eduPost 16

GEPS
Globalisation, Education
& Social Policies

https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09620214.2021.1966825

The role of schooling in times of global pandemic: a sociological approach

Aina Tarabini

Autonomous University of Barcelona

Sociology Department

Research Centre on Globalisation, Education and Social Policies (GEPS-UAB)

aina.tarabini@uab.cat

Abstract

The health emergency generated by COVID-19 and the massive closure of schools has given rise to an unprecedented situation for education systems worldwide. This situation has raised fundamental questions about the role of the school in contemporary societies and whether it still fulfils a particular function as a social institution. This article forwards a theoretical discussion on these issues from a critical sociological approach and, especially, from the perspective of social justice. It argues that the two main functions of schools, namely, socialisation and selection, cannot be fully achieved by distance schooling. Moreover, it contends that the lockdown of schools reinforced the crisis of meaning within the school system by hindering its ability to ensure learning for all students. Overall, the article presents a reflection on the meaning of the school institution in the 21st century, representing a key contribution to contemporary debates on the sociology of education.

Keywords: sociology of education; social justice; learning; virtual education; teachers

Introduction

The global pandemic generated by COVID-19 and the lockdown of millions of children and young people at home during different periods throughout the 2019-20 and 2020-21 academic years, has created an unprecedented situation for education systems at a global level. The massive closure of schools and the sudden shift from an attendance-based to an online school environment has created multiple challenges for policy makers, teachers, families and students alike. The social, economic and political crisis generated by COVID-19 has, in turn, led to an educational crisis that raises a fundamental question: What is the purpose of schools? What are their functions, indeed, what *should* they be, in the 21st century? This question has been at the very heart of debates on the sociology of education since its institutionalisation as a discipline in the 1950s. Today, at a time when everything that was once taken for granted is now ever more uncertain, its fullest meaning is becoming clearer.

Education is arguably the most important determinant of an individual's life prospects (Bayrakdar & Guveli, 2020). Historically, schools that are public, universal, compulsory and free have played a key role as an instrument of social equalisation (Gimeno Sacristán, 2000). Although implemented in an incomplete and biased way due to the multiple forms of exclusion and inequality that traverse education systems, it is nevertheless one of the social institutions with a key role in equalising opportunities in society (Breen, 2004). The sudden advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated social and educational inequalities and placed at risk the role of schooling as a means of guaranteeing social justice and equality (Bonal & González, 2020; Drane, et al, 2020).

This article aims to reflect on the role that schools—as specialised institutions for socialising and teaching children and young people—carry out in contemporary societies, given the challenges represented by the COVID-19 pandemic. This theoretical discussion is approached from the perspective of the critical sociology of education[1] and, especially, from the approach of education justice (Lynch & Baker, 2005). The first section reviews the functions of the educational systems highlighted by the sociology of education, as well as their repercussions in terms of social inequality. It specifically enquires into the mechanisms of social reproduction through schooling stressed by Bourdiesian and Bernsteinian theories. The second section reviews current research on the educational impacts of the global

---

[1] This article uses the term 'critical sociology of education' to refer to post-functionalist approaches to education. This means that even if the authors included in this perspective have distinct conceptual repertoires and methodological approaches, they nevertheless all emphasise conflict, power and control in approaching the functions, relations and practices of the school system.

pandemic and discusses its consequences on how the functions of the education system are exercised. The third section reflects on what is argued to be a 'crisis of meaning' in the school system (Dubet, 2010) due to its inability to ensure powerful learning (Young, 2013) and rewarding educational experiences for all students. This section claims that the lockdown of schools due to COVID-19 has reinforced and made more visible this long-lasting crisis. It also identifies two main requirements to ensure the role of schooling as a socially just institution: physical presence (that is, attendance) as a basis for developing full interaction, key to the processes of cultural transmission; and the role of teachers as companions within the framework of a school that acts simultaneously as a community of learning and a community of care. The final section, by way of conclusion, reflects on the meaning of the school as a specialised institution and on the conditions for guaranteeing its role as an instrument of social equality.

On the uneven functions of education systems

Socialisation and selection are agreed within the sociology of education to be the two main functions of the school as a social institution. On the one hand, schools inculcate values and norms that are key to constructing students' identities. On the other, schools transmit knowledge and skills that are critical in explaining individuals' social positions. The sociological interest in education, then, emerges for its ability to construct identities (through its socialisation dimension) and to define social positions (through its selection/ differentiation function) (Lerena, 1981). These are functions that have been conceived, evaluated, and explained differently by distinct theoretical currents, but they have never been questioned in themselves.

On the one hand, the classical functionalist perspective (Parsons, 1959) stressed the positive impact of education in social mobility and highlighted its role in explaining and legitimising meritocratic societies. Based on the assumption of equality of opportunity (Coleman, et al., 1966), the functionalist approach addressed the socialising and selecting functions of the education systems as mainly fair and based on objective and individual parameters of ability and merit. On the other hand, post-functionalist approaches to education —emerging in the 1970s—incorporated the notion of conflict to explore the relationship between education and society. As originally signalled by Marxist sociology (Althusser, 1970; Bowles & Gintis, 1976) and Reproduction theory (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, 1979) and further developed by many other critically oriented sociological approaches to education (Baudelot & Establet, 1973; Bernstein, 1977; Young, 1971) the main purpose of education is

precisely to maintain the parameters of social inequality and to preserve hierarchical power relations within society. From this perspective, schools are not approached as ideologically neutral institutions but, instead, as institutions for the socialising and classifying of students into distinct parameters of class, ethnicity and gender.

