsible for a condemnation of decadence. Faced with the accusations raised, Simons and Masschelein (2014) present a disruptive idea: school is a source of free time.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

School space-time is clearly distinguishable from work time. It is a different space-time, which is potentially educative of the subject regardless of the socio-economic-cultural family origin, the natural aptitudes, and the developed capacities, among other aspects

given or acquired socio-culturally. This implies a profound democratizing space-time in which free time reaches everyone as a universal patrimony. The school represents the profound vindication of the right to education for all, in which time becomes the key to the achievement of democratizing education. It is the unavailable time for those people who do not have real availability of that free time. In this free time, knowledge is expropriated as exclusive to elite that has time for access and has the opportunity to process it. In the school space-time, it is detached from the social space-time and from the home. In the school there is a process of egalitarian democratization of free time that is in permanent struggle against the attempts of domestication from society, the family and the job market. This dialectical process is a struggle against a meritocratic school and a school as an extension of the family and the requirements of the outside world. Simons and Masschelein (2014) write: "the future of the school is a public question" (p. 13). In this process of reclaiming and resisting school space-time, the young people can abandon the rules, impositions, and social, cultural, economic and family expectations. It is the opportunity to inhabit the world from a free time that makes it possible to study and carry out practices from, in and on what belongs to everyone with responsibility, awareness, without exception.

From the above, it is clear that in order to absolve the school of the accusations already mentioned, the material school culture in its school space-time dimension is a central category to be analyzed. The analysis of the material and symbolic school culture -in a space-time key-, as well as teaching, learning, educability, the role of the teacher and the teaching position are central and highly relevant categories for reflection within the Educational Sciences. In this sense,

it is proposed to establish argumentative relationships among them.

When Antelo (2013) poses the question: "Does it make sense for our children to be locked up there for five or more hours a day for twelve years?" (p. 59) is placing for debate the relationship of school space-time as fundamental school materiality dimensions. The young people are "locked in" for a daily time span during a period of time in their lives. Their question is closely linked to the question that Simons and Masschelein (2014) pose: "What does the first day of school make us think about?" (p. 32). Both questions enable analysis the necessary suspension of the domesticated school space-time. The domestication that is generated from, in and about the school is not exclusively about people, it is also about materiality. The material threshold of the entrance gate/door to the school premises and to each classroom marks a limit between the outside world, belonging to a certain family with a certain socio-economic and cultural level, being a child of, being a neighbor of, with certain rules, expectations, and ways of seeing the world. It is a physical limit that, although some present it as traumatic to cross, represents the opportunity for independence. It is the opportunity to achieve the democratization of existence for all. The authors state that the same thing happens with teachers and the contents to be studied. It is that "the making of a school implies suspension" (Simons and Masschelein, 2014, p. 33). It is the suspension of the demand for productivity linked to the outside world. The school has the potential to achieve this suspension through the materiality that is expressed in the school space-time:

We believe that the concrete form of the school can play an important role in the possibility of lightening the weight of the social order (suspension) for the sake of producing free time. The specific form of

classrooms and playgrounds present, at the very least, the possibility of literally separating from the time and space of home, society and the labor market, and the laws that govern them. (Simons and Masschelein (2014, p. 34)

The school is a space-time that opens the door to what is not given in a predetermined way in the teaching and learning process of young people. It is important to be clear that everyday life is installed in the school from a fabric of organized spaces and times that configure a social order. In school culture, this space-time fabric is also configured and re-configured on a daily basis. A series of apparently natural and neutral routines and rituals are repeated in daily life by subjects who comply with them without even questioning what motivates them to comply with them. There is an apparent harmless, ritualized, and seemingly inoffensive passing of the institutional daily life in school life in which the processes of selection, organization, reproduction, among others, are associated as “normal” in educational practices. However, these perpetuate the inequality between people. These operate as a form of organization of school time and space, fragmenting and reticulating it, associated with greater productivity associated with the effective achievement of functional objectives to the external social system. On the other hand, from the argumentative perspective presented by the authors of reference, the school is a material and symbolic means without a pre-fixed end by those who, from the outside world, consider that it is what people need for their formation. Nothing could be further from reality, since it only builds and strengthens social inequality. Therefore, it is important to enter through the open door to be and to do within an endless number of possibilities distributed democratically for everyone, which implies crossing the threshold of school, constituted on the basis of

emancipating free time and generating social equality. This possibility is a challenge and a responsibility that makes school a public and therefore political issue. Free time must be understood as a common good that builds social equality.

