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Schooling, Social Inequalities, and (dis)Affects: Enriching the Sociological Gaze

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When reflecting on our school experiences during childhood or adolescence, memories arise that evoke a range of emotions: the sense of reward upon understanding a math problem or receiving a high grade, the nerves and embarrassment of being questioned by a teacher in front of the entire class, the anger at decisions we perceived as arbitrary by a teacher or school administrator, the shared fun with classmates through jokes in the classroom and moments of leisure, or, conversely, the deep discomfort generated by discriminatory attitudes that excluded us from groups or activities. Despite the passage of time, these memories are vividly recalled due to their marked emotional intensity, leaving significant imprints on our character. The emotional dimension of the school experience holds profound significance for understanding the ways in which schools contribute to shaping subjectivities and legitimizing processes of inequality and differentiation with far-reaching effects. Despite this inescapable feature of the school experience, the emotional impact of schooling has been under-theorized in both the sociology of education and the sociology of emotions. This Special Section aims to consolidate a line of inquiry that takes advantage of the conceptual tools developed in these sociological fields to more precisely understand the implications of emotions and, affects on educational practices and processes. The following four articles contribute to understanding the role of emotions, affects, and care in schools, particularly in shaping educational experiences, relationships, and opportunities, and the (re)production of educational inequalities. In doing so, it aims to address and fill some gaps identified in existing research.

The study of the relationship between education and emotion has been largely dominated by psychological approaches, which emphasise the individual experience of affect while neglecting its social, relational, and political dimensions. Yet, the affective aspects of interpersonal relationships significantly impact teaching and learning. It is not just that educational experiences are intrinsically emotional (Zembylas, 2005), but that affects and

emotions are central to human existence. Care is about maintaining, continuing, and repairing our world so all of humanity can live in it as well as possible (Tronto, 2013). Moreover, emotions and affect are historicized, relational, and performative practices rather than individual essentialized inner realities (Scheer, 2012).

Classical sociology of education has established the significant role of the school institution in “producing” individuals (Durkheim, 1956). Since the 1970s, with the consolidation of a critical and systematic approach to the explicit and latent functions of educational systems in modern capitalist societies (Bonal, 1998; Varela, 2009), the sociology of education has provided essential conceptual tools for understanding the social dynamics that unfold within the educational sphere. It has raised concerns about the role education plays in legitimizing, reproducing, or transforming social inequalities and the mechanisms that drive these processes (Tarabini, 2022a). Traditionally, the structuralist approach focused on discriminatory processes that legitimised social and educational inequalities, examining their effects on the production of social classes but delving little into what is known as the “black box” of education—i.e., the daily processes that occur in schools. This initial limitation has been largely overcome with the gradual incorporation of the everyday experiences analyses that individuals encounter in educational settings. As a result, research has deepened our understanding of how school systems produce subjectivities with unequal resources and experiences to meet the demands of schooling. However, in general, this approach has overlooked the emotional and affective dimensions, failing to fully account for their implications. While the sociology of education has been able to demonstrate the profound discomforts generated by the processes of school failure (Ingram, 2018; Reay, 2017; Willis, 1977, among others), there is still a need to delve deeper into the emotional complexities that generate the processes of school disaffection and rejection, and their implications at the individual and collective level. School (dis)affects are intrinsically social, and therefore the sociology of education must be able to address them in a way that are connected to the broader political and social structures of power and inequality.

In parallel, the sociology of emotions has made significant progress over more than four decades, establishing itself as a subfield of inquiry (Bericat, 2016). Pioneering scholars have focused on recovering the “rationality” of emotions, previously relegated to the impulsive and uncontrollable side of human existence when associated with permanent structures such as genes, the soul, individual psychology, and human nature, rather than

history, ideology, and culture (Lutz, 1986). Lutz (1986) also uncovers the ideological operation that categorises vulnerable groups as "emotional" – women, children, and lower classes – consolidating an association between emotion, weakness, and irrationality, thus contributing to the subordination of these groups.

