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Critical Places Beyond the Psychology of Well-Being and Competitiveness

Tatiana Chemi¹ 

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Abstract The purpose of the present contribution is to look beyond the limits evident in dualistic discourses in educational practices. Torn between the promises of well-being or the *hard facts* of competitiveness, educational institutions at all levels of instruction might miss the point of a more holistic approach to learning and creativity. Looking beyond dichotomous discourses in educational practices is harder than ever, in a world where globalisation demands high standards of competitiveness and neoliberalism denies all but economic growth targets. Approaches that envision different solutions are necessarily imaginative, critical and alternative to rigid discourses. In order to find foundational evidence for alternative ways of thinking and talking about learning, I will look at how Dewian and Vygotskian conceptualisations walk the same paths and go towards holistic suggestions. Concluding remarks will address the disruptive potential of critical thinking in schools for the future.

Keywords Critical pedagogy · Holism · Dewey · Vygotsky · Feminism · Creative education

Dualistic Discourses

Educational and societal dualism, between discourses of well-being on one side and competitiveness discourses on the other, has been discussed in this issue in Thomas Szulevicz's article (2018). In the present contribution, I wish to take these observations further, in the direction of critical pedagogies, extending Szulevicz's perspectives to relational and cultural dynamics. Differently from Szulevicz, who focuses specifically on school psychologists, I will focus on the challenges that neoliberalism brings to

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educators and students. Neoliberal political and social developments in Western countries have polarised the opposition of any discourse in a paradoxical way: by denying the very existence of oppositions (all debates are flattened down in a suffocating consensus) and by reducing education to production stages, where production is meant not as the creative manufacturing of novel and appropriate solutions or problems, but rather as the industrial fabrication of standards.

Neoliberalism either opposes or is unable to discern the striving for happiness, on the one hand, from the aiming at competitiveness, on the other. The former pole is the rationale behind the happy society (Helliwell et al. 2017), which in educational practices is transformed into educational safe places, pedagogically correct practices, appreciative strategies and educational purposes based on *curling* dynamics. Denmark's astonishment at not being the happiest country in the world in 2017 (Helliwell et al. 2017) speaks of a global competitive spirit even regarding the *soft* conditions of life experiences.

The neoliberal discourse seems to value as competitive skills only a very limited range of human potential: the so-called hard skills that are restricted to logical and verbal reasoning. Applying the neoliberal rationale to schools means building *memory schools*, based on mnemonic skills rather than critical reasoning; it means valuing exclusively the right answer question, the single-question paradigm, and the quantification of learning outputs in standardised tests, in other words, the focus on didactics, even in counselling, mentioned in Szulevicz's article (2018). According to Adams and Owens (2015) it is possible to single out direct influences between political ideologies and educational practices. The belief that competition has a positive effect on growth and its twin belief that politics is a matter of conflict or consensus are affecting the ways in which education is conceived and designed. These either/or discourses completely impede any possibility of imagining and practicing true pluralism. If pluralism is the co-existence of different and sometimes opposed beliefs, neither antagonism nor consensus facilitate democratic pluralism. On the one side is the *agon*, the fight discourse, based on "the idea that politics proper can only occur when it is expression of the deep social division within a society" (Adams and Owens 2015, p. 10). On the other side are consensus ideologies, based on the appreciation of dialogue and social harmony, which have equally failed to embrace the complexities of social interactions. Quoting and expanding on Mouffe (2009), Adams and Owens (2015) describe consensus politics as a –paradoxically– impoverished version of true democracy. In the ideal society depicted by consensual conditions, no frictions can be accepted, but the "vacuum that is created by this absence of antagonism is filled with other expressions of conflict, such as the rise of nationalist, religious or ethnic fundamentalism" (Adams and Owens 2015, p. 11). Advocating for a pedagogy of creativity, Adams and Owens (2015) cannot but be critical towards standardisation and accountability discourses, creativity being that which is new and appropriate to given contexts (Chemi et al. 2015). Here I distinguish pedagogy, as the discipline of theories and practices dealing with learning and education, from educational practices, term that exclusively indicates the application of practices and is limited to the formal institutional system. When critical or creative pedagogies are mentioned here, I relate to theoretical definitions that are well-established in the domain of educational studies. Going back to Adams and Owens' critique of neoliberal influences on education (2015), one more consideration must be made on how pedagogical choices are strictly related to political values, social

