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SOCIAL JUSTICE TEACHER EDUCATION AND CULTURALLY DEMOCRATIC PEDAGOGY: *EL CAMINO SE HACE CAMINANDO*¹

FORMACIÓN DEL PROFESORADO PARA LA JUSTICIA SOCIAL Y PEDAGOGÍA CULTURALMENTE DEMOCRÁTICA: EL CAMINO SE HACE CAMINANDO

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ABSTRACT

As a commentary text to Antonia Darder's "Reflections on Cultural Democracy and Schooling", this text is a reflection on how the author, as a teacher educator working in language teacher education, has been influenced by Darder's thinking, namely on her work on bicultural education and on culturally democratic pedagogy. It seeks to evidence how Portuguese (im)migrant students and students from ethnolinguistic minorities are perceived as subaltern students in Portuguese public schools and the role (language) teacher preparation plays in counteracting power imbalances and transforming pedagogy for these students. Some examples from student teacher narratives are presented, to illustrate how social justice teacher education is

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developed in the author's practice, in order to decolonize a neoliberal hegemonic perspective in pedagogy and in teacher education in Portuguese schools.

KEYWORDS: Portugal, second language students, subaltern students, teacher preparation, decolonial perspective

RESUMEN

Como comentario al artículo de Antonia Darder "Reflexiones sobre la democracia cultural y la escolarización", el presente artículo refleja cómo su autora, en tanto que educadora del profesorado que trabaja en la formación de profesores de lenguas, ha sido influida por el pensamiento de Darder, en concreto en lo que respecta a su trabajo sobre la educación bicultural y la pedagogía culturalmente democrática. El artículo pretende mostrar cómo los estudiantes (in)migrantes portugueses, y los estudiantes de minorías etnolingüísticas, son percibidos como alumnos subalternos en las escuelas públicas portuguesas, así como el papel que juega la formación del profesorado (de lenguas) en contrarrestar los desequilibrios de poder y en transformar la pedagogía para tales estudiantes. Se aducen algunos ejemplos de narrativas de profesores en formación para ilustrar cómo la praxis de la autora de este trabajo desarrolla la formación de profesores en justicia social con el objetivo de descolonizar una perspectiva hegemónica neoliberal en la pedagogía y en la formación del profesorado en las escuelas portuguesas.

Palabras clave: Portugal, estudiantes de segundas lenguas, estudiantes subalternizados, formación del profesorado, perspectiva decolonial

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1. INTRODUCTION: SUBALTERN CHILDREN IN PORTUGUESE SCHOOLS

After 48 years of dictatorship, political democracy in 1974 brought a renewed sense of hope in a modern and progressive society in Portugal, one that would bring true equality among classes, among gender, within the intimate spaces of homes and families but also in public social spaces. After 48 years of political democracy, there is still a very long road to travel towards effective social (and cultural) democracy. There are no more huge masses of students dropping out of school for being poor, (im)migrant, or coloured. However, in Portugal, as in other OECD countries, native students still perform higher in literacy than students with an immigrant and/or an ethnic minority background (OECD, 2011; Oliveira, 2021), as being migrant, poor and speaking a home language other than the language of instruction are high-risk factors (OECD, 2012). Thus, addressing the role of the language of schooling and ethnic belonging is central to a serious debate on social justice in education, for its pedagogical significance, as Darder (2022, this issue) puts it.

The low status of minority and immigrated languages, weaved with unequal power relations embedded in class, gender, and socioeconomic status, has negative implications for subaltern students' academic success. Language plays a central role as one of the most powerful transmitters of culture and, therefore, in "both the intellectual formation and survival of subaltern populations" and "negating the native language and its potential benefits in the development of students' participation and voice constitutes a form of psychological violence and functions to perpetuate social control over subordinate language groups" (Darder, 2022, this issue). As I have argued before (Moreira, 2017, 2018), second language and ethnic minority children in Portuguese schools are still subjected to disempowering and subtractive forms of education, as schools have been unable to seriously address the structural

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inequalities associated with these children's education, such as racism, poverty, and widespread discrimination (*cf.* Darder, 2015; Santomé, 2011, 2017; Skutnabb-Kangas *et al.*, 2009; Valenzuela, 1999).

