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DEMOCRACY AS A CONSTITUENT ELEMENT OF EUROPE'S EDUCATIONAL HISTORY: HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY, THEORETICAL DIRECTIONS, AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

The historical shaping of democratic education in Europe is not merely the outcome of political decisions or pedagogical doctrines; rather, it emerges as a complex and dynamic phenomenon unfolding within continuous social and political transformations. This study explores the trajectory of European education from the 18th century to the present-day proclamations advocating for democratic schools, focusing on the conceptual shifts in the notion of democracy itself and the ways in which it has been embedded as a core value within educational institutions. Education appears as a vital mechanism for social participation and the formation of citizenship, where theoretical approaches developed through historical inquiry are not presented as abstract models detached from their historical significance, but rather as enduring stakes and persistent forces shaping discourse around education interwoven with the dialectical evolution of social structures and democratic values.

The analysis addresses the impact of World War II, the construction of the European Union, and the institutional efforts to enshrine democratic education, while also recording the contemporary contradictions of the educational system. The rise of technocratic models, the intensification of inequalities, the devaluation of the moral-political dimension of learning, and the school's diminishing capacity to cultivate active citizenship reveal the shortcomings of a discourse that proclaims democracy but often undermines it in practice.

The transition from the historical necessity of democratic education to the current societal challenges underscores the need for a critical redefinition of the relationship between education and democracy, aiming primarily at aligning education with the social and political developments of contemporary Europe.

Keywords: Democracy and education, European institutions, educational reforms, democratic school, educational institutions

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The European trajectory of education has been shaped through continuous negotiation between the need for social integration and the pursuit of individual emancipation. The emergence of democracy, not merely as a form of governance but as a value-based principle for organizing public life, also defined education as a domain for the formation of citizenship. At the dawn of

the Enlightenment, the idea of education as a universal right and a tool against illiteracy was aligned with the democratic promise of social equality. However, the concept of illiteracy went beyond its narrow linguistic dimension, becoming an indicator of social exclusion, political impotence, and cultural marginalization (Graff, 1987).

The establishment of national education systems in the 19th century did not stem from neutral technocratic decisions, but from a historical imperative to educate citizens. Education functioned as a field for constructing collective identity, national cohesion, and the social legitimacy of institutions (Green, 1992). In the case of France, Condorcet had already, by the end of the 18th century, advocated for the idea of a national public school as a condition for equality and participation, endowing literacy with political substance (Condorcet, 1791). Similar initiatives in Germany, England, and Scandinavia integrated pedagogical needs into the formation of the state, emphasizing the necessity of the educated citizen as a prerequisite for maintaining public order and productivity.

The concept of democratic education has historically evolved, particularly in times of crisis or reconstruction. The experience of the Second World War and the catastrophic failure of totalitarian regimes reasserted the need for an education capable of resisting authoritarianism. Under the pressure of postwar reconstruction, European countries restructured their educational policies around the values of equality, freedom, and political participation (Simons & Masschelein, 2008). By placing needs and shared values at the center, the pedagogical theories of John Dewey (2001) gained renewed relevance, reinstating the school community as a model of democratic life from the early 20th century. Democratic education no longer aimed merely at the transmission of knowledge but required the cultivation of critical thinking, participation, and the capacity to question.

Participatory education cannot be conceived without the human capacity to understand the world and to stand within it with reason and judgment. Paulo Freire identified illiteracy as a form of social exclusion, as a deprivation not only of the ability to read words but also to read the world around oneself. In Europe, his ideas inspired educational efforts envisioning a citizen capable of speaking, listening, and participating (Freire, 2000). Later, Gert Biesta reintroduced the question of the purpose of education, proposing a school space not limited to the acquisition of skills but one that cultivates attitudes, choices, and ways of coexisting. An education not designed to prepare individuals for the market, but to accompany them to democracy (Biesta, 2011).

The search for a school capable of fostering participation, empowering the voice of young people, and recognizing learning as an act of freedom is once again emerging across Europe in times of social fluidity and institutional uncertainty. Paulo Freire's vision of education is not as the transmission of knowledge but as the act of reading the world continues to inspire efforts to create a school reality where critical understanding is interwoven with action. Through the pursuit of an education that shapes active citizens rather than passive recipients of skills, there emerges a demand for a pedagogical discourse that enables students to meaningfully participate in public life. In the current European context, where the pressures of economic efficiency often distance schools from their public character, the importance of education as a space for exercising freedom, making choices, and assuming shared responsibility is reaffirmed. Gert Biesta's reflections reinforce this direction, emphasizing the need to understand education as

an act that cultivates democratic values and modes of coexistence, maintaining the school as a living cell of democratic experience.