Sociological studies on emotions have, therefore, succeeded in denaturalising, de-essentialising, and historicising emotions by emphasising their sociocultural specificity. While not denying the presence of a biological component related to bodily feelings, these studies have reintroduced the cognitive and constructivist aspects of emotions, based on cultural meanings (Denzin, 2009; Hochschild, 1998; Illouz, 2008; Le Breton, 1998;). This aligns with the inherently relational nature of emotional experiences, not only in terms of the relationships we establish with others but also in reference to other crystallizations of the social world. Rather than viewing emotions as isolated, individual phenomena that exist solely within a person, this perspective emphasises how emotions are shaped by interactions, social contexts, and cultural norms. This also highlights the political dimension inherently tied to the emotional experiences arising from participation in social life, as emotions are always tied to issues of power, inequality, ideology, and collective action. As such, there is broad consensus regarding the relevance of social interaction as the space in which emotions are generated and inhabited (Collins, 1990; Hochschild, 2003; Scheff, 2000). In short, sociological studies on emotions have made "...a sustained effort to show that emotions greatly pattern social life, are all-pervasive, and can be subject to systematic exploration" (Flam, 2024: 1).

Focusing on social research regarding emotions and, affect in education, there has been a growing trend in recent years to explore these themes. These advances have not typically emerged from the sociology of emotions but have, generally, taken up concerns within educational research. As a result, there has been a convergence and intertwining of academic knowledge from the Social Sciences (sociology, anthropology, political science, history) and the Humanities (pedagogy, didactics, psychology, philosophy) (Nobile, 2024; Zembylas, 2024). Given the diverse conceptual frameworks applied in this field, the distinction between emotions and affect (Ahmed, 2004; Gould, 2009; Papacharissi, 2015) is rarely observed in research on the emotional and affective dimensions of schooling -a pattern also evident in the articles of this Special Section. Consequently, these terms will be used interchangeably in this introduction.

However, as will be discussed further, more and more research is emerging that integrates concepts developed in both educational and emotional-affective studies. A retrospective view of how this field of study has been delineated—though not exhaustive due to the limitations of this text—reveals its early origins with Anglo-Saxon scholars in the 1990s. Notable works include those by Andy Hargreaves (2000, 2001), who examines the sources of emotions experienced by teachers concerning the "emotional grammar" of each educational level, and Megan Boler's (1999) book, which reconstructs the relationship between emotions, power, and social control in schools. Subsequently, Diane Reay's work—one of the prominent scholars included in this Special Section—, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts, has documented the role of educational institutions in shaping certain emotional experiences that contribute to the production of social classes (Reay, 2004, 2005). With her concept of "emotional capital", the author shows the emotional resources that families, especially mothers, invest in the educational development of their children and reveals that these resources are clearly crossed by class and gender dimensions. More recently, research has focused on the role of affect in learning dispositions, as seen in Megan Watkins' (2016) work, as well as Michalinos Zembylas' (2016) exploration of the emotional regime of social justice and its ethical and political implications. Kathleen Lynch—also included in this Special Section—has also developed a powerful line of research focused on the importance of affective equality as a central element of educational and social justice (Lynch, 2012).

Another ongoing line of research addresses the prevalence of a therapeutic *ethos* that gradually permeates educational settings (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2008; Zembylas, 2016). Within this framework, some studies take a critical position in front of the dominant concept of "emotional education" which mostly adopts an individualising and therapeutic approach through a series of "recipes" focused on emotional literacy and socio-emotional skills development. From a critical educational perspective, this approach has been seen as part of the neoliberal commodification of education, aimed at producing a flexible subject adaptable to current living conditions, constantly strengthening their human capital to become more competitive and make profitable use of their emotions (Bornhauser and Garay Rivera, 2023; Sorondo, 2023). These critiques also highlight the psychological approach that emphasises the individual dimension of affect, disconnecting emotions from relational networks and institutional settings (Abramowski, 2018; Nobile, 2017). Two articles of this Special section, the ones of Kristiina Brunila and colleagues,

and Megan Watkins, contribute to this research line by addressing the risks associated with therapeutic discourses that focus on vulnerability and resilience.

Continuing this brief review of research on education, emotions, and affect, a significant theme emerges in various regions: the role of emotions in teaching work. Studies explore the sources of this emotionality, the prevailing emotional rules, and the emotional labour required to conform to them, drawing -as we can see- on Arlie Hochschild's concepts (Abramowski, 2010; Henao-Arias *et al.*, 2017; Olson *et al.*, 2019; Willaa, 2024). Other research has examined emotional tensions and reactions related to multicultural encounters and expressions of racism in schools, as well as the political dimension of students' and teachers' emotions linked to social justice, equity, and democracy—topics primarily addressed in the Global North (Zembylas, 2024). Additionally, studies have focused on the implications of emotions in educational inclusion-exclusion processes arising from relationships within the school (Bayón and Saraví, 2019; Brummer, 2024; Nobile, 2014; Tarabini, 2019), and those that explore conflicts and violence within peer interactions (di Nápoli, 2016; Kaplan, 2006; Olsson, 2020; Prieto Quezada *et al.*, 2005).