Currently, Portuguese mainland schools have 68,018 foreign students, corresponding to 6,7% of the school population (Oliveira, 2021), from 95 different nationalities and speaking 76 different first languages (Madeira *et al.*, 2013), but mostly originating from official Portuguese-speaking countries. Even though some form of linguistic support is provided for second language students in the language of instruction, bilingual language learning is not supplied. Exception is made in elite private schools for the socially privileged, where bilingual instruction in a 'prestige' language such as English, French or German is provided. Therefore, a monolingual and monocultural educational framework prevails, according to which the students' languages and cultures are not school languages and cultures, and foreign languages as curriculum subjects enjoy a much higher status than the languages spoken by bilingual/bicultural students (Vieira and Moreira, 2020).

In Portugal, as in the rest of Europe, Roma students are the most invisible students in schools. Even though they speak Portuguese, Roma communities are often subjected to institutional racism and cultural bias (Santomé, 2011, 2017) and widespread segregation in the Portuguese society (Casa-Nova, 2005). Roma knowledge and culture is in the *deepest realm of the epistemic abyss* (*cf.* Santos, 2008), as Roma history has been "marginalized or whitewashed in traditional social studies curricula and textbooks" (Darder, 2022, this issue), in Portugal and in Europe in general. This alienation from school is mostly explained by being the poorest and most socially excluded social group in Europe with the highest dropout rates before completing secondary education and the lowest literacy rates (FRA, 2014). In spite of the general improvements in the access to school over the last years (from 16

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students in secondary education in 1997/98 to 651 in 2018/19; Casa-Nova, 2021), they still present the highest levels of academic underachievement, grade repetition, and school drop-out (DGEEC, 2017). While non-Roma students have retention rates of around 2,9% in primary school and 9,3% in secondary education, Roma present around 16,5% in primary and 15,2% in secondary (Casa-Nova, 2021).

Teacher education shares responsibility for this state of affairs. As Darder (2022, this issue) reminds us,

teacher education programs are notorious for reducing the role of teachers to that of technicians or automatons. [...] few teachers are able to envision their practice outside the scope of barren classroom settings, lifeless instructional packages, bland texbooks, standardized knowledge, and the use of meritocratic systems for student performance evaluation. Ultimately, conditions such as these serve to disempower both teachers and students.

The 'neutral' curricula in (language) teacher education have been systematically unable to denounce the effects of neoliberal thinking and reasoning – that it is the minority children and their parents who are deficient, rather than the schools and societies at large (Cummins and Skutnabb-Kangas, 1988), as well as prevailing teaching and assessment practices.

2. TREADING THE PATH TOWARDS DECOLONIZING SOCIAL JUSTICE TEACHER EDUCATION AND CULTURALLY DEMOCRATIC PEDAGOGY

Looking at schools and the work of teachers, the neoliberal momentum is oxygenated by transnational and non-democratic organizations such as the OECD that takes high praise in draconian measures that have asphyxiated public schools and overburdened teachers in Portugal:

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According to ministry sources, education spending in Portugal has been revised in order to reduce operational costs by increasing the average number of students per class, reducing teaching hours in the curricular reform and in sports, integrating more schools into school clusters and merging existing school clusters; optimising resources of the Mathematics Programme (Programas de Matemática II), the National Reading Plan (Programa Nacional de Leitura) and the School Library Network (Rede de Bibliotecas Escolares); and continuing the reduction of the number of teachers hired on fixed term contracts (not integrated in the public education system) and non-replacement of retired teachers. (OECD, 2014, p. 16).

The capacity of teachers to develop a "culturally democratic praxis that serves to support subaltern students in developing their capacity for emancipatory resistance" (Darder, 2022, this issue) is severely hampered when they are "provided with 'canned' curriculum to ensure [subaltern students'] success renders teacher passive agents of their labor" (Darder, 2022, this issue). Teachers' discourse on their work and on their students' work often reproduces (educational) common sense ideas that naturalize discrimination, racism, sexism, colonialism, and patriarchy in educational policies and practices (Moreira, 2018). Too often, they do not realize they are doing the oppressors' work (Freire, 1975), acting as sounding boards for "the hegemonic forces that have created a condition by which the subalterns are persuaded to think that the logic of coloniality is normal and natural" (Kumaravadivelu, 2016, p. 79).