Exploring the relationship between democracy and education, through the lens of historical development and pedagogical theory, is critical not only for understanding the past but also for renegotiating the meaning of education in 21st-century Europe.

2.0 THE INSTITUTIONAL FORMATION OF DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION IN EUROPE

The institutional formation of democratic education in Europe is not merely a product of state organization, but rather the culmination of long-standing historical and philosophical processes that began with the Enlightenment and culminated in the postwar reconstruction of European values. The 18th century period of intense intellectual activity laid the foundational principles of a universal demand for access to knowledge. The Enlightenment's core legacy was the conviction that knowledge should not remain a privilege of the nobility or clergy, but rather a right of every individual by virtue of their rational nature (Outram, 2013).

A central figure in this direction was Nicolas de Condorcet, who in "Five Memoranda on Public Education" (1791), clearly articulated the view that education is the foundation of political freedom, and that democracy cannot flourish without citizens equipped with judgment, reason, and information (Condorcet, 1791). Condorcet's liberal vision proposed universal, free, and secular education, controlled not by the Church or aristocracy, but by public institutions. In his thought, education is decoupled from class interests and becomes a cornerstone of a potentially democratic world (Rosanvallon, 1998).

The transition from philosophical intentions to the first implementations of public education systems took place in the 19th century, influenced by nationalist reconstructions, the Industrial Revolution, and the need to create an educated and disciplined workforce. In France, Jules Ferry's educational reform in the 1880s established compulsory, free, and secular education for all children, clearly continuing the vision of Condorcet (Ozouf, 2014). Similarly, Prussia had already institutionalized a structured system of popular education from the early 19th century, aimed at strengthening state cohesion and social discipline (Green, 1992).

However, the institutional foundation of democratic education suffered a severe blow in the 20th century due to the two world wars and the rise of totalitarian regimes. The experience of World War II, along with the exposure of brutality that could result from technocratic and authoritarian educational logics, strengthened the awareness of the need for a new institutional architecture in support of democracy. The founding of UNESCO in 1945 signaled a global commitment to promoting education as a prerequisite for peaceful coexistence and collective responsibility (UNESCO, 1945; Quirion & Poissant, 2021). In the Declaration on Education for All and the organization's early reports, the need to shape citizens capable of critical thinking, resistance, and participation was strongly emphasized as a counterbalance to the dangers of authoritarianism (UNESCO, 1952).

The postwar period found Europe in search of stable institutions to ensure both economic reconstruction and the cultural and educational reestablishment of democratic values. The European Community, and later the European Union, gradually formed an educational domain

marked by strong institutional interventions. From the Treaty of Rome (1957), which recognized the need to converge educational policies, to the Maastricht Treaty (1992) and the Bologna Declaration (1999), European institutions have aimed to create a coherent European educational space (Corbett, 2005; Keeling, 2006). In the same spirit, programs such as Erasmus, Comenius, and lifelong learning strategies were instituted as mechanisms to enhance democratic awareness and cultural pluralism. The European educational space functions not only as a technocratic vehicle for mobility and skills, but also as a field for cultivating the European citizen, capable of critical action, active participation, and resistance to structures that undermine collective freedom (Ozga, 2019; Biesta, 2011). Democratic education in Europe, from the Enlightenment to the 21st century, has developed as an institutional, political, and value-laden concern. Its dynamism is not confined to the transmission of knowledge but extends to the formation of a public sphere in which education serves freedom, equality, and human dignity.

3.0 THE IMPORTANCE OF DEMOCRACY FOR EDUCATION AND OF EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY

The institutional and philosophical relationship between education and democracy constitutes one of the most significant pillars of European thought, especially from the 19th century onward. The cultivation of critical thinking, the capacity for civic participation, and the freedom of expression cannot be sustained without an educational framework that promotes democratic values. It thus becomes necessary to view education not merely as a mechanism of social reproduction, but as a dynamic field of social transformation (Giroux, 2011; Biesta, 2011).

John Dewey's perspective is foundational for understanding the relationship between education and democracy. Democracy, in his view, is not confined to a form of governance, but is a way of life that requires the active participation of all citizens in social processes. Education, therefore, should not focus solely on the transmission of knowledge but should encourage creative and reflective thinking, critical analysis, and interaction between students and their social environment. Dewey's principle of experiential learning conceives education as a process that integrates experience into the discovery of knowledge, fostering collaboration and collective action (Dewey, 2001).