This brief overview indicates that in the last 10-15 years, significant progress has been made, though it remains insufficient in investigating emotions and affect in schools, particularly given the structural power that the school institution continues to exert in social life, both collectively and individually. This power became particularly evident during the pandemic of COVID-19; the closure of this space for social integration and, in certain cases, the transfer of the school environment to homes destabilised family dynamics and adult work performance, revealing the extent to which much of the population's daily life is intertwined with the phenomenon of schooling (Bonal and González, 2020; Tarabini, 2022b). Moreover, even several years after the pandemic, emotional aftereffects such as depression and anxiety have increased among adolescents. Thus, the post-pandemic context presents a unique opportunity to explore how schools can become spaces for addressing this emotional distress and regenerate relational networks that foster interaction, solidarity, care, recognition, and respect as structuring values of school experiences.

Moreover, beyond the pandemic, contemporary educational systems face multiple challenges that have generated growing controversies about their role, functions and relevance as a specialised institution in the 21st century. Neoliberalism, digitalization, the

rise of the extreme right, and the crisis of the welfare state have raised multiple questions about the capacity of schools to contribute to social mobility, to the construction of democratic values or even to guarantee deep and meaningful learning for all students. Simultaneously, the increasing levels of poverty, segregation, and inequality manifested at a global scale, together with the extension of market-driven policies, have increased competitive pressures on educational systems and reinforced the patterns of social injustice that traverse them. In this context, manifestations of anxiety, demotivation, and lack of meaning and purpose are increasingly evident among teachers and students. Affective forms of injustice are indeed central to any holistic conception of justice in education (Lynch and Baker, 2005). The affective domain of life is a key site for the (re)production of social inequality, and yet emotions have been largely peripheral to debates about inequality in sociology in general and in the sociology of education in particular. It is therefore crucial to remain attentive to the types of discursive matrices that prevail in approaches to emotions within educational institutions (Nobile and Gamba, 2024), as how emotions are handled in educational settings constitutes a contested terrain of differing meanings. Moreover, approaches to researching schooling and its processes of inequality require a framework that integrates not only the material, cultural, and political dimensions of inequality but also the fundamental role of (dis)affects (Lynch et al., 2021).

School experiences, as they unfold over time, accumulate in such a way that they lead to a differential accumulation of emotional energy (Collins, 2019). This accumulation can manifest through relationships that strengthen solidarity and belonging within the school, generating feelings of personal trust. However, it may also arise from connections that limit our full membership in school life. Recent research has shown how processes such as failure and school dropout can be explained through powerful expressive, subjective, and symbolic mechanisms related to the sense of belonging students develop towards their schools (Tarabini *et al.*, 2018). These are manifested through curricular, pedagogical, and evaluation modalities, as well as in interactions with teachers and peers, shaping school trajectories that are marked by different, yet unequal, experiences.

Despite the evolution of the sociology of emotions over four decades, its application to education remains limited, as does its conceptualisation. Often, studies only describe affectivity in schools. While concepts from the *affective turn*, such as the “affective economies” proposed by Ahmed, have begun to be incorporated into the field of

sociology of education (some examples are Ideland and Serder, 2023; Sellar, 2017; and Zembylas, 2009), more in-depth exploration is needed regarding how these theories can shed light on specific educational experiences. Issues related to social and educational discrimination are crucial to understand how they affect students' life possibilities. There is a lack of research addressing the emotions of individuals, affective atmospheres, or emotional regimes in schools, considering the particularities of educational levels, types of educational supply, and different school spaces (e.g., classrooms associated with teaching and learning, playgrounds, restrooms, etc.). Furthermore, empirical research needs to be strengthened to systematically collect data on this aspect of school life. It is particularly important to explore contributions that delve into the articulation of political, institutional, and subjective dimensions of (dis)affects in education along lines of class, gender, ethnicity, and other forms of inequality. In short, it is necessary to continue to study in depth the multiple forms of (dis)affect in educational contexts from a multi-scale perspective which accounts for their diverse expressions, conditions and impacts. This approach should also advance theoretically and empirically the meaning of care in education, thus moving towards a complex understanding of the implications of care (and lack of care) for the present and future of education systems and society at large.