Over the years, with other colleagues, I have been trying to show that there are alternative ways to do alternative forms of teacher education (Casa-Nova et al., 2020; Moreira and Vieira, 2012; Paraskeva and Moreira, 2020). One is to resort to teacher narratives of experience, to involve student teachers in the critical analysis

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of the purposes of schooling, the content of curricula, the role of the (language) teacher, and pedagogy (Moreira *et al.*, 2020, 2021; Moreira and Ribeiro, 2009). This is a part of my/our struggle to shape the soul of teachers (Zeichner, 2018), while reinstating the healing nature of theorizing lived experience (Darder, 2018; hooks, 1994).

In my teaching practice, I also use critical readings to help student teachers use *ideology as a pedagogical tool* to question and unveil the contradictions between the school dominant neoliberal and colonial culture and the knowledge and living experiences of subaltern students (Darder, 2020, p. 87). They realize that *there is such a thing* as coloniality in curricula and in everyday's life of students and teachers in schools. Reflecting on the experiences 'of the cultural other' helps student teachers engage in the critique of the Western European paradigm of rationality, becoming aware of how the instrumentalization of reason by colonial power has produced distorted and oppressing knowledge paradigms and deprived all others of their rightful place in the history of humanity's cultural production (Quijano, 2000). They realize that there is no 'discovery', but conquest; they become aware of the predatory presence of the colonizers that have imposed themselves to both the physical and historical and cultural space of the colonized and of curriculum and teacher education discourses that 'soften' the invasion and regard it as a 'civilizational' present (*cf.* Freire, 2000, p. 34).

I remember on one of my history lessons, on 9th grade, when we were being taught on how Christopher Columbus reached America, and how that became one of the biggest accomplishments in the world. I remember being taught how the Native Americans were not fighting back; in fact, they were curious about the "white men". I also remember being taught how the "white men" were not so nice towards the Native Americans. The white men brought death

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with them: violence, sickness, enslavement, rape and pillage, until the Native Americans ran away from their lands and hid in places we now call Indian Reservations, as most of the Native American tribes were reduced to nothing. What is truly saddening is that during those history lessons, we were taught that these expeditions from Europe to America were somehow essential, as the "white man" had to civilize the natives. But why did it have to happen? Were the deaths of all those people just so the Europeans could prosper? Why was that a good thing? It simply was not. These history lessons made me think about how this part of history was taught in America, in classes where the majority of students are white, with perhaps one or two Native American students, I thought about how they must feel, when being told that their ancestors dying was necessary for them to become civilized, for other people to prosper at their deaths and submission. And this is just one example about how the education in Portugal still lags behind, because I just referred one ethnicity that is not present in Portugal, but what about black people living in Portugal? Or the Roma people? They certainly do live in our country, and I do not recall one time when their culture was either mentioned or respected. (Student teacher, February 2018).

In my work over more than 30 years in teacher education, I have often registered instances of teachers' discourse thar reveal the slyness that dominant ideology uses to naturalize the position of structural subalternity for the 'usual suspects' in public schools. When referring to the Roma minority in schools, I have often heard: "she is well behaved *even though* she is a gypsy"; "I have normal students *and* a few Roma"; or "we are giving them [poor, ethnic minorities] what is best for them [vocational training] – they have *neither* the cognitive ability *nor* the cultural competence to achieve more than this". These instances reveal the extent

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to which "reason is ideological, not grammatical" (Freire, 2013, p. 48). In this educational framework, subaltern students will seldom succeed; the kind of knowledge they possess is irrelevant to school; their experiences and their families' experiences and funds of knowledge (González *et al.*, 2005) are irrelevant (and invisible) to school (Moreira, 2017, 2018).

As Paraskeva (2011, 2016) vehemently argues, we need to fight for (an)other knowledge outside the Western epistemological platform, one that will engage us in the struggle against curriculum epistemicides that take place in schools worldwide. In line with Guilherme (2020), I/we know that I/we do not know it all, but I/we can no longer pretend that knowing a part of it is the same as knowing it all, as "the plurality of knowledge existing in the world is unreachable [...] [and k]nowledge exists only as a plurality of ways of knowing, just as ignorance exists only as a plurality of forms of ignorance" (Santos, 2018, pp. 79-80).