In a democratic society, education should not aim to prepare passive recipients of knowledge but rather to cultivate citizens capable of independent thought and responsible action. Dewey emphasized that learning must be experiential and open to social interaction, allowing students to acquire skills that enable them to participate actively in social processes and to influence the direction of their society. Viewing education as active engagement in social and political life reflects Dewey's deep conviction that democracy is a continuous endeavor, not a static condition (Dewey, 2001).

Paulo Freire's contribution to the radical pedagogical tradition powerfully reinforced the emancipatory dimension of educational practice, highlighting the need for education to function as a means of social and political liberation. Freire strongly challenged the traditional "banking model" of teaching, in which students are treated as passive recipients who are merely "filled" with information. Against this static and unidirectional approach, he proposed a dialogical method where students and teachers collaborate actively in the co-construction of

knowledge. In this way, the learning process becomes a dynamic and reciprocal act that enhances critical thinking and opens the path to awareness and liberation from oppressive social structures (Freire, 2000). For Freire, education is not simply a mechanism for cognitive development but, above all, a tool of social struggle that contributes to the development of political consciousness and action against oppression and inequality.

The contemporary work of Gert Biesta offers a renewed and deeper understanding of democratic education, moving away from a technocratic and narrow focus on skills assessment and learning outcomes. Biesta argues that education cannot be reduced to the development of competencies, as its full value lies in strengthening citizenship and cultivating the capacity for participation and commitment in the public sphere and democratic processes (Biesta, 2011). According to his perspective, democracy is not a fixed and given system but a continuous negotiation and open space for dialogue. Consequently, education, as he envisions it, must not function as a mere tool for reproducing the existing social order and structures, but as a field of reflective and critical intervention, offering students opportunities to develop critical thinking and to participate actively in social and political processes.

Educational practice today must transcend the traditional view of knowledge transmission and integrate broader dimensions of human development. Education, as a means of empowering critical thought, intercultural understanding, political dialogue, and personal responsibility, gains central importance in a European context confronted with the challenges of the post-democratic condition. Post-democracy refers to a state in which democratic institutions remain in place, but the substantive political participation of citizens is diminished, and the public sphere is narrowed, dominated by technocratic and depoliticized logics (Crouch, 2004). In this evolving reality, the concept of "education for democracy" emerges as a key pedagogical, political, and ethical imperative. Education is called upon to reinforce democratic participation and provide students with the tools to resist growing technocratic pressures and the erosion of individual rights, while contributing to the creation of a society that respects and advances the principles of equality and participation (Sandel, 2010; Nussbaum, 2016).

Concern arises from the gradual erosion of the public nature of education, as instrumental, competitive, and market-driven values increasingly permeate educational systems. The dominance of technocratic approaches in educational policy, the emphasis on evaluation at the expense of deeper understanding, and the limited space for critical reflection create an educational environment that threatens democratic participation (Ball, 2003). Rather than fostering dialogue and active student engagement, the classroom is increasingly transformed into a space of compliance and discipline.

The protection and reinforcement of the democratic dimension of education become imperative in an era of increasing social instability, exclusionary rhetoric, and institutional crisis. Building an educational field that is open, participatory, and centered on meaning rather than efficiency emerges as a foundation for preserving and renewing the democratic experience. Only when education is freed from its one-dimensional connection to the market and productivity can it be elevated to an act of freedom and democratic reflection (Apple, 2004; Biesta, 2011; Freire, 2000).

4.0 EDUCATION AS A MECHANISM FOR THE FORMATION OF CITIZENSHIP

The educational process cannot be considered independent from the political and moral development of the individual. In every historical period, education functions as a carrier of values, behavioral norms, and collective narratives, playing a decisive role in shaping political subjects. The concept of the citizen, therefore, does not merely arise from legal status but is constituted within an educational system that either cultivates or hinders autonomy, critical capacity, and democratic participation (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1998; Biesta, 2011).

The pedagogical traditions of the 20th century differed significantly in how they addressed the political dimension of education. In industrial societies, citizenship was identified with obedience to institutions and the assimilation of dominant national and cultural narratives. Educational practices, especially in the 19th and early 20th centuries, reinforced the disciplinary nature of learning and strictly delineated acceptable forms of social behavior (Foucault, 1995; Bowles & Gintis, 1977).

The shift toward a more participatory and dialogical approach to citizenship was grounded in critical theoretical interventions, drawing heavily from critical theory and post-structuralist interpretations of power. Paulo Freire, for instance, believed that citizenship is shaped through the act of consciousness-raising and the assumption of responsibility toward the world. Education must encourage dialogue, self-reflection, and solidarity, creating the conditions for the social and political participation of the excluded (Freire, 2000; Bolin, 2017).

