



Opinion

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Anthropological Speculations about Education in Pandemic Times

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When summer comes in the North hemisphere, school corridors may smell of fresh air, a sense of a new beginning, as teachers and students are headed for a new school year. However, not this August in many countries, because of the coronavirus pandemic. The world is facing an ongoing movement of educational institution closures. Suddenly, academic organizations switched to remote learning, in response to the worries about spreading covid-19. In doing so, might distance learning be a death sentence for schools, those old-fashioned technologies created by modern society?

According to Sibilia [1], the school is one of the institutions, alongside factories, psychiatric hospitals and prisons, which arose in the period concomitant to bourgeois revolutions with the ideal of disciplining and formatting docile and useful bodies for a capitalist economy. Using prison and the army as a model, school apparatus should be places where each body would constitute itself as part of a machine. In Foucault's words (p. 165): "the school became a machine for learning, in which each pupil, each level and each moment, if correctly combined, were permanently utilized in the general process of teaching [2]."

Sibilia [1] calls our attention to the need of recognizing school devices while late eighteenth-century technologies, a period in which society thought itself as being egalitarian, fraternal and democratic. It was necessary, then, to assume the responsibility of educating all citizens, teaching them to read, write and do mathematical operations, in a process of standardization of the multiplicity. Therefore, in the light of that proposal, educational institutions were created.

At the time of capitalism's gestation, the rigid separation between the public and private spheres orchestrated the construction of a solipsist subject, whose subjectivity would be seen as a kind of hidden place to which few people could ascend. In other words, modern individualism was almost equivalent to internalized life. Consequently, the school, with its logic of confinement, was suited with the ideals of these times.

Nonetheless, points Sibilia [1], isolation and interior life are relics of a past that is increasingly distant. In a world dominated by new portable technologies and digital networks, there is no more room for internalized subjectivities. The old intimacy has allowed itself to dialogue with several intrusions of what happens in the online environment. In taking into account this context, students and teachers would easily assimilate distance learning as countrywide shutdowns caused by coronavirus remain in place in several countries.

However, a glimpse in articles published by the most important newspapers in the world - such as The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Guardian - about the distance learning during these pandemic times may reveal some different predictions. Although the coronavirus may revive the unschooling ideas, what we are seeing is a flood of concerns, anxieties and complaints towards the education mediated by digital technologies. While Zoom and Google Meet, amongst other platforms, were adopted by schools in replacement to face-to-face classes, both teachers and students, let alone equally several specialists, from pediatricians to computer scientists and psychologists, are describing problems and even damages generated by virtual instruction.

Here I am going to emphasize an image described by the anthropologist Karen Strassler [3]. In confessing her preferences in relation to small intimate classrooms, where we can face each other around a table and conversation goes easily, Strassler (p. 4) claims: "in these classrooms, students meet one another as apparent equals. They sit in the same chairs [3]." It is exactly that illusion of egalitarianism - an implicit contract of the school - what is vanishing in remote learning.

School's disciplinary power worked through the uniformization and confinement of students in the classroom. Sharing the same space and dressing the school uniform, everybody seems equals in front of the teacher. Now, with virtual instruction, some disparities became more wide open, namely: those students with reliable broadband connection along with a quiet place in which to study and finish assessments and those without these conditions; those pupils who own a single laptop or tablet and those who share these hardwares with several relatives; those parents who can assist their sons with turning on a device, logging into an app, understanding instructions, clicking in the correct place, typing answers and keeping on tasks [4] and those who were less likely to spend amounts of time on homeschooling; those children who rely on schools for free or profitable meals, for counseling and for after-school activities and hobbies while parents are busy and those whose school enrollment is not tied to social services and assistance policies [5]; and those countries that scores highest rates in digital performance, such as Finland, Sweden and Denmark, and those that still have a long way to go, for example, Pakistan, whose distant learning is a single television channel [6].

Even when necessary hardware is all in place, the offscreen agreement of the classroom, where pupils own a certain degree of control over what sides of their experiences outside of school come into view, is fading away. Engaged in remote learning, sometimes their personal lives leak into the screen, against their wills. As we use to post our intimacies in social networks, in particular, Instagram and Facebook, creating visible subjectivities, those more suitable to current times, the blurred boundaries between public and private

spheres should not embarrassing us, but in video lessons, images of bedrooms, photos, objects of decoration, and even parents and pets moving like shadows in the background, are causing a new and unwanted sense of closeness [3]. Reading reports about distance learning experiences may raise to us questions about if isolation and interior life are really outdated experiences.

Since their early periods, schools have been managing their students by redistributing them in closed spaces and homogenizing them through the logic of age groups. Despite this *modus operandi* has been used to build docile bodies, it also created a sense of community and belonging hardly mimicked in other fields. And because of their ability in creating the tale of egalitarianism, a making-believe story without which democratic societies cannot survive, schools still have a long life to come, even though the competition from the mass media and the new digital technologies. Against all odds, the coronavirus pandemic has confirmed this sentence.

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Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

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