Pedagogy for the Precariat: Reflections on the education of young people and precarity

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Introduction

Many sociological studies have discussed youths and the precarity they face. However, there are very few references on how to approach the education of young people, whether that be in compulsory education, post-compulsory education, vocational training or other types. Therefore, given the lack of future prospects, how can teachers motivate their students knowing that regardless of whether they study or not, they are sentenced to an uncertain future? Why study if social references are dominated by ideals like those seen in TV programmes such as "*The Voice*"? [1] Could education still be a useful tool to bring back meaning to the lives of young people in the face of precarity, and empower them to transform the present and build a secure future? What role can adult education play in this process?

1. Youth and precarity: the oppressed of the 21st century

The word precarity is associated with the transformations that have occurred in the last few decades in the world of work, and those that affect the way in which relations have developed between companies and workers, to the detriment of the latter. However, its scope goes beyond work and affects in a comprehensive way the lives of many people, particularly the young.

According to a report of the General Union of Workers (UGT by its Catalan initials), in 2016 the unemployment rate in Spain for youths under 25 was 43%, which is three times higher than for workers over 55 and double the average rate for the population as a whole. There are more than 1.6 million unemployed young people, of whom 137,500 are under the age of 19, 476,400 are between the ages of 20 and 24, and 998,500 are between 25 and 34 years old. In addition, the first work experiences of young people almost always involve insecure working conditions with a shocking number of temporary positions (more than 50% of the contracts for workers under 35 are for less than 6 months); gross malpractice in the renewal of

contracts and types of contracts like those for part-time workers leading to increased fraud and exploitation; and a high intergenerational wage gap regardless of the educational level of the workers (VVAA, 2017).

A recent analysis shows just some of the consequences of a process of precariousness that is rooted in deregulation and neo-liberal policies implemented mainly since the 1980s (Alonso, 2014). This transition has made the concept of work as a way of giving direction to one's life volatile and has destroyed a socially and legally constructed meaning of work, replacing it with insecure employment and a tangled web of possibilities (and frustrations) based on precarity.

Added to these consequences is the creation of social stereotypes of youths based on trivial and superficial representations. These go back to "a social structure that generates this contemporary condition of youths, a contradictory status between spending power, sustained through family support or funded through a long line of bad jobs, and scant social guarantees offered to groups of young people with regard to ways of achieving success in life, being able to make their own decisions, and being financially self-sufficient and able to plan for their future and move out from the family home (Alonso, op.cit.: 6).

As suggested by González (2013: 161), to understand how this situation affects young people in our country you only have to ask one of them, at random, what they see themselves doing and where they imagine they might be living a year from now.

The Precariat, a term coined by the sociologist Guy Standing (2014b), represents a new social class. Although it does not replace traditional categories such as the working class or the popular class, it does provide a better self-representation for large sectors of society [2] affected by a process of precariousness that has affected millions of people in recent decades and has lowered their expectations in life to include an unstable job and a life of uncertainty.

Young people, along with many millions of others belonging to the precariat class, are citizens of a lower category, who are denied the rights normally associated with citizenship and, particularly, rights linked to the welfare state, which is in the process of being broken up.

Standing (ibid.) called these young people *denizens* (as opposed to *citizens*, citizens in their own right), which is one of the factors that makes it difficult to accept and

identify with the social class itself and, somehow, with the status of the oppressed. Unfortunately, young people are the spearhead of this strategy of increasing acceptability across the mutations of the financial system: “With their priorities tending towards social status through consumption, and alienated by the dogma of flexibility and adaptability to the changing times, lower expectations for life and work are revised in favour of subsistence and access to a dignified life” (Zubiri -Rei, 2010).

As Paulo Freire reminds us in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* first of all, it is important to use the term “oppression” and, in this case, these new (and old) forms of oppression that precarity encapsulates in a certain way, defining the working conditions and life of the precariat and their experiences. Secondly, through education we may be aware of the magnitude of the phenomenon that we face, because in addition to dehumanising the oppressed from an ontological perspective, this precarity implies the cultural invasion of the oppressed, assumes a dominant culture (Freire, 2005: 55) and therefore influences our apprehension of the world.