behaviours and even educational policies. The two authors investigate the theoretical and practical ways in which education can nurture democratic behaviours and creativity, democracy and creativity being closely linked to each other. The ability to think creatively is based on liberatory practices that ask questions about the world, about one's self (self-criticism), or about cultures. At the same time, creative thinking nurtures and is nurtured by critical approaches that incline learners to agency. Pedagogies that do not allow for creative spaces are also ideologies that do not tolerate pluralistic critique. In his article, Szulevicz (2018) describes the educational reforms that are being established globally. This educational reform movement seems to be consistently characterised by ever increasing competition, standardisation of curricula, reliance on tests and measurements, privatisation of schools and devaluation of teacher professionalism, and on the reduction of any cultural or educational discourse to economic standards (*homo economicus*). This not only jeopardises any attempt to engage in creative practices but also prevents the good functioning of education.

Banks and Democracy

A similar concept is to be found in Freire's (2005) pedagogical theories with the expression *banking system*. With this term, Freire sarcastically describes education as the passive storage of knowledge for later use, which holds tragic consequences for education and society at large. Freire believes this pedagogical practice to be the core of brutal oppression and points to specific didactic elements that construct the oppressive classroom:

- a. the teacher teaches and the students are taught;
 - b. the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing;
 - c. the teacher thinks and the students are thought about;
 - d. the teacher talks and the students listen — meekly;
 - e. the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined;
 - f. the teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply;
 - g. the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher;
 - h. the teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it;
 - i. the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority, which she and he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students;
 - j. the teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects.
- (p. 73)

In neoliberal terms, the advantage of competitive –and oppressive– education is that all its elements are measurable quantitatively. Memory and banking items are directly assessable and accountable for. *Ergo* they are not only usable or comprehensible, but also applicable on a large scale. These tools that shape the classroom do not call for advocacy: they are intuitively graspable and accepted, *because* they so clearly produce quantifiable growth and bottom line. Standardisation of education has its brightest expression in the neoliberal school, and its tools are quantifiable outcomes that can be generalised and applied beyond contexts or differences. The assumption is that

individuals are all the same, and that in education they can get the same treatment, with the consequence that they will become the same. The industrial mindset has colonised the educational discourse, reducing learning processes to a standardised assembly line. Standardisation versus customisation of education has been mentioned in Robinson (2001), where some clear points are emphasised:

- we are caught up in a social and economic revolution
- to survive it we need a new conception of human resources
- to develop these resources, we need radically new strategies (p. 4).

According to Robinson (2001), societies not only need to foster creativity as a survival strategy, but also to apply creative solutions and mindsets to education and educational policies. As a consequence, he points out that it might not be enough to just raise past standards to meet new challenges, and that constantly measuring and testing students on their performance might not be the most appropriate strategy. “Kids are being tested as never before” (Robinson 2001, p. 51), which generates enormous pressure for expectations and consequently expressions of violence. Testing and unrealistically high academic standards, instead of achieving the wished-for effect of well-behaved, knowledgeable young people, tragically end up by encouraging perfectionism, pushing “individuals to put unrealistic pressure on themselves” (Robinson 2001, p. 52). In this way, neither society nor individuals get what they really need: free thinkers who can creatively imagine better ways to survive and live together.

Quantification, Equality and Creativity

Opposition and consensus discourses both miss the point of education in general philosophical terms, and in terms of specific challenges for an unknown future. It is problematic to formulate arguments for a holistic approach, because this approach escapes measurement and quantification, dealing as it does with beliefs, emotions, complexity and intuitions. Even the arguments for well-being are more easily sustained with *hard facts*, because educational models that are critical and democratic often involve paradoxical responses or transformative learning processes. Where well-being discourses only deal with what is positively perceived, pluralistic education can generate contradictory responses and ambiguity.