Gert Biesta's interpretive approach emphasizes the being of the citizen as an existence in relation to others. Civic education, in this view, is not about transferring knowledge of institutions and laws but about cultivating the ability to act within a public space with responsibility and an openness to dialogue. Education must allow for the unpredictable, permit the emergence of the individual as an agent of action, and encourage ways of living that are not constrained by market demands or technocratic indicators of success (Biesta, 2011).

The political dimension of education is also closely tied to the cultivation of empathy. Martha Nussbaum argues that democratic education cannot be limited to skills or technocratic training. The development of imagination, emotional understanding, and the capacity to view the world from the perspective of the other are essential elements for the political formation of the individual. Art, literature, and the humanities are crucial domains for shaping a democratic consciousness grounded in the recognition of otherness (Nussbaum, 2016).

Current challenges highlight the fragility of the foundations of democratic education. The rise of nationalist rhetoric, the commodification of learning, and the trend toward standardized and pre-packaged student assessments restrict the space for critical reflection and active citizenship. Public education must resist the substitution of its educational mission with the production of controllable and measurable outcomes, affirming education as a space for genuine civic formation (Giroux, 2011; Apple, 2006).

Within this process, the role of the educator becomes crucial. The educator is not merely a transmitter of content but a conscious shaper of relationships, capacities, and awareness. Everyday teaching practice has the power to either reinforce or undermine the democratic character of education, depending on whether it promotes inclusion, justice, and meaningful student participation. Citizenship is not cultivated through civics textbooks alone, but through

the school culture and the relationships formed within the school community (Carr & Hartnett, 1996; Parker, 2002).

Understanding education as a field for civic formation demands a re-evaluation of the values guiding curricula, pedagogical practices, and educational policies. Recognizing citizens not as a subject of obedience but as an agent of responsibility and creative participation is the foundation for renewing the democratic school. Only when education ceases to silently reproduce power relations and social inequalities can it truly become a space of freedom and political emancipation.

5.0 CRITICAL ISSUES IN CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

The current educational landscape in Europe reveals a range of complex challenges that concern not only access to education, but also the quality of participation and the formation of active citizens. As a central pillar of democracy, education is expected to respond to the demands of a social and political context shaped by globalization and deepening social inequalities. The value of democratic education lies in the capacity of schools to promote participation, equality, and social justice, ensuring that all citizens, regardless of their social background, have equal access to knowledge and public life (Freire, 2000). However, despite rhetorical commitments to equality, today's educational systems often reproduce social inequalities, limiting students' ability to develop critical thinking and to engage meaningfully in democratic processes.

A democratic school is not confined to teaching knowledge and skills; it aims to develop students as citizens who participate equally in shaping their society. The educational process must support students' active participation, enabling them to express opinions, to question, and to critique the social, political, and cultural structures in which they live. According to this broader conception of education, the concept of "illiteracy" extends beyond reading and writing to include individuals' capacity to understand and actively engage with the social and political developments of their time. A lack of access to modern technologies and digital illiteracy, for example, limits students' ability to fully participate in the knowledge society, exacerbating social inequalities and excluding large segments of the population from democratic engagement (Illich, 1971).

Europe, in recognizing these challenges, has made significant efforts to incorporate the idea of democracy into its educational policy. Nonetheless, the system often becomes trapped in a framework of evaluation and competition that, rather than enhancing democratic participation, reproduces social hierarchies and restricts students' opportunities to participate equally in society. Instead of serving as a means of social inclusion, education tends to reinforce social divisions, pushing the less privileged to the margins.

Amid these challenges, the democratic school must affirm the value of participation, strengthen solidarity, promote social justice, and cultivate critical thinking. Education must provide each student with the tools to understand and influence social processes, to meaningfully contribute to the common good, and to develop a sense of collective responsibility for the future of society. Only in this way can existing inequalities be overcome and full participation in the educational, social, and political processes of contemporary Europe be ensured.

Despite efforts to position the school as a space for democratic engagement and social mobility, it has often become a site of intensified assessment, where students are treated as units of measurement and comparison based on specific performance criteria. In practice, educational processes do not always allow for the meaningful development of critical thinking and creativity, as the focus is placed on achieving high scores and performance targets. This shift undermines the pedagogical role of the school, as education increasingly centers on “guiding” students toward the expectations of a competitive and individualistic system. Democratic education, which should foster social solidarity, participation, and citizens’ active presence in public life, is frequently reduced to a narrow model of technical training aligned with the escalating demands of competition (Apple, 2004).