Based on the above, the role of the teacher can be considered. With regard to teachers within this conception of the school, three dimensions (obviously interrelated) should be analyzed: the contents taught and learned the pedagogical link and the possibility of conducting educational research. These dimensions can be conceptualized transversally from the understanding that the school space-time is conceived to be inhabited for specific purposes according to a chronology that makes time something measurable, planned and gridded, as a way of producing and reproducing certain links and contents associated with those links (Brailovsky, 2012). As Iglesias (2004) summarizes: “Tell me how you arrange your space and time in the classroom and I will tell you how you teach” (p. 80). The school space-time acquires symbolic value in a silent way as it expresses a pedagogical conception and orientation. Biesta (2011) proposes how to name the subjects of education: “learner”, “student” or “speaker”. He provides the conceptual key to open the interrelational character of the three dimensions mentioned in relation to teachers. The concept of “learner” “is constructed in terms of a lack” (Biesta, 2011, p. 151) so it implies an inequality between those who are complete and those who are incomplete. This concept gives an essential role to teachers as the ones without whom the learner cannot learn something. Learning by itself is not possible. To be a teacher is to bridge a gap that, instead of being overcome, remains in the given time. As stated by Jacques Rancière (2007), who refers to an “explanatory order” that has colored apprentice-based pedagogy.

There are sapient and ignorant minds that require enlightenment for an indefinite time, perhaps all their lives. In contrast to the concept of apprentice, reference can be made to the concept of “learner”. From Rancière’s analysis in his work *El maestro ignorante* (2007) about the teaching carried out by the french teacher Joseph Jacotot who was summoned to teach French to Flemish students whose language he did not speak. Therefore, he could not teach by explaining. Nevertheless, the youngsters learned with the teacher -without explanations-. Thus, a pedagogical relationship is established that is “will to will” (Rancière, 2007, p. 11) in which the teacher is not dispensed with, the one who summons to study and the figure of the student emerges (Biesta, 2011). Now, if the political character of education is understood, as Biesta analyzes it from Rancière’s intentionality, it can be said that the focus is on who can speak, which ultimately is “who is *allowed* to speak” (Biesta, 2011, p. 160). Hence, he refers to the “speaker”. In this sense, speaking accommodates the challenge of existing in the world without being the center of the world. The teacher shows the value of the world and promotes the study of what happens in the world from the dialogic exchange that enables dissent as an act of subjectivation that arises spontaneously. The important thing is that the student *can* speak within a framework where dissent has an important place as a trigger for equalizing emancipation within a variety of positions on different issues. To *be able* to speak is to combat unequalizing distractions such as: competencies, trajectories, meritocratic requirements, among others. This implies a teaching that activates existential possibilities for young people to freely affirm their adult place in the world. Speech is unique as a space of freedom. In this way, it is clear that Biesta (2011) develops a strong critique of what could be called “apprenticeship” and,

therefore, of the installed language of learning, which poses teachers as facilitators and/or mediators in front of young people in the face of knowledge:

The predominance of the language of learning in education, a phenomenon I have referred to as educational discourse and practice (...) continues to surprise me. It surprises me. Not because learning and education have nothing to do (although I think there are more things involved in education than in learning, because there are more things involved in life than in learning) (...) Education, unlike learning, always raises questions about content, about purpose and about relationships. (Biesta, 2021, p. 2)