Adams and Owens (2015), inspired by Rancière, interpret contemporary strategies for educational design as implicitly and systematically sustaining antidemocratic behaviours. The all-knowing expert teacher, together with the testing system, undermines any genuine possibility for students (and teachers) to apply authentic creative behaviours in or out of the classroom. Educational designs that place the teacher’s expertise (and body) at the physical and psychological centre of the classroom stage a clear inequality between the teacher –who knows- and the students –who do not. Rancière’s *ignorant schoolmaster* (1991) challenges this perfect balance of expert/novice relationships and criticises this kind of education as a “deliberately obstructive process, which not only ensures that access to knowledge is governed and mediated by the teacher, but that it also structures the student, creating dependency” (according to Adams and Owens 2015, p. 8). As mentioned in Szulevicz’s article too (2018), students that are

socialised in this dependency upon experts and teachers learn that their own knowledge and understanding *must* be subject to the validation of explication. This validation only comes from experts who own the rights to explication and assessment. Which means that this kind of teacher has and uses unconditional control over the classroom: decisions about content and form, definition of understanding, exercise and enactment of expertise, and validation of performance. In other words, these teachers decide *what* should be learned and *how*, set rules on how a satisfying understanding of content can be recognised, present themselves as central to the classroom (physically placing themselves frontally and in the middle of the educational “stage”), and hold the absolute power of judging the students’ performance. Adams and Owens (2015) warn against the inequality of this model that cannot but stimulate “the acquiescence of the learner, who has internalised the erroneous belief that understanding cannot occur beyond the structures of explication and its subsequent validation” (p. 8). Individuals socialised within these structures cannot be critical, for the simple reason that they are victims of the neoliberal deception of freedom and consensus. Quantification of students’ performance and teacher-driven classrooms are more than educational models - they become the very instruments of inequality.

Creative education is sometimes strongly emphasised in neoliberal discourses as the panacea for endless growth and economic development, but as a matter of fact creativity is feared in neoliberal educational systems. As a practice that brings about the unknown, creativity might be troublesome, because “any disruption is an unwanted obstacle on the way towards fulfilling teacher’s and school system’s educational objectives”, as Szulevicz et al. (2016, p. 448) discuss. Disruptive practices, dealing with chaos and with the unknown, and radical innovation are all disliked in organisations and policies that are based on inequality paradigms. This is quite understandable, as creativity escapes both discourses of antagonism and consensus. The happiness objective (Lyubomirsky 2008) and beliefs about social harmony do not take into account the dark side of creativity: hard work, frustrations, mistakes, painful transformational processes, persistence, and bold spaces. The competitive paradigm also ignores the fact that the fundamentals of creation are intrinsic in environments that offer time and chance to fail, opportunities for experimentation, and *waste*. Moreover, competitiveness ignores pleasure as a fundamental human drive, trivialising the pleasure of learning, of researching, of knowing, of creating as unnecessary fringe products (Riddle et al. 2017). Oblivious to these contradictions, liberal economies try to stay in the saddle of a dangerous horse, which risks overthrowing their very core beliefs –inequality, dependency, control- but hoping, too, to tame the creative beast. In this case, creativity can be trivialised into what experts –geniuses, talented people- *have* and define, and what educational institutions reduce to isolated and meaningless idea-generation exercises.

Beyond Dualism

One exemplary case of how learning discourses fail to recognise connections and instead focus on oppositions is the debate around an article by Michael Glassman (2001). This article discussed the theories of Dewey and Vygotsky, offering dualistic interpretations that were later challenged (O’Brien 2002; Prawat 2002). On the one part, the theories of Dewey and Vygotsky jointly contribute to explain the core concepts