As we have discussed elsewhere, "as successful teachers are those whose students get high scores in standardized tests, the focus of the neoliberal (grand) narrative is on teaching, on how to promote teaching behavior and teaching procedures that will yield the intended academic results" (Moreira *et al.*, 2021, p. 57). The neoliberal momentum we live even captures educational concepts such as (democratic) citizenship, as it shapes subjectivities and relationships, highlighting individual competitiveness at the expense of a sense of common good (Redon, 2020) and shared happiness and solidarity.

I told the children we would play a game in the schoolyard. [...] The game they played was the same that the children in the Ubuntu story played. My aim was to get the class to experience the story [they were going to listen to], as well as to establish a link with the story itself.

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Outside I divided the children into two groups with eight people each. I asked them to stand behind the line on the floor and told them that the first to arrive at the chair would get the candy bag that was there. On my count, off they went, running in a highly competitive manner. As soon as the first arrived, he took the gift. The second group did the same. At the end of the game, we returned to the classroom.

There, as the children would sit down, I could observe that some were sad, others very upset. I asked them whether they liked playing the game and the majority said no. I asked them how they felt, and some said what I had already noticed – that they were sad, wronged, and upset. Then I told them we were going to watch a story with the game they had just played. I showed them the title *The story of Ubuntu*, that was adapted from a video from Leading Edge News (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=42BsTIUzYqA). I told them that it took place in Africa and that the word Ubuntu was not English. [...] With my help, the children understood the story. [...] At the end, we reflected on the meaning of the sentence *Ubuntu – I am because we are*.

Afterwards, with the children, we reflected on their behaviour and we compared their behaviour with the children's in the story. Some children said that they should have had the same behaviour as in the story, because that way they would be happier. By sharing the candy, they would make other children happy and nobody would be sad. After this dialogue, I asked the two children who won the game how they felt after getting into contact with the Ubuntu story. They replied they also wanted to share their candy with their classmates. This was done. As in the story, after sharing the candy, there was happiness and joy in children's faces.

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I chose this story because I believe in its awareness-raising power; also, because I believe that the wealth of traditional African culture embedded in human values should be known and shared [...] According to Nussbaum (2003): "Ubuntu is a social philosophy, a way of being, a code of ethics and behaviour deeply embedded in African culture. The underlying values of this extraordinary philosophy seek to honour the dignity of each person and are concerned with the development and maintenance of mutually affirming and enhancing relationships. Ubuntu is the capacity in African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity in the interests of building and maintaining community with justice and mutual caring. The underlying value – A person is a person because of others– seeks to honour the dignity of each person and is concerned about the development and maintenance of mutually affirming and enhancing relationships" (pp. 1-2). In sum, it was really gratifying for me and specially for the children, to be able to experience the Ubuntu philosophy, both through the game and the story. (Pimenta, 2020, pp. 49-50, my translation).

In my work with my student teachers, I try to get them into remembering the mission and purposes of schooling, as well as the right of all children to a democratic and inclusive education; remembering the right of all children to be children and to behave like children; and remembering that children and adolescents come from a different background from the theirs, so they know a great deal of the world that the teacher does not know. I try to use ideology as a pedagogical and teacher education tool that can unmask the contradictions that exist between the school dominant (neoliberal and capitalist) culture and the lived experiences of their students (Darder, 2020).

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In this task, the critique of assessment practices plays a key role. As the National Council of Education recognizes (Grácio *et al.*, 2015), even though literature and research clearly select formative assessment as the main evaluation and assessment mode that should guide educational action, school culture and schooling practices privilege summative assessment and standardized testing:

This tendency is embedded in an educational system where an overwhelming 'grade culture' prevails, without the corresponding concern in the processes that promote learning. Practice is impregnated in this culture, first and foremost with the tradition – without any parallel in other educational systems – of compulsory public display of individual grades with student identification, arising from internal assessment, under the pretences of transparency, but with questionable effects in the perception of results by students and their families. [...] The assessment culture, more oriented towards classifying and ranking, deepens the disciplinary and punishing character of assessment [...] (Grácio *et al.*, 2015, p. 10; my translation).

