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Democracy, Schools, and Education

“A genuine educating society means more than a society of good schools. Among other things, it means a society with a healthy sense of what is good for the community and with a memory of its own cultural past.”

Educar ciudadanos, Concepción Naval¹

Abstract

What is the relationship between schools and a democratic model for civic life? This may be the purpose of the present work, which seeks to be, essentially, a study in the field of education. We face a series of difficulties in government and in democratic life; hence the question of whether we are democrats or not —not because we deny it, but because of the evident facts. We seek to approach concepts of the citizen and citizenship, and to identify within the curricular structure of our schools possible formal difficulties, whether in the curriculum itself, in the conception underlying the creation

1 Concepción Naval, *Educar Ciudadanos*, EUNSA, Pamplona, España, 1995, 13.

of these institutions, or in the framework of laws that do not lead us toward the development of democracy. In general, at the end of this paper, we venture to offer, very briefly, some recommendations for school structures and teacher training.

Introduction

Initiating research into democracy using indicators from the formal educational process requires a set of basic premises that relate not only to pedagogy as a science, but also to a disposition of the spirit known as justice.

Justice has to do with kindness, tolerance, recognition of merit, proportionality, solidarity, balance, honesty, integrity, responsibility—in short, everything related to respect for and the exercise of human dignity. It is not an option to be considered only by charitable and sensitive people in their efforts to help others, but rather a disposition that should compel every person to recognize the inherent worth of every other human being. In this sense, we are in the realm of ethics and, on the side of the school, in that of moral development as one of the necessary aims of schooling.

Moral development is addressed within formal school settings because it is necessary to cultivate habits of behavior and thought in order to educate the kind of citizenship required by the times. Rubio Carracedo (1999) states this clearly in one of his publications:

We have still not found the formula for reconciling, or at least for avoiding tensions between, ethics and politics without irreparably damaging one or the other. This does not mean that the Enlightenment project has failed, as McIntyre (1981) believes; it is likely that we have not found such a formula

precisely because it does not exist, because such tensions are inevitable and may even be a source of fecundity for both.²

In the following pages, we will attempt to explain the relationship between education and a system of government—democracy—which some authors define as a way of life and which, therefore, requires habits of conduct and customs deeply rooted in citizens, known as citizenship.

The various circumstances to which we have been subjected in the country in recent years prompt us to investigate, from the perspective of the intentional process of transmission, how this form of government is achieved.

Some Definitions, or Why It Seems We Are Not Democrats

It might seem that the definition of a system of government as widespread, at least nominally, as democracy is already well known. Nevertheless, it is not superfluous to examine the basic features of this system in an attempt to improve or refine our understanding of the concept. In this regard, Robert Dahl wrote some interesting observations in one of his publications:

An important cause of the confusion over what democracy means in our present world is that it has developed over several thousand years and stems from a variety of sources. What we understand by democracy is not what an Athenian in the time of Pericles would have understood by it. Greek, Roman, medieval, and Renaissance notions intermingle with those of later centuries to produce a jumble of theory and practices that are often deeply inconsistent.

2 José Rubio Carracedo, *Paradigmas de la política: del estado justo al estado legítimo* : Platón, Marx, Rawls, Nozick, Anthropos, Barcelona, 1999, p. 22.

What is more, a close look at democratic ideas and practices is bound to reveal a considerable number of problems for which no definitive solution seems to exist. The very notion of democracy has always provided a field day for critics. Critics are roughly of three kinds: those fundamentally opposed to democracy because, like Plato, they believe that while it may be possible it is inherently undesirable; those fundamentally opposed to democracy because, like Robert Michels, they believe that, while it might be desirable if it were possible, in actuality it is inherently impossible; and those sympathetic to democracy and wishing to maintain it but nonetheless critical of it in some important regard. The first two might be called adversarial critics, the third sympathetic critics.³ A modern author reflects on the term and offers several interesting criteria worth considering for a detailed analysis. Lalander, R., notes that democracy at this point is not what was originally conceived in Athens, and that it must be viewed or understood in a manner specific to the education of those communities and to the various idiosyncrasies that are experienced or formed within them.⁴