This Special Section on schooling, social inequalities, and the role of affects and emotions includes four articles by esteemed authors who have made significant contributions to advancing our understanding of the implications of affect in educational experiences, as well as the influence of discourses on emotion management in contemporary policies.

Diane Reay in her article "*The emotional landscape of social class in English education*" discusses -by means of classic concepts from Pierre Bourdieu- how emotions, especially anxiety, stress, and fear of failure, affect students, particularly those from working-class backgrounds. This allows for a reflection on the influence of social class on students' emotional experiences in the educational context. In this way, and in a brilliant one, she shows us how working-class students often experience significant emotional distress, in contrast to their more privileged peers, through experiencing the school environment in a much more oppressive way. The article also provides us with tools to understand the discomfort that competition and the obsession with measurement and evaluation generate in school institutions, affecting the emotional well-being of their students. In this way, recent educational policies have made the school space a less accessible and more painful

place for working-class students. The findings of this article conclude the need to consider emotions as a crucial factor in the discussion on social inequality in education.

Next, Kathleen Lynch and Anne Lodge, in their contribution “*Metricisation in School: An Affective and Epistemic Injustice*”, deepen into one of the aspects discussed in the Reay’s article in this section and brilliantly show us the effects of the assessment, comparison, and classification practices that are commonly used in schools on the emotional distress of pupils. Lynch and Lodge focus specifically on the role that metricisation plays in exacerbating both affective and epistemic injustices in education and in the broader society, which, in turn, exacerbate classism and ableism in education. In their analysis, the authors present a fine critique of some of the most naturalized concepts in the educational field, such as intelligence, merit, or evaluation. Their concepts of affective, epistemic, and hermeneutic injustice illuminate how power dynamics shape which knowledge is valued in educational settings and how certain experiences are either privileged or marginalized. Lynch and Lodge emphasize that these forms of injustice restrict the ability to challenge existing inequalities or advocate for change, thus reinforcing the continued marginalization of affected groups. Their analysis also encourages us to envision a reorganization of educational systems where care, love, and solidarity are universal rights, transcending the values of competitiveness and individualism.

The third article of this Special Section, written by Kristiina Brunila, Inka Tähkä, and Maija Lanas is entitled “*Cultural Practices, Young People, and the Ethos of Vulnerability in Finland*”. The article engages in dialogue with studies addressing the "emotionalisation" of education in a context of rising neoliberalism. The authors analyse how the “therapeutic ethos”, and its focus on vulnerability, permeates the cultural practices implemented in social policies aimed at serving young people in Finland. As the article demonstrates, these policies promote an "affective subjectivation" that conditions the identity of these young beneficiaries, understanding themselves as vulnerable. This process amplifies the approach that promotes individualised and psycho-emotional interventions, which leads to a greater perception of personal vulnerability, limiting the conditions of possibility, transformation and change for these young people. In this way, social problems become personal problems to be solved through the imperative of happiness and positivity. Likewise, the analysis is attentive to gender differences and shows us how this vulnerability *ethos* not only reinforces neoliberal rationality but also

gender normativity, focusing specifically on the impacts it has on the construction of a particular type of masculinity.

The final article in the Section is written by Megan Watkins and is entitled “*The affective dimensions of resilience: rethinking its role in working with students of refugee backgrounds*”. The author draws on Bourdieu's and Spinoza's proposals to masterfully show the material, contextual, and dispositional dimensions of affect. From here, the text offers a penetrating analysis of resilience concept that represents a critical alternative to the dominant psychological conception that understands and approaches it as an individual quality of inner strength. Based on a detailed analysis of the situation, discourses, and interventions with students from refugee backgrounds in schools in New South Wales, Australia, the article demonstrates that resilience is a capacity grounded in what an individual does, not simply what they think and feel. Moreover, as the author argues, this capacity is reliant upon the accumulation of certain affects that require considerable time and work to be done with and through the support of others. Ensuring a better future for students from refugee backgrounds, and for those from disadvantaged backgrounds in general, therefore involves developing specific pedagogical practices that can engender bonding, belonging, and learning for all students.

Taken together, the articles in this Special Section demonstrate that both ignoring and individualising affect are nothing more than a neoliberal device that contributes to creating and reinforcing social distress, while reproducing and amplifying social inequalities. Given the role that the educational field plays in the production of individuals and the structuring of societies, it is, therefore, crucial to continue exploring the role that emotions, (dis)affects, and care play in these processes.

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