One of the key questions that has organised the development of the sociology of education as a discipline is precisely the role that education plays in the legitimation, reproduction or transformation of social inequalities (Bonal, 1998). This is of crucial importance given the persistent inequality that plagues students' educational opportunities as determined by their social class (Reay, 2017). In fact, the endemic underachievement of working-class children in schools has been the central focus for many sociologists of education over the last fifty years.[2] Schools have been widely documented as institutions for the (re)production of social inequalities that persistently generate unequal opportunities and conditions for pupils to succeed (Francis & Mills, 2012).

Unquestionably, the work of Bourdieu is one of the most influential contributions to the critical sociology of education. Based on his empirical studies of the French education system, Bourdieu stressed the role of schooling as a *battlefield* between social classes in order to reproduce their social positions within society. By means of distinct forms of capital—namely, economic, social and cultural—individuals have different resources that can be built upon or exchanged within the schooling system (Ingram, 2018), thus generating different opportunities to access and take advantage of educational opportunities. Moreover, the schooling system does not value or reward different forms of capital in an equal way. Particularly, middle-class cultural capital—that is, its knowledge, skills and titles—is considered to be the only legitimate form, and this is of paramount importance in understanding what children and young people are taught within schools and how they are socialised.

The selection and socialisation functions that education systems fulfil are therefore not based on objective criteria of merit and achievement—as predicted by functionalist theories—but on the distance from or proximity to the 'legitimate school culture' that children and young people have. On the one hand, the school system gives more credit and value to particular forms of knowledge, thereby reproducing dominant economic and social relationships by selecting individuals to occupy unequal positions in the labour market. On

---

[2] The reproduction of social inequality through education is not only based on the axis of social class. The school system also (re)produces inequalities of gender, ethnicity and origin, among others. However, the sociology of education as a discipline has given more relevance to the study of social-class inequalities. Following the historical development of the discipline, this article focuses specifically on such inequalities.

the other hand, it transmits the dominant culture—that of the middle-class—as universal, socialising students into particular values and norms that ensure the cultural reproduction of society.

Furthermore, according to Bourdieu's theory, the school has a critical role in shaping the habitus of children and young people and, thus, in producing particular relations towards schooling and learning. Although the habitus—understood as the system of dispositions generated by individuals' location within the social structure—is the product of early childhood experience, and in particular of socialisation within the family, it is continually re-structured by the multiple experiences that individuals accumulate throughout their lifetime. The school system, most especially, acts to provide a general disposition towards what Bourdieu termed 'a cultured habitus' (Bourdieu, 1967, in Reay, 2004). In order to be recognised as educated, students must acquire the operative schemes and categories of the school; this is an 'educated habitus', in terms of Nash (2002), which involves characteristics such as a positive orientation to schooling, high aspirations, a positive academic self-concept, and a desire to identify and be identified as educated.

Based on Bourdieu's theory, contemporary sociological research has provided considerable evidence to understand the eminently unequal educational experiences, results and educational trajectories of children and young people from different social classes (Ingram, 2018; Reay, et al, 2001). This research has highlighted the everyday institutional structures and practices at place within different schooling contexts, which serve to reproduce privilege and disadvantage for different pupils (Abrahams, 2016). It has also proved the fallacy of the meritocratic illusion that addresses working-class academic underachievement in terms of individual giftedness, effort or aspirations (Reay, 2020a).

On the other hand, Bernstein's theory of educational codes (Bernstein, 1997; 1990) has provided the bases for many sociologists of education to reflect on the role of pedagogy and curriculum in shaping the educational experiences of children and young people. The principal thesis of Bernstein within the theory of educational codes is that all pedagogic practice entails power relations and means of social control and, as such, has a critical role in explaining the processes of social reproduction through schooling.

Educational knowledge, as Bernstein's claims, is a major regulator of students' educational experience. In fact, in line with Bourdieusian theories, Bernstein's work argued that there are hierarchies of knowledge to which different social classes have unequal access. School knowledge is mainly of an abstract nature and can be acquired and transmitted

independently from context. This is why middle-class students have a greater familiarity with school culture and have higher possibilities of school success. Their family codes are the same as the school codes, since both contexts organise students' experience through universalistic meanings. Working-class students, however, are socialised in family contexts where experiences and orientation to meanings are organised in particular contexts of practice and, as such, are context-dependent. Consequently, working-class children in general enter school less predisposed to acquiring the specialised knowledge of schooling, and to recognising and realising the school code (Hoadley, 2008).

Subsequent research based on Bernstein's theory has further specified the impact of different pedagogical codes on the learning conditions of students from different social classes. Research conducted by Morais (2002) in Portugal or that carried out by Hoadley and Muller (2010) in South Africa stress the importance of 'mixed' pedagogic practices in producing better learning for all students, especially for those from the working classes. These mixed pedagogical practices include, among other issues, explicit evaluative criteria; the weak framing of pacing, that is some students' control over the timing of their knowledge acquisition; and the provision of higher-order knowledge to all students.

The results of these studies have demonstrated that in order for the working-class students to acquire relevant learning and to have opportunities for school success, it is paramount that they have access to a kind of knowledge that provides them with the power to think beyond their immediate realities, to understand and explain the world, and to imagine the future through surpassing their current frameworks of understanding (Wheelahan, 2007). This is what Michael Young (2013) termed 'powerful knowledge' and, as the following section will argue, its acquisition is severely compromised by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic both on families' living conditions and on schools' modes of online educational provision.