Some authors define democracy as an attempt to establish aristocracy in all citizens—that is, to make them all excellent through virtue. Clearly, democracy vitally requires civic habits, as well as intellectual habits, that will prevent the system from

3 Robert A. Dahl, *La democracia y sus críticos*, Paidós, Barcelona, España, 2002, pp. 10-11.

4 “Modern democracies are not as simple as the political system of Aristotele’s Athens. Political institutions change and the studies of political have proven to be cumulative. Further, the behavior and development of one political system is affected by other political system is seldom isolated”. Richard Lalander, *Suicide of the Elephants? (Venezuelan Decentralization between partyarchy and chavismo)*, Institute of Latin American Studies, Monograph 42, Stockholm University, Finland, 2004. p. 17.

faltering. This is a frequent occurrence, as a contemporary author such as Aníbal Romero writes:

Societies, in other words, do not perish from ‘natural causes’; only rarely do they disintegrate as the result of a ‘murder’ (external aggression). The most frequent cause of deterioration and failure is suicide: the consequence of deficiencies in the leadership’s creative capacity. These failures can manifest themselves in two ways: through demagoguery or authoritarianism. Either because leaders, out of weariness and complacency, surrender themselves to the dangerous art of deceiving the majorities, or because, driven by excessive ambition and a lack of humility, they oppress the majority, thereby breaking the bond of loyalty and credibility that sustained the system.⁵

There are, in my view, several causes of this apparent failure of education. The most fundamental is that there is an attempt to teach cognitively something that is not merely theoretical, but rather a practice, a “way of life,” as democracy is. Schools, however, have systems that are not precisely democratic and are often quite the opposite. Features of this kind of school range from requiring students to sit physically wherever the teacher “wants,” under threat of sanctions, to oppressive schedules designed more for the teacher’s convenience, and even to a form of “discipline” that seeks not to cultivate habits in students but simply to ensure peace and quiet for teachers. J. Dewey writes:

One of the most important instruments for producing democratic men is a school system structured for that purpose (...) Therefore, the task of schools is not only to unite the minds of generations, but to form personalities through the organi-

5 Aníbal Romero, *La Miseria del Populismo*, Prólogo, Ediciones Centauro, Caracas, 1994.

zation or method, as well as through the content of the institution.⁶

The various curricula and activity programs produced by the State reflect the thinking of the officials who drafted them at a given time. Notwithstanding whatever shortcomings they may have, a body responsible for oversight and planning is necessary. And this must always be understood in relation to a city that requires order, even though that order may sometimes degenerate into the temptation of command for command's sake —that is, into authoritarianism, potentially progressing as far as totalitarianism. We echo Naval's observation:

The man whose image is revealed in the works of the great Greeks is the political man. Education was not a sum of private arts and organizations aimed at forming a perfect and independent individual. A spirit detached from the State was as impossible as a State detached from the spirit.⁷

Going further into the subject, we realize that since justice is a necessary habit for democratic life, it is not transmitted through the communication of information or knowledge, but rather is the result of an "atmosphere" that one breathes within a community (in this case, the school community). By this same criterion, we perceive that another source of distortion lies in poorly established family customs concerning participation and constructive dialogue. These are cultivated through customs ranging from eating together and cultivating table manners and interpersonal civility to seeking better ways of living together, and these can only be cultivated within the family. It is a fact that

6 Cfr. John Dewey, *Democracia y educación: una introducción a la filosofía de la educación*, Ediciones Morata, 1996.

7 Cfr. Concepción Naval, *Educación Ciudadanos*, EUNSA, Pamplona, España, 1995.

our Venezuelan family reality is certainly a weak point when it comes to achieving democracy.