2. The education system in face of precarity

Parallel to the global deregulation processes of work standards and the flexibility found in contracting processes, and to the process of social and labour precarity, and on the margins of the schooling system, in the 1990s appeared Social Guarantee Programmes (PGS, in Catalan) and more recently the Initial Professional Qualification Programmes (PQPI) [3], with a rights-based logic both of the right to an education and of the possibilities, at least, of placing in the labour market young people who have fallen by the wayside, paradoxically attracted by a market in which it is as easy to be hired as fired, but at the same time offers access to consumer goods that satisfy our material “needs”, and acts as a mechanism of social adaptation.

The other side of the neo-liberal cycle, and changes in the production model, are the high rates of so-called “school failures” (young people who finish compulsory education without having achieved the objectives) as well as the early dropouts (young people who drop out of school before completing compulsory education). Without going into the subject of responsibilities and, again like Freire, being aware of the importance of language (who has failed, who abandons who, and at what stage), according to Eurostat [4], Spain has the second highest drop-out rate in the European Union (19%, double the European average), with even more worrisome

rates in regions like the Balearic Islands and Valencia, whose economies depend heavily on tourism and services, and have higher rates of job insecurity.

Many of these young people today make up a large part of the activity of adult education centres and institutions throughout the country, which in the last few decades have seen how, while society is undergoing a transformation, reading and writing classes and literacy for adults are being progressively replaced, initially by PGSs, and then by PQPIs, along with other occupational training activities that coexist with classes to obtain the Compulsory Secondary Education qualification (ESO in its Catalan initials). The majority of the people affected are young and they take up these studies as a result of their participation in some of the programmes mentioned above.

The number of those who fall by the wayside and, with a bit of luck, are able to reincorporate themselves into the system continue to be very low, given the percentage of students who pass through programmes such as the PQPIs, or basic vocational training, despite the slight reduction in drop-out rates as a result of the economic crisis of recent years, compared to the group of adolescents and young people who drop out or do not achieve the objectives to gain the ESO qualification.

Other young people, those who manage to attain what is considered to be “educational success” and who have accessed university, higher vocational training or something similar, in which they finish their studies beyond compulsory education, are also not exempt from precarity. In fact, one third of employees with higher education qualifications are over-qualified (González, 2013: 163). Added to this are phenomena such as interns working without any job security, financially dependent self-employed workers or unregistered or false” self-employed workers, personal and work situations that involve the role of supporting families, which not only lessens an increasingly delayed emancipation, but also contributes to the financial maintenance of many “young people” who are not so young any more.

In short, we find ourselves facing the widespread failure of an education system focused on facilitating the employment of young people in a market that, above all, presents tremendous uncertainties regarding their future and their lives.

3. Is it possible to educate without having life projects?

At this point, we need to ask: is it really possible, as the education system claims, to insert students in the labour market, without the system questioning the logic and

the rules of this market that invalidate the results of the system itself? Is it possible, as it also claims, to create free and independent citizens (as suggested by the educational laws), without questioning the social and economic model that condemns precarity regardless of their efforts? What freedom and independence are we referring to, if these are clearly conditioned by precarity? And the most important question: is it possible to educate without having life projects?

Guichard (1995: 64-66), in the context of France in the 1990s, reminds us of the educational importance of the life project as an essential tool for young people to build their identity in the school setting, based on representations of the ego that enable them to make sense of their lives and the world. While it is true that this image projected from the ego of the future adopts “the type of adhesion to idols and ideals as guardians of our fully formed identity”, and that these references at present are idols who have attained instant success, without the need to have studied, it is no less true that precarity on the horizon generates a great deal of uncertainty in the process of youth identity formation.

The professional and life projects of young people should give their education meaning, at the end of the compulsory stage, and in transitional and higher educational studies, in the same way that the education we offer should serve to permeate the lives and aspirations of young people in the process of becoming independent, of becoming adults.