Global pandemic and educational inequalities

The closure of face-to-face educational activity as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the multiple and profound educational divisions that traverse the education systems world-wide. Economic, social, cultural, emotional and digital divides that lockdown revealed in their crudest forms. As recent research in this area stresses (Bayrakdar & Guveli, 2020; Bonal & González, 2020; Cullinane & Montacute, 2020; Drane, et al, 2020; Hamilton, et al, 2020; Reay, 2020b), the global pandemic has amplified the inequality of educational

conditions (Lynch & Baker, 2005) that both families and schools face in ensuring students' learning, increasing the attainment gap between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

On the one hand, the pandemic and the school lockdown have substantially widened existing inequalities between families. As demonstrated by Bonal and González (2020), middle-class families in Catalonia (Spain) were able to maintain higher standards of education quality during lockdown, while children from socially disadvantaged families had few learning opportunities both in terms of time and learning experiences. Their data reveal, for example, that for students enrolled in lower secondary education, only 35% of mothers who had completed compulsory education helped such students with their homework, while 48% of the more educated mothers were able to do so. Additionally, they found severe differences in the reasons argued by families in providing support for schoolwork, depending on the level of the parents' education attainment. 92% of the families with an adult who had a university degree and who did not provide support for schoolwork argued that the child did not need it. This reason was forwarded by only 69% of respondents from those households with adults who had completed compulsory education only. Differences in cultural capital are therefore reflected in the capacity and possibilities of families to help children with their school tasks and in the reasons forwarded to provide this help (Bonal & González, 2020, p. 648). Similar results are identified in the study conducted by Bol (2020) in the Netherlands, who found that lower-educated parents feel unable to help, or else have limited understanding of the material that schools had provided during school closures. Additionally, the research by Andrew et al. (2020) in the UK found important differences in the amount of time dedicated to educational activities during lockdown: children from families in the highest 20% income bracket spend 5.8 hours a day on educational activities, over 75 minutes more than their peers in the poorest 20% (4.5 hours).

The results of these studies demonstrate that online schooling reinforces the role of families as providers of learning conditions and this, in turn, strengthen the impact of family capitals on these conditions. The physical conditions of households, access to technological devices or parental ability to help children with their homework are conditioned by families' social class, thus generating deeply unequal conditions from which to face online schooling (Bayrakdar & Guveli, 2020; Drane et al; 2020).

Disparities in families' capacity to cope with the pandemic are mediated and expressed not only by means of economic, cultural and social capital, but also by means of emotional capital (Reay, 2004). As stressed by research conducted both by Reay (2004) in

the UK and Lareau (2003) in the US, the experience of schooling for families—especially mothers–is emotionally charged, and these emotions are intrinsically related to social-class background. The legitimate cultural capital that middle-class families possess, together with their profound knowledge of the educational system and their personal experience of educational success, provide them with a lasting sense of confidence, belonging and entitlement in relation to the education system that is subsequently transmitted to their children. In contrast, feelings of anxiety, anger or fear are disproportionally related to the working-classes experiences of schooling.

The emotional and affective aspects of social inequality are reinforced by the worsening in living conditions of working classes families under COVID-19 and by the challenges associated with distance schooling. Recent research highlights the psychological distresses linked to the pandemic and identifies the harmful emotional consequences of school closure for the most vulnerable social groups (Drane, 2020). Bol (2020) and Cullinane & Montacute, (2020) found that families with low cultural capital feel less confident supporting their children's learning during the lockdown and, consequently, that they experienced intense psychological pressures of anxiety and depression related to the requirements of home schooling (Reay, 2020b).

The global pandemic has not only exacerbated the social inequalities among families; it has also affected those inequalities existing among schools. As indicated by Bayrakdar et al. (2020), the learning gap of the most vulnerable children is also produced by the schools they attend and, more specifically, by the modes of educational provision during lockdown. Recent research has shown important disparities in the forms of online schooling deployed by schools throughout lockdown and has revealed a substantial inequality of resources available for schools to conduct remote learning, and to provide enrichment activities and access to a broad and balanced curriculum (Cullinane & Montacute, 2020; Hamilton et al., 2020). Different surveys conducted during lockdown indicate that teachers have been unable to contact a significant number of students, mainly because of lack of internet connection or adequate devices for engaging in distance learning (Bonal & González, 2020). Even when students have been able to connect, research has shown profound differences in the regularity of these connections, in teachers' technological skills or in the content of online teaching (Coe et al. 2020).

For example, research conducted by Cullinane and Montacute (2020) in the UK found that, while 60% of private schools and 37% of state schools in affluent areas had online platforms to receive pupils' work, only 23% of schools in the most disadvantaged areas had

such facilities. They also showed that, for state-funded schools, almost half (46%) of teachers in the most deprived schools reported that, in their view, *broadcasting* lessons would not be possible, compared to 37% in the most affluent state schools, and 17% in private who expressed such an opinion. schools. Notable differences were also found in the kind of learning activities undertaken during remote teaching, according to the socioeconomic make-up of the schools. Whilst teachers in private schools were most likely to engage in direct messaging and in the creating of resources, and were overwhelmingly more likely to have hosted an online class (25%) or an audio/video call with a student (25%), both of these scenarios were very rare in the state sector (3% and 4%, respectively).