Other Definitions, the City and the Citizen

The classical concept of the polis is not merely the concept of a physical place —a space— for human coexistence and interaction. The characteristics of our present society, shaped by globalization and digital interconnection, have given human communities unexpected new dimensions. At present, a city is far more complex than anything it might have been in antiquity. Simply by observing the various forms of technology used in the home —information technology— which allows people to communicate across great distances instantaneously and without physically moving through space, conduct economic transactions, and access academic education with no greater inconvenience than having a PC at their disposal, we can conclude that the culture and civilization of our time are entirely different from those of earlier periods.

This necessarily determines the educational condition of individuals and the various plans and programs, as well as people's circumstances with regard to their work and access to the productive sphere, as a consequence of their academic training.

New legal provisions necessarily emerge governing inter- personal relationships that bear no resemblance to the social relations of earlier periods. The technological leap brought about a new conception of life: in the physical sphere, in the movement and transportation of people within cities, and in mass transit, affecting the circumstances of families, education, and modes of economic production. Naval continues by outlining the foundations of this line of thought:

Education and institutions are like the two columns that support the edifice of the city. They have the same end: the

happiness and prosperity of the social body (...) therefore, pedagogy and politics have the same end: the happiness of the city; and they have the same foundation: human psychology.⁸

These changes have been so far-reaching that the original concept of the citizen in past and classical periods is entirely different from what we might call the citizen of our own time. It is worth clarifying the various stages or dimensions that define this element. The inhabitant of the city must possess *certain habits* that constitute citizenship, certain specific *legal dimensions* that determine their identity, and both of these give rise to *political commitments*. Together with the *social requirements*, these would form the basis of what we might call citizenship.

The Structure of Our School and the Structure
We Would Like for Democracy

An author wrote years ago that a school is a place where *memory and desires* converge. The idea of education taking place in a setting such as a school entails the community's commitment to achieving a series of elements that shape a citizen, and those elements are subordinated to desires linked to the common good of that community. Ensuring that this common good is truly what is desired, while also being what has been "filtered" through the memory established by past achievements and apparent achievements, is one of the characteristics that is particularly important to that community. For this reason, when the government of a community is constituted, its actions should be guided by the pursuit of virtue in the citizen through the system of laws and formal school education. Otherwise, a properly constituted civil society cannot emerge, and the process of solving and resolving problems becomes arduous, frequently leading to dead ends.

8 Idem.

Touraine observes: “...what is valid for society is also valid for the individual. The education of the individual must be a discipline that frees him from the narrow, irrational vision imposed upon him by his own passions and his family, and opens him to rational knowledge and participation in a society that organizes reason.”⁹ Rethinking the school structure that has governed us for so many years is an interesting subject.

The search for reasons why a system of government fails to produce what is desired, in terms of the people who participate in it and the fruits yielded by that same system, is usually conducted within the educational system as a mental construct, but less frequently does one consider the structure of the school as a social institution. There is a difference between these two concepts: one is the idea, while the other is life itself in a classroom. This distinction is pertinent because the various levels that make up a school, and those that define an educational system or school project as such, are not always clearly understood.

In the first case, the structure of a school depends greatly on the culture of the community in which it is embedded, or on the motivations that gave rise to it—that is, the ideologies and the reasons that produced the institution. On the other hand, that school has or follows programmatic guidelines and employs means to achieve the objectives it seeks to accomplish through the activities, content, and actions characteristic of the educational environment.

An interesting proposal along these lines is a “school project” that was initiated in several places throughout the country. However, it failed to reflect all the effort of the institutions and individuals involved in the project and, like many things in the

9 Alain Touraine, *Crítica de la Modernidad*, Fondo de Cultura Económico. México, 1994, p. 20..

country, ultimately became identified with the environment of the school or community in which it was implemented. As a result, it lost its distinct identity as a project and became simply another part of the existing system.