of holistic education, learning and human development, and can be mentioned here to support visions of pluralistic and democratic education. On the other part, the attempt to define the two theories as opposed to each other is telling of a general need for labels and demarcations in the field of educational studies. In his “Dewey and Vygotsky: Society, Experience, and Inquiry in Educational Practice”, Glassman (2001) looks at how activity translates into Dewey’s pragmatism and Vygotsky’s cultural psychology. Specifically, he looks at activity as the major motivation for learning and digs deeply into the two theories. Of course, he cannot fail but find many points of overlap in the concepts of activity, experience and inquiry. However, his conclusion is that Dewey “promotes individualism, whereas Vygotsky sees the social organization as the central agent of change” (Glassman 2001, p. 12). This sharp distinction and several of the arguments he brought to this conclusion were subsequently criticised in O’Brien (2002) and Prawat (2002). According to Glassman (2001), the strong focus on activity as a systematic teaching tool and educational strategy posed several problems to Dewey and Vygotsky. The first was the role of teachers in the classroom: pragmatism and constructivism challenge the role of expert, but might end up retaining unequal power relationships in the role of mentor, while the role of facilitator allows a broader student participation. Given that Dewey’s concept of *experience* (Dewey 2005) can be interpreted as being equivalent to Vygotsky’s concept of *culture* (Vygotsky 2012), even in Glassman’s differentiation (2001), the role of teachers in these processes can be of mentor if they help students to achieve their potential, or as absent facilitator who lets the students be in full charge of the learning process. According to Glassman (2001), “the role of the adult as social interlocutor” (p. 4) is clear in Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development, which is the area of not-yet-achieved learning which the learner can enter, once skilfully guided by a more expert adult. This is the zone of potential, but not yet achieved, learning, into which teachers aim to guide learners: “these adults mentor children in specific, culturally appropriate activity (...). The role of the educational process is to prepare children for more complex activity in the larger social community” (Glassman 2001, p. 4). In contrast to this, Dewey’s proposition in the classroom is the design of long-term projects based on the students’ immersion in real-life problems and everyday activities. Here, Glassman describes the role of the teacher as characterised by absence and the learning process as –almost naturally- *coalescing* around topics that are interesting to the students, but not necessarily to the teacher or relevant to curriculum. The teacher is expected to “step back from the process once children display a relevant interest and act as facilitator rather than mentor. It is the student who must drive the inquiry based on their own goals” (Glassman 2001, p. 4). Moreover, Dewey’s experiential approaches were interpreted as process-oriented and less ideological than Vygotsky’s theories, and the freedom advocated in Dewey was opposed to Vygotsky’s cultural enquiry: “Dewey’s solution is to educate the individual and diversify the social milieu so that the tools will be brought into question (a bottom-up/indeterminate approach). Vygotsky wants to use the educational process to teach new members of the social community how to ‘use’ important, culturally developed tools in an effective manner (a top-down/determinate approach)” (Glassman 2001, p. 6). Some consequences of this interpretation were that in Dewey the teaching and learning processes are free and unstructured, almost naturally emerging from indeterminate conditions, and in Vygotsky “social history can, to a certain extent, limit the types of experience possible” (Glassman 2001, p. 8).

In their critique of Glassman (2001), O'Brien (2002) and Prawat (2002) not only shed light on holistic educational theories that bring consistent arguments to the design of education beyond any dualism, but also model scholarly disagreements based on agonistic epistemologies. According to O'Brien (2002), in Dewey holistic approaches condensed into his concept of *unity*, which became for him an educational ideal he sought to realise in practice. Unity implies that process, content and product in education (as in other cultural phenomena, such as art) are profoundly inseparable, and that the processes of teaching and learning are organically linked to each other and to real life. In this sense, individual and society are *not* divided or opposed, nor are they to be confused with each other. The educational consequences are clear. The role of teachers is not to be absent, giving up any responsibility in favour of the students' own interests, but is a very active initiative. Teachers are gardeners, who organically cultivate their own and their students' interests and maintain a central role in enabling students to see and accept differences, "to look critically at previously accepted beliefs in the light of new experiences" (O'Brien 2002, p. 21), to accept the challenges of real-life problems and complex tasks. Teachers are not the filter through which students are expected to see the world, but the builders of promising conditions that can support learning and development. This educational gardening must perforce be a mentoring role - differently to what Glassman (2001) says, it is a role that "closely resembles Vygotsky's notion of scaffolding" (O'Brien 2002, p. 22). However, in neither theory does this guidance imply either the tragic absence or the suffocating presence of teachers in the students' learning process. The teachers described in these theories – and developed in practice in Dewey's Laboratory School (Mayhew and Edwards 1966)- guide and facilitate others, but as learning is based on individual *experiences*, the expertise has to be placed on the learner's side. Learners are experts of their own experiences, and any learning process that aims at being engaging and personally meaningful cannot but include this perspective. Dewey used the masculine metaphor of gardening, but my association is with midwifery. The teacher as midwife is an ancient metaphor going back to Plato's *Theaetetus* (Chappell 2013), a dialogue where Socrates engages in a conversation on *Maieutics*, the art of giving birth to ideas and knowledge.