Research conducted by Hamilton et al. (2020) in the US reported a wide variation in curriculum coverage during remote teaching. Only 12% of surveyed teachers covered all or nearly all of the curriculum that they would have covered had schools remained open. This percentage reveals considerable variation according to the social intake of the schools. Whilst 14% of city and suburban teachers reported covering all or nearly all of the curriculum, this fell by half in the case of teachers working in towns and rural schools. Similarly, teachers in high-poverty schools reported (at a much higher percentage than their counterparts in low-poverty schools) dedicating most of their curriculum coverage to reviewing old content than to providing new input (26,3% and 18,8%, respectively).

In line with results from Hamilton et al. (2020), research conducted in Spain (Jacovkis & Tarabini, 2020) also indicates that principals and teachers in the most disadvantaged schools placed greater emphasis on the social and emotional well-being of their students than on advancing their learning. As indicated by Jacovkis and Tarabini (2020), 40% of schools with middle-class students prioritised learning as their main goal during distance schooling, whilst this percentage fell to 25% in schools with working-class students. The lockdown therefore further accelerated the social-worker role carried out by teachers in the most disadvantaged schools (Reay, 2020b).

Overall, the results of these investigations provide important insights into the disparity of learning opportunities available to students in different social classes due to the massively unequal effects of COVID-19 both on their families and on their schools. In this context, the role of schooling as a space for social development, protection and learning for all students has been seriously compromised. Lockdown has clearly revealed and amplified the enormous disparities in the socialisation and selection functions performed by the school. It has also amplified the crisis of meaning (Dubet, 2010) in schools as institutions for guaranteeing social equality and social justice.

On the one hand, the global pandemic has demonstrated the critical role that schools—as social institutions—play for the most vulnerable students. Delegating the responsibility for education to families exacerbates social inequalities, as it reinforces the impact of the family's capitals on students' learning and development. The school, as a physical space and also as a symbolic one, can and should offer the possibility of transcending the limitations of the thinkable and the imaginable. It should be a space of physical, social, and emotional protection for children and young people, a space for acquiring relevant learning and for ensuring individuals' overall social and personal development.

On the other hand, the pandemic has shown that the conditions facing families and schools in ensuring these goals are profoundly traversed by social-class dynamics (Reay, 2017). It is in such a context that the crisis of meaning for schools arises. Such a meaning can only ever reach its full value if schooling facilitates the acquiring of powerful knowledge for all students and acts as a space for social inclusion in its broadest sense.

A crisis of meaning: the lack of powerful knowledge for all students

Edgar Morin (1999) refers to four principles of relevant education: contextualisation, globalisation, multidimensionality and complexity. Contextualising school knowledge refers to the importance of taking into account the social, economic, cultural and personal context within which educational knowledge is embedded. In the advent of the global pandemic and its vast social, labour and emotional costs, it is imperative to inquire into the context in which children and young people from different social groups receive and acquire school knowledge. In what way does lockdown affect the possibilities of acquiring, realising, and internalising such knowledge?

The same is true of globalisation, multidimensionality or the complexity of school knowledge. In order to learn, and for this learning to be profound and meaningful, it is essential to connect the parts with the whole, the local with the global, specific daily experience with wider, general and universal situations. As Young (2013) states, powerful knowledge, knowledge that opens possibilities of social emancipation, is that which enables us to think beyond immediate realities; it is knowledge that can be transferred from one context to another, knowledge that acquires relevance beyond its immediate applicability. It is that which can invest everyday reality with significance through global frameworks of meaning and which, in turn, reinforces and qualifies existing theoretical frameworks based on the meaning that they acquire in specific contexts.

The question that arises in order to address the meaning of the school in a context of generalised school closure is the following: what are the material, pedagogical, social, and professional conditions that guarantee access to and acquisition of this kind of knowledge for all students? What elements both within and without the school enable students to learn?

Following Dubet (2010), one of the central elements for understanding the decline of the school institution is the crisis of the very process of socialisation and cultural transmission. A crisis that responds not only to changes outside the school. It can also be explained by endogenous factors linked to three central aspects that have historically characterised the school as a social institution: the assumption of a universal culture; the legitimacy of the figure of the teacher; and a supposed breach between the world of the school and the outside world. As the author explains, the processes of school democratisation have led to greater social heterogeneity that, in turn, has eroded the automatic identification of families and students with the school's homogeneous values and its apparently universal knowledge. The cultural arbitrariness that schools represent has become evident and has consequently entered into decline.

Furthermore, this articles argues that two fundamental elements are required for ensuring the role of schools in providing learning and social development for all their students: on the one hand, the importance of physical presence, that is, *attendance*, as a necessary condition for guaranteeing full interaction in the processes of cultural transmission; on the other, the role of the teacher as companion in the processes of learning and personal development.

Physical presence as condition for cultural transmission

Based on the multidimensional nature of learning, it is essential to bear in mind that this is not only generated individually and, moreover, that it is not only generated with and from the head, so to speak. Humans are not only cognitive beings; we are also social, emotional, and relational beings (Resnick, 1991). For this reason, education is profoundly a social act. As Hodkinson et al. (2008) affirm, learning is a deeply cultural process that needs to be approached in an integrated manner that avoids the dualism between the social and the individual. And this is why cognition and emotion cannot be separated. Nor can we separate so many of the other dichotomies that often run through the school world: theory and practice; subject and object; body and soul. How can students connect the cognitive if the emotional is broken? How can they activate the emotional if the social is absent? How can they learn without feeling and without experiencing?