Based on this precarity experienced by young people and the people around them (other young people and family members who also experience situations of precarity), and going back to the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, it would be a necessary first step to build on an ideal to transform this lack of perspective, this absence of a life project that dehumanises young people and their teachers, neither of whom should become resigned. An ideal that makes these young people feel important once again, as subjects of their present and their future, and not just as future commodities in a labour market that must be transformed if we want to move forward in a more dignified way.

It is true that the education system is not as flexible as the labour market, but as Dewey (2010: 94) reminds us: “It is often helpful to start considering educational problems by temporarily ignoring the school and thinking of other human situations. I take it that no one would deny that the ordinary good citizen is really subjected to a great deal of social control and that a part of this control is not felt as a restriction of personal freedom.” [PR1]

And, going back to Guichard (Op. Cit., pp. 143-146), it is in the organisation of the education system, in addition to other social, media, or family influences, where the representations of the future of most young people are formed. Therefore, if we organise education in a different way, young people will be able to structure representations of the future that differ from the deterministic, but not decisive, perspective of precarity.

4. Pedagogy for the Precariat

We agree with Standing (2014a) that the precariat is not a bogus" concept, and from the defence of the political nature of education, it is obvious that the first task of pedagogy for the precariat should be the creation of precarious subjects as subjects of a political system, as actors in their own lives, beyond their situation or their employment prospects.

Education is also becoming precarious, as is its organisation and those who form part of it, since the framework that generates precarity, as we have explained here, is the same one in which deregulation policies lead us to consider education as a service rather than a right. This affects laws, such as the LOMCE [5], that contribute to increasing inequalities, in the school environment too [6], and to overcrowding in classrooms (which implies a lack of teachers and of infrastructure), or evaluations generally focused on results that don't take into account the learning process and the diversity of students.

Precarity and capitalism, updating Freire's proposals, condition but do not define us, and as teachers we should be aware of this and not take the market-driven attitude that permeates education and attempts to steer it preferably towards the world of work (without changing it). Along with the precarity of education, and with it the teaching profession at all levels, any reflection must also clearly include academia in general, which has been established in recent years from the precarity experienced by young teachers and researchers at universities.

The characteristics of precarity and the process of precariousness lead us to identify, with the help of the ideas offered by Freire in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* a pedagogy for the precariat.

First of all, we must renew recapture the political meaning of education, and its importance as freedom in practice, and not as a mere adaptation to the dynamics of the precarity dictated by the status quo, although the education systems fulfil this

double social function of which Durkheim reminded us: reproduction of the system but, at the same time, the possibility to educate citizens who can change it.

Educating critical and committed citizens involves commitment to a critical pedagogy that counterbalances dominant attitudes that place labour market integration a top educational priority. This is especially true if we do not change this world of work or the policies and powerful relationships that make it possible and young people are not able to promote themselves. It involves educating many people who are, or will be, *denizens*(citizens with less rights) to become fully fledged citizens and, furthermore, to get them to commit themselves to this change.

As professional projects coincide with life projects, with which their journey through the education system peaks (understood as future projections of young people), and being aware of the uncertainties of work and life generated by this precarity, the world of work must be approached not only as a question of skills and professional qualifications, but also of rights and of empowerment, linked to the concept of dignity at work and in life, and of the acquisition of analytical tools to struggle against situations of injustice in which young people will find themselves.

In the face of precariousness that to some extent dehumanises us (one of the concerns Freire expressed in the first chapter of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*), education cannot merely be adaptive, and precarity should therefore be recognised as a problem, analysed and denaturalised. Any proposal has to be accompanied by problematising education, in which teachers understand their work as an ongoing research study that facilitates the relationship between students' present and future experiences and educational contents.

We need education in which the students will recognise themselves as subjects, and as subjects of the precariat class, in a process to raise awareness, starting from the feelings of precarity experienced in our surroundings, including those of the teachers and other key participants in the educational community, which can add value to the learning process. Everyone, including those who have been expelled from the education system, have knowledge that is worthy of consideration.

We need a distinct and more horizontal relationship between teachers and students, one that is already present in many of those who undertook the PGSs and now the IPQPs and other initiatives (such as the so-called "second chance schools" [7]) that offer a life and educational experience that provides acceptance and recognition on

the part of adults to counteract unpleasant experiences such as dropping out or school failure that implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) give the message that these young people “are not worth much” (Guichard, 1995: 147).