Inequalities in access to education, particularly those rooted in class, digital divides, and cultural differences, highlight the disproportionate opportunities available to different social groups regarding quality education. Economic status, cultural distinctions, and lack of digital infrastructure may marginalize entire communities, excluding youth from the benefits offered by contemporary education. Digital inequalities, arising from unequal access to tools and internet connectivity, further amplify social disparities, as students from privileged backgrounds enjoy greater access to modern technologies and learning tools. In contrast, students from less privileged families face substantial educational obstacles, reducing their chances of social integration and entry into the labor market (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

Technology thus becomes a double-edged sword for democratic education. While it can provide new opportunities for learning, participation, and interaction, it also carries the risk of contributing to the further commodification of education and the emergence of new forms of illiteracy, such as “digital illiteracy.” The contradiction is most apparent when technology is used as a tool for measuring performance without integrating the pedagogical dimension of human development and democratic engagement. Technology can indeed support democratic participation when employed to foster critical thinking and broaden opportunities for involvement, but an excessive emphasis on "assessment" and the imposition of rigid efficiency standards can limit its potential to enhance democratic dialogue and social inclusion (Sahlberg, 2011; Livingstone & Helsper, 2007).

Taken together, the problems arising in contemporary democratic education in Europe are troubling, as they reflect a drift away from the core values of democracy, participation, and social inclusion. Education should not be confined to preparing students for the labor market but must also encourage the formation of active, responsible citizens who engage meaningfully in society and democracy. There is an urgent need to reform our understanding of “democracy in practice,” recognizing that democratic education does not consist merely in obedience to rules or the transmission of specific knowledge, but in a genuine process of participation and critical reflection that strengthens the cohesion of both society and politics.

6.0 CONCLUSIONS

The historical trajectory of European education, from the direct democracy of ancient Greece to the humanistic values of the Enlightenment, has integrated education as a privileged arena for the political formation of the citizen. The Roman conception of civis romanus, the Roman citizen, was closely tied to the ideal of the educated, dialogical, and responsible individual, establishing a model that continued to be cultivated systematically through the educational

institutions of the modern era (Nicolet, 1988). Education was not merely a means of personal development, but above all a tool for creating citizens capable of participating in public dialogue and contributing to the shaping of society (Dewey, 2001; Biesta, 2011).

The postwar establishment of education as a public good redefined the role of the school as a mechanism for reproducing democratic legitimacy. However, the principles of universal access, freedom of thought, and pedagogical emancipation gradually gave way to a functional and instrumental approach that prioritized rational evaluation, competitive ranking, and the allocation of students based on criteria of efficiency (Ball, 2021; Apple, 2004). The value of knowledge, once understood as transcending utilitarianism and standardization, was reduced in favor of serving socioeconomic interests, further distancing educational practice from its original pedagogical mission.

Reform policies in recent decades have intensified the technical orientation of education and the obsession with performance, undermining the values of participatory learning and creative citizenship (Apple, 2004). Efficiency metrics and assessment mechanisms have permeated educational structures as tools of control, increasing regulatory pressure on educators and diminishing the dialectical relationship between teacher and learner (Ball, 2021). Democracy has been transformed into an administrative system, stripping education of its political core, as described in Biesta's critical pedagogy, which emphasizes the need to cultivate subjectivity and responsibility in contrast to blind conformity (Biesta, 2011).

Inequitable access to education, driven by class, linguistic, cultural, and digital exclusions, continues to reflect the historical link between education and the maintenance of social hierarchies (UNESCO, 2021). A new form of illiteracy has emerged, not limited to the technical inability to read and write, but encompassing the inability to comprehend the structures of the digital and institutional world, reinforcing new mechanisms of exclusion. Educational policy has proven unable to establish conditions of equality, with the pandemic crisis revealing the reproduction of social inequalities even within digital learning environments (Biesta, 2011).

The need for a new horizon of educational democracy demands the disentanglement of education from the constraints of economic instrumentalism and a return to the principles of dialogue, empathy, and active political participation (Freire, 2000; Biesta, 2011). Educational practice must be recognized as a space for the encounter of subjectivities, not as a system for reproducing roles and skills. The emergence of a new pedagogical humanism cannot occur without a radical redefinition of educational aims and a rupture with the traditional power structures that permeate the school (Dewey, 2001).

Education retains its role as a vital and political mechanism of European identity, but it requires a critical return to the values of participation, equality, and the political formation of the individual as a responsible citizen. Redefining the politics of educational democracy calls for new forms of institutional organization that strengthen collective practices and adopt theoretical approaches that move beyond conventional assessment criteria. These approaches must not be confined to the administrative management of knowledge but should be rooted in the recognition of the historicity of education and its political responsibility (Freire, 2000; Biesta, 2011; UNESCO, 2021; Tröhler, 2011).

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