As previous research has shown, one of the main reasons explaining why young people drop out of school is their lack of engagement with school culture (Tarabini, 2019), that is, through a lack of engagement that is cognitive, behavioural and emotional (Fredricks et al., 2004). They feel that they don't learn; they feel that they don't belong. For many students this disengagement has also become physical and technological due to the closure of the face-to-face educational activity generated by COVID-19. But this does not appear from nowhere. For this reason, physical presence (that is, attendance) is a necessary condition—though one that is not sufficient in itself—in enabling the acquisition of powerful knowledge for all students.

Certainly, face-to-face and virtual environments are less dichotomous than alarmist discourses often convey. Being physically at school does not necessarily imply listening, paying attention or being collaborative, nor does being in the virtual world need to be associated with processes of individualisation or social isolation. A critical view of social media needs to approach such environments as potential sources both of emancipation and commodification (Allmer, 2015). Moreover, as Buckingham (2008) states, there is an entire generation growing up in an era in which digital media are part of the taken-for-granted social and cultural fabric of learning, play, and social communication. So, the relation between youth, learning and digital media is complex and by no means linear. Delving deeper into this argument would lead the current discussion away from its central objective, but the argument is that there are key elements to the school experience that involve a physical, attendance-based, corporal, and sensorial engagement with the school space; with its sensations, its smells, its colours. There are forms of interaction that require presence, physical contact, movement, in order to be carried out, and these are things that the virtual world, by its nature and characteristics, does not allow. It is in this sense that face-to-face education has to be understood as a condition for cultural transmission and for ensuring the acquisition of powerful knowledge through schooling, above all for those students coming from the most disadvantaged social backgrounds.

As indicated by Drane et al. (2020), social support from teachers is a paramount component of educational engagement; this includes appreciation, respect and caring for all their pupils. The digital divide, however, has severely harmed the ability of the most disadvantaged students to access these forms of social support. Lack of access to technological devices, the living conditions of their families under lockdown or the difficulties of their schools in engaging them with relevant learning and feedback during

remote teaching has all reinforced the loss of school connectedness that many vulnerable young people had already experienced before the pandemic (Burke & Dempsey, 2020).

This does not mean that presence of the school and face-to-face attendance are in themselves necessarily pleasant, or ineluctably liberating or emancipatory. Research evidence suggest that school attendance is too often directed towards making bodies docile, disciplining minds, dividing soul and reason (Dubet, 2010; Youdell, 2006). In Francis and Mills' terms (2012), schools are damaging organisations, both in material and symbolic ways, replete with practices of distinction and selection that systematically 'produce' students as 'failures' and consequently perpetuate social inequalities. According to Reay (2020b), 'the mainstream discourse that schools are a sanctuary for the poor and 'vulnerable' is rarely shared by those groups themselves, who are more likely to find education an uncomfortable space of judgement and labelling' (Reay, 2020b, p. 314). Recovering the meaning of the school, therefore, entails rethinking the meaning of being *present* in school by ensuring that all children and young people have access to a pleasant and rewarding school experience.

The role of teachers in learning and caring

Research has long indicated that positive face-to-face interactions with teachers are central to effective learning (Wang & Eccles, 2012). Teachers' trust in students' capacity to learn has been signalled as a critical element for their effective learning and engagement with schooling (Curzon-Hobson, 2012). Consequently, the role of teachers is paramount to ensuring the acquisition of profound knowledge and to providing meaningful school experiences to all students.

In order to guarantee the relevance of school knowledge, attention must be paid to the form in which this is transmitted (pedagogy) and not only to its definition and selection (curriculum) (Bernstein, 1977). As indicated by Young (2010), it is crucial to conceptually differentiate between curriculum and pedagogy. That is, although the curriculum—understood as that knowledge considered important for all students to acquire—may be perfectly relevant and valid, this relevance may actually be brought into question through the pedagogical relationship itself, that is, through the physical, cultural, emotional and symbolic distance between teachers and students. For this reason, in order to recover the meaning of the school institution, it is essential to rethink the sources of legitimacy pertaining to the figure of the teacher.

For years now, sociological research has emphasised the key role that teachers play in the processes of educational inclusion and exclusion. Teacher expectations, in particular,

have been identified as one of the main elements that affect young people's opportunities for educational success (Archer & Francis, 2005; Oakes, et al, 1997; Rist, 1970; Valencia, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999). Communicated through the manner in which students are treated, teacher expectations have a critical impact on students' self-esteem, social interaction, and ultimately on their educational results (Agirdag et al., 2012; Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012). Simultaneously, teacher expectations consolidate themselves into pedagogical practices, such as tracking and ability grouping (Gamoran, 2009). Such practices not only explain different modalities of curricular provision within and between schools[3] but also throw light on why learning becomes an almost unachievable goal for many students.

Inquiring into the role of teachers within the framework of contemporary schooling also implies recognising that their duties, like all tasks based on human relations, involve heavy emotional work (Hargreaves, 2001). Education is a profoundly emotional practice and teachers are key in communicating the positive or negative emotions, qualities, stereotypes, stigmas, affection, and disaffection that day-to-day school relationships feature. As Lynch and Baker (2005, p. 150) affirm, 'good teachers love their students, in the sense that they are deeply committed to their development in a way that enables them to be free'. In this sense, schools must necessarily be both communities of learning and communities of care (Hargreaves, 2003). Patently, learning and caring go hand in hand: whilst schools cannot give up on teaching, it is equally clear that they cannot teach without caring.