Democracy requires a particular kind of teacher, both in terms of academic and cultural education. That is, a teacher who is open to dialogue, capable of listening, free from stereotyped prejudices about people or groups engaged in intellectual production, and who possesses the habit of deliberation and of correcting errors once they have been identified. Such teachers are not being trained by the various schools of education or teacher-training institutions in the country. An additional “plus” is needed in those who train them, one that lies in the realm of culture and the formation of personal character, rather than merely in academic specialization. Training is required in an environment of freedom and spiritual openness, one that develops people’s character more than their erudition, without, of course, neglecting the latter.

Some Means Appropriate to These Ends

We frequently ask ourselves where these undemocratic habits among the people with whom we live in this country come from.

If we conceive of democracy as something that is learned, then there must be some problem in the educational processes. This brings us to the heart of the matter concerning the many problems involved in the transmission of knowledge, and there we find our first task: to achieve the agreement that will strengthen our ability to attain the goals we have set. The possibility of consensus within the educational process of a democratic system is central—indeed, vital—to the preservation of the system. We cannot conceive of a nondemocratic educational system for the purpose of educating people with a democratic mentality. It is, unfortunately,

a system that is frequently repressive, one that provides little opportunity for dialogue, does not cultivate deliberation or critical thinking through questioning. Briceño Iragorri writes:

In a democracy that does not respect the higher life of the spirit and does not allow itself to be guided by it, where demagoguery has free rein, national life is rapidly and easily lowered to the level of mediocrity, for demagoguery insists on bringing culture down to the level of the masses instead of raising the masses to a higher plane through education.¹⁰

The transfer of government is not, as we might suppose, simply an activity involving a change of leadership. It should be the consequence of an attitude toward life, toward natural and communal events, arising from a particular kind of education. So, what does a change of government really mean? In reality, it represents the genuine continuity of habits of civic action—diligence, for example—of habits of thought, and of ideals that transcend one’s own actions, placing the “dignity of the other” as the guiding principle of civic life.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Since education is a necessary and important undertaking for the individual, and even more so for the person, it is something that belongs to the community before it belongs to any other institution. This activity is above all a process of optimizing the possibilities given to a person by nature, through which they establish a connection with the reality that surrounds them, particularly their social reality.

10 Mario Briceño Iragorri, *La Hora Undécima*. Ediciones de la Presidencia de la Republica, Caracas, 1956, p. 94.

This makes the State, as an entity arising from the social nature of the human person, responsible, first and foremost, for ensuring that education *functions*, and then, perhaps through a process of decentralizing responsibilities to the communities that govern educational institutions, for demanding that it *function well*. This is because, although the State is responsible for creating and maintaining schools, it cannot bear the entire burden —nor is it within its competence— of what constitutes the actual quality and relevance of education. Hannah Arendt expresses this clearly:

*“It is not the family but the State, that is, the public world, that requires school attendance, and consequently, in relation to the child, the school comes to represent the world, even though it is not, in fact, the world.”*¹¹

One of the first recommendations we can make in this regard is to decentralize the educational process and grant the greatest possible decision-making power to the assemblies of parents and guardians at educational institutions throughout the country. This would initially lead to a series of mistakes in the management and administration of the school, but it is through this process that sound leadership can emerge, as we learn —through trial and error— the various procedures involved. In this way, each school can be given the vital impetus it needs, as José A. Marina confirms:

Vital needs impose an adaptation to reality, communication with other beings, and cooperation with them on a practical level. All these things require the configuration, within the subject’s consciousness, of an objective, common, interpersonal, stable space.¹²

11 Hannah Arendt, *Entre el pasado y el futuro, Ocho ejercicios sobre la reflexión política*, Ediciones Península, Barcelona, 1996, p. 200.

12 José Antonio Marina, *Ética para Náufragos*, Ediciones Anagrama, Barcelona, 1998, p. 132.