One last remark on this exemplary case of holistic theories and the dualistic misconceptions about them, is that the implications of these theories for education are still under-investigated. Their hypothetically disruptive potential lies basically in two elements: 1) socialist and democratic ideals, 2) the unsettling of classroom teaching. The first element is far from being mere ideas or ideals, and has been practiced as concrete educational experiments both in Dewey, for instance with the Laboratory School (Mayhew and Edwards 1966) and in Vygotsky, for example in his work with special needs students (Vygotsky 1993). Designing learning environments for underprivileged groups or investigating the dynamics of cultural exclusion are acts of political statement and have affected generations of educators and inspired educational traditions, such as the Reggio Emilia model (Vecchi 2010). The second element, the disruption of the traditional classroom, is what leads the present discussion to future perspectives. The task of imagining the classroom as an organic (Dewey) and open system (Vygotsky), where individuals grow together in a co-creative process, is still a challenge, even more so today in the face of neoliberal discourses.

Critical Spaces in Educational Practices

In order to educate for equality, democracy and freedom, new pedagogical mindsets are needed and truly creative environments must be safeguarded. Szulevicz's solution (2018) focuses on three propositions: dialogue, awareness, and agency that protects professional identity. These are all strongly related to the individual's development. The areas of enquiry that I propose for the future, instead, are more directed towards the building of environments. These spaces are necessarily blurred, queer, pluralistic and hybrid. In alternative to established educational models, these spaces cultivate a "thirdness" that allows for opposites to coexist without resolving themselves in synthesis. In these spaces voices are heard beyond paradigms of teacher expertise, and learners participate equally in a shared process. Third spaces have been "conceptualised in post-colonial theories (Wolf 2000) as the spaces of possibilities that go beyond borderlines" (Chemi 2018, p. 223), which means that within third spaces opposites can co-exist without becoming either conflict or harmony. The third space is the locus of a "dialogic process that attempts to track displacements and realignments that are the effects of cultural antagonisms and articulations – subverting the rationale of the hegemonic moment and relocating alternative, hybrid sites of cultural negotiation" (Bhabha 1994, p. 178).

Dualistic separations of mind and body, of research and pedagogy, of public and private, of work and leisure have led to disengagement and massification. The benevolent dictator in the role of teacher is expected to be mindless of his or her body and emotions, to be in control, and to educate free spirits to democracy and creativity. The problem is that this objectified teacher cannot either feel engaged or engage learners in authentically creative and joyful learning processes. Critical and engaged pedagogy can only emerge in dialogical spaces where learning is reciprocal. According to bell hooks (2014), "when education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess. Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process" (p. 21). As this feminist writer further develops, the critical and engaged classroom is not necessarily a space that is or is perceived as *safe*, actually quite the contrary (hooks 2014, p. 30). Reporting on her personal experience as teacher, she recounts her students' discomfort and often pain in realising that learning is transformative, and critical thinking reveals what is hidden and compels to action. I have myself challenged the idea of safe places as pedagogically creative (Chemi 2017) and other theoretical perspectives seem to point in these future directions (Arao and Clemens 2013). "We argue that authentic learning about social justice often requires the very qualities of risk, difficulty, and controversy that are defined as incompatible with safety" (Arao and Clemens 2013, p. 139). This raises professional and ethical dilemmas for teachers. The objective of students' or one's own well-being is challenged in these critical spaces where learning occurs by means and in spite of difficulties. Dealing with one's own and students' emotions does not necessarily imply that they relate to positive experiences, such as engagement and curiosity, but often means that learners (students or teachers) face their own fears, their supposed inadequacy or lack of expertise. In an educational system based on assessment of performance, feeling inadequate or the experience of not-knowing, fundamental to creativity and innovation, becomes a threat to one's own survival. Learners can be captives of their fears and of neoliberal expectations or they can learn to resist discourses that make them hostages of neoliberal policies. Educators have a central role in

maieutically cultivating free minds by designing brave spaces. Letting go of fear can only happen in spaces that are brave and bold. Paradoxically, learners can let go of fear only by knowing it, by having experienced it, and so they can survive fear only by making sense of it. To let go of fear demands that these brave spaces also are experienced as safe spaces: “letting go of some of the hurt may create a space for courageous contact without fear or blame” (hooks 2014, p. 109). Only critical spaces can truly comprise creative purposes, because only in alternative -third- spaces is it possible to build communities of learners that are based on equality and that empower learners to dare transgressive actions, such as deep thinking, learning and transformation.

An integrative approach to education has to be multimodal, allowing for multiple dialogical events to occur in environments that are safe and bold at the same time, places where the “risk of education” (Biesta 2016) is desired and desirable. However, this can only be achieved by finding and applying educational solutions that are alternative to both full freedom (egocentrism) and to neoliberal oppression and control.

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