It is clear from the quote that for the author the language of learning is radically different from the language of education. The language of learning is insufficient to express all that education implies. It reduces young people and teachers to mere learners or perhaps at most to students and teachers as facilitators of learning. This leads to a reductionism applied to school culture as an exclusively learning environment. In this environment, reference is made to the teaching-learning process, which implies that teaching is also reduced to being the creator of learning opportunities. Thus, the responsibility for learning is placed on individuals; and this the lifelong responsibility. Education is reduced to learning something for a purpose within a pedagogical link that is built on the basis of not accepting dissent as the multiple possibilities of being, being and doing in the world. This whole conception generates that the teaching that *enables* people in school to speak is withdrawn from the school. It is the expression of the withdrawal of teaching as an enabler of the subjectivities that make possible the construction of people’s identities. If the schooling process is reduced to “learning”, it loses its essential and existential sense: to empower the human being in his diversity

within the freedom enabled by the State of education as a human right and common good. It is the emptying of the political and public character of education.

In addition to understanding that education implies contents and purposes, it is important to analyze the pedagogical relational aspect. In this sense, it is worth mentioning the pedagogue Philippe Meirieu, who emphasizes that pedagogical links are fundamental to understand the relationship between teacher and student. According to the pedagogue, the construction of pedagogical links has a dynamic and contextualized character and this enables formative processes from the events that occur in everyday life. It is generated within a logical framework of reciprocity in which each subject gets to know and recognize who is in front of him/her and each of the teaching strategies is evaluated as adequate for the achievement of learning. In this constructive process of pedagogical links, empathy, communication, mutual respect, the creation of an atmosphere of collaboration and trust, participation, commitment and involvement are involved. It is a pedagogical work situated between-all. Each person breaks into the school space-time in an existential way on a daily basis. This is where Meirieu's notion of educability comes in, which is the key to this analysis:

For me, the teacher is someone who has an ethic, someone who has a project, and this project is based on what I call the "educability" of the students. I believe that the teacher is someone who has the utmost conviction that every student is educable, that is to say that no student can be left halfway... (Birgin, 2012, p. 9)

Educability is based on the fact that everyone can develop and grow, speak, emancipate in an equal and democratic way in the school space-time. This is the authentic

learning that is generated daily in a cooperative way in the school where there is the pleasure of being together with free time where everyone has a place to be, to be and to act with others. From this principle, according to the French pedagogue "one of the main objectives of democratic education is to transmit to our children that knowledge was and still is a tool for the emancipation of men and women" (Ministerio de Educación de la República Argentina, 2013, p. 8). Emancipation based on the fight against prejudice, claiming that the "emancipatory capacity of knowledge is a way to put knowledge back at the center of the school"¹. That is to say that knowledge is emancipatory. Knowledge cannot remain an accumulation of formal information that only some can learn, but must have meaning and significance for students without exception. According to Meirieu (Ministerio de Educación de la República Argentina, 2013) what is often taught is knowledge disconnected from its own history and role in the history of humanity. It is essential to reconnect with the origin of knowledge insofar as it was crucial for the organization of human life, solving challenges and even played a central role in human emancipation in the face of archaic forms of oppression. The meaning and significance of contextualized and historical knowledge enables pedagogical action under the principle of educability. In line with the above, Meirieu (Ministerio de Educación de la República Argentina, 2013) proposes what he calls "three categorical imperatives" for a democratic school: teaching to procrastinate, to symbolize and to cooperate. The school is a space-time in which the inhabitants postpone immediacy from thinking, reflecting, making silence. This brings us back to Simons and Masschelein's (2014) proposal that school represents free time for everyone. If we add to this having clear that what is essential in

1. Ministerio de Educación de la República Argentina. *La opción de educar y la responsabilidad pedagógica. Conferencia de Philippe Meirieu*. Buenos Aires: Ministerio de Educación; 2023, pp. 8-10.

a democracy is, according to Meirieu, “to fight for social justice, for a more equitable distribution of material goods, it is also necessary to fight for equal access to symbolic forms; and therefore, to the forms of artistic and cultural expressions” (Ministerio de Educación de la República Argentina, 2013, p. 19). Symbolization makes it possible to connect the material world with conceptualizations, which leads to the understanding of the world as a whole. In this way, it is possible to inhabit the world and in the world with others for a common good from a cooperation in which all the existing material -and even technological-resources are used.