In the same way that Freire proposed fighting against “divide and rule” and “cultural invasion” understood as imposition of a certain vision of the world (Freire, 2005: 183-203), it is essential to propose education in values rather than one based on individualism and consumerism, which make it more difficult to understand the world beyond saying “that’s just the way it is”. An example might be the understanding of consumerism as a political act as well, or questioning certain material needs that are not basic necessities but rather socially created and superficial ones that go hand in hand with market interests.

It is necessary to overcome individualism that also undermines the collective organisation required to confront precarity: if individuals only look out for themselves, we will never break free from this precarity. This is a topic that unions, which have also suffered a corresponding crisis of representation (beyond questioning their power of negotiation as a result of financial and labour deregulations), are beginning to react to [8]. They are conscious that the way they are organised (comparable to the organisation of the school system) does not work when it comes to representing and defending the interests of workers in precarious situations.

Redeeming the value of the collective – not only a question of values, but of methodologies and options, such as cooperative work – over individualism has to be done in the classroom, as is articulating proposals that go beyond the education system to also include proposals affecting economic and business organisation, such as cooperatives (which, for example, have been much more resilient in terms of employment than conventional companies in the years of crisis), or using the internet as a space for young people to cooperate and organise themselves, with initiatives such as crowdfunding or physical or virtual coworking spaces (González, 2013: 177), by which many young people demonstrate every day that there are other ways to survive capitalism with dignity: through partnership with others, being part of and working in networks.

These networks also begin in the immediate surrounding and in learning that has to incorporate an aspect of community involvement, such as learning-service project proposals, which not only achieve citizen education in the form of commitment to the community and the school environment, but also introduce improvements for

students, teachers, social organisations and communities.

In short, this is not a new practice, but one that is part of the daily work of many teachers, especially in the field of adult education, which as stated above, has recently been focused on the young people who the education system itself has marginalised. Practices with sufficient magnitude to be transferred to formal and non-formal education and focused on educands, who are not resigned to becoming part of a future domesticated workforce.

These practices should probably be systematised and exploited as a whole if we want better education. They remind us every day, as would the teacher, that precarity can influence us, but it will not determine us. The young people of today's precariat are the oppressed of the 21st century, as Paulo Freire predicted (2005: 82):

As marginal persons, who are excluded from or on the margins, the solution for them would be to be integrated or incorporated into a healthy society from which they will one day separate themselves, resigned, like exiles, into a happy life.

For them, the solution would be to let go of the status of being excluded and take on the status of those included in society. However, those who we have described as marginalised, who are none other than the oppressed, were never excluded. They were always included within the structure that transforms them into "beings for others". Their solution, then, is not found in the fact of integrating them, or of incorporating them in this structure that oppresses them, but to transform it so that they can become people in their own right.

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Notes

[1] In reference to the well-known TV show that seeks talented young people and so many other shows with similar formats that have proliferated in recent years.

[2] Although Standing’s proposals are based on an overview, his analysis is more relevant to Western societies, with a different social structure and a distinct labour market, for example, than Latin America’s, although the categories of precariat, precarity and precariousness are also valid in other contexts, as Cuevas (2015) asserts, for example.

[3] Hereinafter, PGS and PQPI.

[4] Detailed data regarding this issue can be found at http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/education-and-training/overview .

[5] The Organic Law on the Improvement of the Quality of Education, the latest general education law approved in Spain in its most recent political phase, strongly challenged by the educational community.

[6] In the *Manifiesto por Otra Política Educativa*(The Manifesto for a new Education Policy), at the Seville Forum, included in the bibliography, intellectuals and various key participants in the educational community discuss this question regarding the case of Spain.

[7] For more information about second chance schools, see: http://www.e2oespana.org , website of the recently created Spanish Association of Second Chance Schools.

[8] See for example the *“Precarity War”* campaign by the CCOO (*Confederación Sindical de Comisiones Obreras*– Confederation of Labour Unions):

https://www.eldiario.es/clm/CCOO-declara-guerra-trabajo-derechos_0_703079816.html .