In this respect, it is essential to demand teachers who are capable of *accompanying* their students in the broadest sense of the word. To accompany means to be in the company of the other, to go jointly in their company, to exist next to the other, to participate in their feelings. And this is the role that teachers should play in order for the socialisation and learning functions of schools to be deployed in a socially just manner. A feminist ethic of care highlights connections as being fundamental in human life (Gilligan, 1982). In this sense, what is required is a 'caring teacher', one that connects with their students, with their learning and with their lives, thorough the entire education system.[4] It is, in short, a matter of moving away from what Lingard and Keddie (2013) define as *pedagogies of indifference*, those that give rise to and/or legitimise social inequality. In contrast to such pedagogies, the authors suggest the notion of *productive pedagogies* (Lingard, 2007; Lingard & Keddie,

---

[3] Research demonstrate that teachers working with low ability classes are mostly focused on behavioural control and on the transmission of basic concepts and skills, whilst in high ability groups the pedagogy is more challenging and the curriculum deeper and broader (Hallam & Ireson, 2005).

[4] The notion of caring teacher has been mainly developed in primary education and in alternative school settings. See for example TeRiele et al. (2017).

2013), which incorporate four main dimensions: intellectual demand; connectedness; supportiveness; and working with and valuing difference. These four dimensions are of equal value in ensuring that schools work as socially just institutions. Moreover, there is a need for a 'pedagogy of accompaniment'[5] thorough the entire education system, capable of recognising that education is an inherently relational experience between people, places and spaces.

Conclusions

The aim of this article has been to reflect on the meaning of the school institution in an unprecedented situation of global pandemic generated by COVID-19 and under the compulsory lockdown of the population at a global level. The paralysis of face-to-face activity in schools during different periods of the 2019-20 and 2020-21 academic years has brought to light the significant gaps that exist between families and schools in developing their educational function (Bayrakdar & Guveli, 2020; Bonal & González, 2020; Coe et al, 2020; Cullinane & Montacute, 2020; Hamilton et al, 2020), and has revealed the multiple forms of exclusion that restrict the equalising function that the school institution should fulfil.

It has been argued that the school, as a social institution, has a key role in equalising opportunities in society (Gimeno Sacristán, 2000). This role implies guaranteeing the transmission and acquisition of powerful knowledge for all students (Young, 2013), but it is seriously threatened by the multiple forms of segregation, disengagement and expulsion that run through our educational system (Francis & Mills, 2012). The pandemic has highlighted, on the one hand, the critical role that schools play for the most vulnerable students; in this respect, transferring schooling to families increases the learning inequalities that are generated by family backgrounds (Bonal & González, 2020). On the other hand, the pandemic has shown that schools are not neutral in the provision of learning conditions and that they can indeed contribute to increasing the learning gap between students, rather than reducing it (Bayrakdar & Guveli, 2020). And this is where the crisis of meaning of the school as social institution originates (Dubet, 2010). This crisis of meaning existed long before COVID-19, but was exacerbated by the global pandemic. Because the school is the basis of social mobility for many working-class people individually, and yet, at a collective level, the education system does not contribute to the social emancipation of the most disadvantaged social groups (Reay, 2017).

---

[5] To my knowledge, this term is used only within the ambit of religious education, but its particular suitability argues for its application in this context.

It has also been argued that two fundamental elements are required for ensuring the role of schools in providing learning and social development to all their students: on the one hand, attendance and physical contact as a means of guaranteeing the forms of profound interaction that the processes of cultural transmission require. On the other hand, the figure of the teacher as companion, to guarantee that schools act at one and the same time as communities of learning and of care (Hargreaves, 2003).

It would be unfair to argue that schools and their teachers are primarily responsible for this crisis of meaning. That said, both schools and teachers must assume their respective responsibility, as critical and reflective stakeholders (Perrenoud, 2001) within a broader context marked by education policies that constrain and/or enable them. Similarly, it would be naive to imagine that schools themselves can overcome all the inequalities generated outside their own environment. To varying degrees, capitalist societies always produce inequalities at the level of economy, employment, health and housing that go beyond strictly school-based intervention (Reay, 2012). However, there is still enormous room for improvement in purely educational terms. Furthermore, an education system that cannot provide equitable educational experiences and results for all students is profoundly unjust and antidemocratic (Van Zanten, 2005).

The school as a social institution must act as a space for protecting and guaranteeing the rights of all children and young people, and this implies guaranteeing equality of conditions (Lynch & Baker, 2005) so that all schools and all families can carry out their educational function. This equality of conditions calls for policies of redistribution, recognition, representation and care among and within schools and, although it does not depend solely on schools and teachers individually, it very certainly needs them onboard as its principal allies.

References

Abrahams, J. (2016). *Schooling Inequality: Aspirations, Institutional Practices and Social Class Reproduction*. PhD Thesis. Cardiff University.

Agirdag, O., Van Houtte, M., & Van Avermaet, P. (2012). Ethnic School Segregation and Self-Esteem: The Role of Teacher-Pupil Relationships. *Urban Education*, 47(6), 1135-1159. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085912452154

Allmer, Th. (2015). *Critical Theory and Social Media. Between Emancipation and Commodification*. Routledge.

Althusser, L. (1970). Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation). In: Althusser, L. (Ed.), *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (pp. 85-126).