There is no doubt that all that has been written represents an anthropological challenge in which the teacher plays a central role from the relationship the student. Pedagogical work involves dialectic between distance and closeness with the students. Interplay of being and being with others. Distance takes on a substantive meaning since it enables the emergence of a free space for the other to express freely. Everyday life interpellates this formative encounter, enriching it significantly from the fact of sharing the school space-time. The non-prescriptive aspect of the everyday with unexpected situations operates as a formation of subjectivities from the diversity of what is experienced. The pedagogical relationship is alien to all foreseeable mechanics. This generates identities and teaching positions,

...are constructed within the discourse and not outside of it, so the way in which they are produced in specific historical and institutional contexts, and in the play of specific modalities of power, must be considered. Identities are relational in the sense that they are produced through difference, through the establishment of a “we” in relation to others. Identity and otherness are two sides of the same coin and should be thought of as mutually constitutive, in the framework of always open

and contingent processes of identification. (Southwell, 2020, p. 64)

The notion of teaching position re-signifies the concepts of teaching and learning. It involves a human, open, dynamic and contextualized sociocultural relationship that necessarily leads to the collective construction of new knowledge from the territories experienced daily and shared democratically for everyone, in the real recovery of equalizing and emancipating potential free time within the school space-time.

When Biesta (2016) refers to “the disappearance of teaching and the teacher” (p. 120) he explains the full understanding of the role of teachers and the teaching: the vindication that the teacher is there to teach. This last objective should be obvious, but it is not. Basically, when conservative perspectives on teaching structure this discourse, they do it on the basis of achieving or even regaining the teacher’s attainment of control and (supposedly weakened) authority. In turn, it is argued that people can be responsible for their own learning throughout their lives, without the need for the presence of the state. This has been strengthened with the development of new ICTs which, when applied to learning processes, make it possible to install a virtual school with free access. All this is framed in the development of a student-centered learning language that takes teachers out of the scenario. Specifically, constructivist theory -as learning theory- has placed special emphasis on the learning achieved by students as the center of educational practices. These perspectives analyze and make educational proposals on the social must be, leaving aside what really happens in the school space-time. Education has a pragmatic character, that is, when decisions are made about contents and methods, strategies, or formal aspects, they are made according to a contextualized socio-educational reality. In the same line of

argument, Meirieu (2020) develops a criticism of these positions, calling them “infantile” in that they take for granted that both the social and the natural world are at our total decision-making disposal. To this critique, Biesta (2016) adds another critique, from a learner-centered perspective, which presents “the reduction of all educational issues to questions of learning” (p. 120). As already explained, this implies leaving aside that the language of learning is not the same as the language of education and falling into a defense of “apprenticeship” that does not take into account what is central to education:

The quickest way to express what is at stake here is to say that the axis of education is not only that children or students learn but that they learn something, that they learn it for a particular purpose and that they learn it from someone. (Biesta, 2016, p. 121)

It is in the content-purpose-relationship about and in which teachers have to teach. It is from here that Biesta (2016) argues, from a progressive perspective, in favor of the teacher and teaching in order to overcome the reductionist view of being a mere facilitator of learning. The teacher has a central role in defining the purposes and means of education from the educational point of view in each concrete situation, which is linked to the educational judgments and not mere actions (Biesta, 2007). This has to do with asking what education is for as a central issue within democratic societies. From this perspective it is possible to return teaching to education having as a conceptual axis that “the question of educational purpose is a multidimensional issue” (Biesta, 2016, p. 123). This purpose for the pedagogue has three domains, namely: qualification, socialization and subjectivation. When teachers elaborate their educational judgments in relation to the objectives of their activities, they do so according to a sort of balance composed of the three domains

mentioned. The key point is the relevance of the teacher’s role in this process of elaboration, which beyond having a theoretical aspect, is also practical, contextualized and linked to concrete situations that are often very far from the educational duty to be. These educational judgments represent the exercise of authentic educational *praxis* from the teaching positions. It is in this way that the teacher teaches. It is necessary to allow the teachers to teach from the construction of their educational judgments. When teachers teach from the educational language, it can be established that they bring something new to present to their students. For them, these novelties may generate resistance as a result of the encounter:

Such an encounter, as I want to suggest, is of great educational significance if one grants that education is not a process of development of what is already “inside”, nor a process of adaptation of what comes from “outside” but a continuous dialogue between the “self” and the “other” (in the broadest sense of the word “other”), in which both are formed and transformed - a process through which we come to the world (Winter, 2011) and the world comes to us. (Biesta, 2016, p. 126)

Teaching, therefore, is presented as an opportunity for a dialogic encounter that is very different from a competition in which one party wins and the other loses. In this encounter, student and teacher win from the different, the strange, or even from speaking and building from dissent (Biesta, 2011). As Biesta and Säfström (2018) put it, there is a tension between what is and what is not. What is not is presented, it bursts as the new in the pedagogical relationship and in the school space-time as a way of appearing subjectivity. This is constructed from what is not and what is; from the anchorage between what is real and what is in the abstract and even fantasy world. This interstice gives rise to the

freedom from which the teaching position is constructed. It gives room to the origin of the teacher's will to do educational research.

Educational research carried out by teachers who teach represents the opportunity to discover, understand, interpret, describe, explain, everything that occurs in this tension between what is and what is no within education, both in the school material and symbolic culture. The *Manifesto* written by Biesta and Säfström (2018) constitutes an attempt to fight so that education is no longer associated with what or what it is not. It is an attempt to construct an educational object from a theory of education that transcends the contents available from other academic disciplines such as sociology of education, psychology of education, history education, among others. These contributions are substantive, but according to Biesta and Säfström (2018): "the question we need to ask again –just as we intend to ask this question in relation to educational practices- is whether such theoretical resources can capture the educational dimension of education" (p. 25). In short, it is a manifesto in defense for the autonomy of education and that vindicates that teachers continue to teach and develop educational research as a way to achieve the construction of a theory of education from territorialized educational practice. According to Biesta: "if you do not have a conception of education as an autonomous discipline, it is very difficult to imagine what theories of education are as properly educational theories, not as theories coming "from other fields" and then applied to education". To which he adds that "this educationally relevant theoretical and research work has yet to undergo an educational transformation, so to speak, to become educationally operational" (Siegel y Biesta, 2022, p. 41). In this case, Biesta also argues that educational research represents problems in terms of the roles that have been

given to educational theory, mainly in relation to what to do with the concept of education and the dynamics of education:

I refer to these as the ontology, axiology, and praxeology of research: all research must have an adequate theorization of what the unique reality of education is (ontology), the normative orientations that play a role in it (axiology), and the fact that to educate is to act (praxeology). My problem with a huge amount of so-called educational research is that it does not reflect on these things at all, but relies on what I usually call quasi-casual assumptions about education. (Siegel y Biesta, 2022, p. 43)

CONCLUSION

Based on the above, it seems evident that the construction of a theory of emancipatory education is necessary. This is built from the conception that is a common good, a collective space, intentionally sustained by the communities. It is important that the students and teachers work so that the school space-time, from its material and symbolic issues reclaims free time. This implies for education and its agents the possibility to think and reinvent itself from a participative and cooperative participation. It is urgent and necessary to cross the conservative material and symbolic threshold of entering the school (daily and contextualized) by the hand of teachers who are allowed to teach and research *praxically*, and by the hand of students who are allowed to inhabit the space-time school creating, thinking, questioning, in agreements and dissent from being able to speak. This will undoubtedly generate the suspension of social inequality in the modern western society of the 21st century.

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