Andrew, A., Cattan, S., Costa-Dias, M., et al. (2020). *Learning during the lockdown: Real-time data on children's experiences during home learning*. Institute for Fiscal Studies. https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14848

Archer, L., & Francis, B. (2005). They never go off the rails like other ethnic groups: teachers' constructions of British Chinese pupils' gender identities and approaches to learning. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 26(2), 165-182. https://www.jstor.org/stable/30036056

Baudelot Ch. & Establet, R. (1973). *L'école capitaliste en France*. François Maspero.

Bayrakdar, S., & Guveli, A. (2020). *Inequalities in home learning and schools' provision of distance teaching during school closure of COVID-19 lockdown in the UK*. ISER Working Paper Series. https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/227790/1/1703719352.pdf

Bernstein, B. (1977). *Class, Codes and Control. Vol III. Towards a Theory of Educational Transmissions*. Routledge.

Bernstein, B (1990). *Class, Codes and Control. Vol IV. The structuring of pedagogic discourse*. Routledge.

Bol, T. (2020). *Inequality in homeschooling during the Corona crisis in the Netherlands*. First results from the LISS Panel. https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/hf32q/

Bonal, X. (1998). *Sociología de la Educación: una aproximación crítica a las corrientes contemporaneas* [Sociology of Education: a critical approach to contemporary theories]. Paidós.

Bonal, X. & González, Sh. (2020). *The impact of lockdown* on the learning gap: family and school divisions in times of crisis. *International Review of Education*, 66, 635–655 https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-020-09860-z

Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J.C. (1977). *Reproduction in education, culture and society*. Sage.

Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J.C. (1979), *The Inheritors: French Students and Their Relations to Culture*. University of Chicago.

Bowles, S. & Gintis, H. (1976) *Schooling in Capitalist America*. Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Breen, R. (Ed.). (2004). *Social mobility in Europe*. Oxford University Press

Buckingham, D. (Ed.) (2008). *Youth, identity and digital media*. Cambridge. The MIT Press.

Burke, J., & Dempsey, M. (2020). *Covid-19 practice in primary schools in Ireland report*. National University of Ireland Maynooth.

https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/education/news/covid-19-practice-primary-schools-report

Coe, R., Weidmann, B., Coleman, R., & Kay, J. (2020). *Impact of school closures on the attainment gap: Rapid evidence assessment.* Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). https://dera.ioe.ac.uk//35707/

Coleman, J. S., Campbell, E., Hobson, C., et al. (1966). *Equality of educational opportunity* U.S. Government Printing Office..

Cullinane, C. & Montacute, R. (2020). COVID-19 and Social Mobility Impact Briefing: school shutdown. Sutton Trust. https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/School-Shutdown-Covid-19.pdf

Curzon-Hobson, A (2012). A Pedagogy of Trust in Higher Learning. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 7:3, 265-276. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562510220144770

Demanet, J., & Van Houtte, M. (2012). Teachers' attitudes and students' opposition. School misconduct as a reaction to teachers' diminished effort and affect. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 28, 860–869. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2012.03.008

Drane, Ch., Vernon, L. & O'Shea, S. (2020). Vulnerable learners in the age of COVID–19: A scoping review. *The Australian Educational Researcher.* https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-020-00409-5

Dubet, F. (2010). Crisis de transmisión y declive de la institución [The Crisis of Transmission and the Decline of the Institution]. *Política y Sociedad*, 47(2), 15-25.

Francis, B. & Mills, C. (2012). Schools as damaging organisations: instigating a dialogue concerning alternative models of schooling. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 20(2), 251-271. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2012.688765

Fredricks, J.A, Blumenfeld, P.C. & Paris, A.H. (2004). School Engagement: Potential of the Concept, State of the Evidence. *Review of Educational Research,* 74(1), 59–109. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543074001059

Gamoran, A. (2009). *Tracking and Inequality: New Directions for Research and Practice.* WCER Working Paper, Nº 6. Wisconsin Center for Education Research.

Gilligan, C. (1982). *A Different Voice: psychological theory and women's development.* Harvard University Press.

Gimeno sacristán, J. (2000). *La educación obligatoria: su sentido educativo y social* [Compulsory Education: its education and social meaning]. Morata.

Hallam, S. & Ireson, J. (2005). Secondary school teachers' pedagogic practices when teaching mixed and structured ability classes. *Research Papers in Education*, 20(1), 3-24. https://doi.org/10.1080/0267152052000341318

Hamilton, L., Kaufman, J.H. & Diliberti, M. (2020). *Teaching and Leading Through a Pandemic. Key Findings from the American Educator Panels Spring 2020 COVID-19 Surveys*. Research Report. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA168-2.html

Hargreaves, A. (2001). Emotional Geographies of Teaching. *Teachers College Record, 1*03 (6), 1056–1080.

Hargreaves, A. (2003). *Teaching in the Knowledge Society. Education in the Age of Insecurity*. Teachers College Press.

Hoadley, U. (2008). Social class and pedagogy: a model for the investigation of pedagogic variation. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 29(1): 63–78. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425690701742861

Hoadley, U., & Muller, J. (2010). Codes, pedagogy and knowledge: advances in Bernsteinian sociology of education. in M. Apple, S. Ball, & L.M. Gandin (Eds.), *The Routledge International Handbook of the Sociology of Education* (pp. 69-78). Routledge.

Hodkinson, P., Biesta. G., & James, D. (2008). Understanding Learning Culturally: Overcoming the Dualism Between Social and Individual Views of Learning. *Vocations and Learning* 1, 27–47.

Ingram, N. (2018). *Working-Class Boys and Educational Success. Teeenage Identities, Masculinities and Urban Schooling*. Palgrave.

Jacovkis, J. & Tarabini, A. (2020). COVID-19 y escuela a distancia: Viejas y nuevas desigualdades [COVID-19 and Distant Schooling: Old and New Inequalities]. *RASE,* 14(1), 85-102. https://doi.org/10.7203/RASE.14.1.18525

Lareau, A. (2003). *Unequal Childhoods. Class, race and family life.* University of California Press.

Lerena, C., (1981). Acerca del desarrollo teórico de la sociología de la educación. [About the theoretical development of sociology of education]. *Revista Internacional de Sociología*, 39, 311-328

Lingard, B. (2007). Pedagogies of Indifference. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 11 (3), 245-266. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110701237498

Lingard, B. & Keddie, A. (2013). Redistribution, recognition and representation: working against pedagogies of indifference. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 21(3), 427-447. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2013.809373

Lynch, K., & Baker, J. (2005). Equality in education An equality of condition perspective. *Theory and Research in Education*, 3(2), 131-164.

Morais, A.M. (2002). Basil Bernstein at the micro level of the classroom. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 23(4): 559–569. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1393312

Nash, R. (2002). The educated habitus, Progress at School and Real Knowledge. *Interchange*, 33 (1), 27-48.

Morin, E. (1999). *The seven complex lessons on education of the future.* UNESCO.

Parsons, T. (1959). The School Class As A Social System Some Of Its Functions In American Society. *Harvard. Educational Review*, 29, 297-318

Perrenoud, P. (2011). *Desarrollar la Práctica Reflexiva en el Oficio de* Enseñar [Developing reflective practice in the office of teaching]. Graó.

Reay, D. (2020a). English Education in the Time of Coronavirus, *FORUM* 62 (3) http://dx.doi.org/10.15730/forum.2020.62.3.311

Reay. R. (2020b). The Perils and Penalties of Meritocracy: Sanctioning Inequalities and Legitimating Prejudice. *The Political Quarterly*, 91 (2), 405-412. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12829

Reay, D. (2017) Miseducation: inequality, education and the working classes. Bristol: Policy Press

Reay, D. (2012). *What would a socially just education system look like?* Think piece. CLASS. Center for Labour and Social Studies.

Reay, D. (2004). Gendering Bourdieu's concepts of capitals? Emotional capital, women and social class. *The Sociological Review,* 1. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2005.00524.x

Reay, D., Davies, J., David, M., & Ball, S. J. (2001). Choices of degree or degrees of choice? Class, 'race' and the higher education choice process. *Sociology* , 35 (4), 855-874. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038501035004004

Resnick, L. B . (1991). Shared cognition: Thinking as social practice. In L. B. Resnick, J. M. Levine, & S. D. Teasley (Eds.), *Perspectives on socially shared cognition* (p. 1–20). Washington D.D: American Psychological Association.

Rist, R. C. (1970). Student Social Class and Teacher Prophecy in Ghetto Education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 40(3), 411–451.

Tarabini, A. (2019) *The Conditions for School Success Examining Educational Exclusion and Dropping Out*. Palgrave.

Te Riele, K., Mills, M., McGregor, G., & Baroutsis, A. (2017). Exploring the affective dimension of teachers' work in alternative school settings. *Teaching Education*, 28(1), 56-71. https://doi.org/10.1080/10476210.2016.1238064

Valencia, R. (2010). *Dismantling Contemporary Deficit Thinking Educational Thought and Practice*. Routledge.

Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: US-Mexican youth and the politics of schooling*. State University of New York Press.

Van Houtte, M. (2011). So where's the teacher in school effects research? The impact of teachers' beliefs, culture, and behavior on equity and excellence in education. In K. Van den Branden, P. Van Avermaet, & M. Van Houtte (Eds.), *Equity and excellence in education: Towards maximal learning opportunities for all students* (pp. 75–95). New York, NY: Routledge.

Wang, M.T., & Eccles, J. S. (2012). Social support matters: Longitudinal effects of social support on three dimensions of school engagement from middle to high school. *Child Development*, 83(3), 877–895. https ://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2012.01745 .x

Wheelahan, L. (2007). How Competency-based Training Locks the Working Class out of Powerful Knowledge: A Modified Bernsteinian Analysis. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 28 (5), 637–651. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425690701505540

Youdell, D. (2006). *Impossible bodies, impossible selves: Exclusions and student subjectivities.* Springer.

Young, M. (Ed.) (1971). *Knowledge and control: New directions for the sociology of education.* Collier-Macmillan Publishers.

Young, M. (2010). The future of education in a knowledge society: The radical case for a subject-based curriculum, *Pacific-Asian Education, a Journal about Education in Pacific Circle countries,* 22(1), 21-32

Young, M. (2013). Powerful knowledge: an analytically useful concept or just a 'sexy sounding term'? A response to John Beck's 'Powerful knowledge, esoteric knowledge, curriculum knowledge'. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 43(2), 195-198. https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2013.776356

Van Zanten, A. (2005). New Modes of Reproducing Social Inequality in Education: The Changing Role of Parents, Teachers, Schools and Educational Policies. *European Educational Research Journal*, 4 (3), 155-169. https://doi.org/10.2304/eerj.2005.4.3.1