In a world where teachers spend more time testing than teaching and providing meaningful and informative feedback, a culturally democratic education is being high jacked by neoliberalism, by "dehumanizing policies of accountability and instrumentalized forms of teaching to the test [...] that shape student consciousness, discipline their bodies, minds and hearts, shape how students speak, the attitudes they hold toward those considered 'other', and how they define themselves and interpret the world in which they live" (Darder, 2022, this issue).

When I asked children if they expect to learn and be happy in the process, some said that when they are unhappy, they do not like classes. When asked about why having good grades in tests was so important for them, they replied that this way parents, teachers and classmates will see them in a more

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favourable manner. Yet, one child answered in a really surprising manner; he said that he preferred being happy than having good grades in the tests. This answer carried me into a questioning spiral: why one child only in twenty of them? Should not the children's happiness and well-being be more important than tests? Why is there a lack of courage to more systematically adopt more *child-friendly* assessment, like formative assessment? (Pimenta, 2020, p. 29; my translation).

Too often I register instances that reveal the insidiousness of neoliberal discourses and practices that have naturalized anti-democratic pedagogies in teachers' discourses and practices.

After one intensive day preparing (primary) students to the tests (Student teacher, March 15, 2018).

We have to prepare children to be competitive (Teacher at a conference, January 2018).

We have to prepare children for the job market (Teacher at a teacher development workshop, November 2016).

It is a relentless struggle against ideological mechanisms that use, as an excuse, the official schooling grammar and that "makes it almost impossible to have an education and a curriculum outside a particular framework that is bounded by issues related to standards, classification, objectives, disciplinary orthodoxy, and competences — in other words, the official curriculum language" (Paraskeva, 2011, p. 175). Too often I have heard teachers complain: "I do not have the time; I have to cover the syllabus / to teach the whole syllabus, I cannot take the time to go back and explain [...]"; "Curricula are far bigger than we can take for each school year and sometimes that leaves no time to teachers to deviate from the curriculum to address specific and different examples of the real life that are really useful for each student's

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needs". I often have to remind teachers that, as Freire (2001) has taught us, understanding is weaved, forged by those who read and study, in a patient, challenging, and persistent mode – it is also imbricated with the level of intellectual experience of the reader and of the author. When the distance between the two is too wide, the effort to understand is hopeless – it is a continuous struggle to get to know...and this struggle is particularly cumbersome for those who come from a more disadvantaged sociocultural and socioeconomic background, that is, for the majority in public schools.

3. CONCLUSION: EL CAMINO SE HACE CAMINANDO

As a teacher educator struggling to recover the soul of teacher education (*cf.* Zeichner, 2018), I try to maintain my "faith in the capacity of human beings to transform the oppressive and dehumanizing conditions that disconnect, fragment, and alienate us from one another" (Darder, 2022, this issue). The message I sought to convey in this text counteracts a neoliberal capitalist view of schools and schooling as places where a combination of meritocracy, positivism, and structural racism serve to perpetuate inequity (Darder, 2015; Santomé, 2011, 2017) and epistemicides in curriculum and in teacher education (Paraskeva, 2011, 2016). In my work, I seek to stimulate change in the way (prospective language) teachers perceive their role, hoping to contribute to a better understanding of why and how "subaltern students are consistently silenced in the process of their schooling [...] trapped in classrooms with teachers who do not only prevent them from finding voice, but who also thwart their organic and contextual understanding of how what they are learning can be used to transform their lives". (Darder, 2022, this volume)

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My goal is to also help these teachers develop a 'grammar of decoloniality', as they become producers, not only consumers of pedagogic knowledge and capable of monitoring their own teaching acts (Kumaravadivelu, 2016, pp. 81-82).

This is a road I have to travel, as I also believe, with Darder (2022, this issue), that "If subaltern students are to succeed academically, their teachers must enter the classroom with an emancipatory commitment to work toward transforming the traditional oppressive structures and relationships of mainstream public schools". This commitment is as mine as is theirs.

As I sought to evidence, in this comment text to Darder's paper on cultural democracy and schooling, there are *alternative ways of thinking alternatively* education, curriculum, schooling, and teacher education (Casa-Nova *et al.*, 2020; Paraskeva, 2011, 2016; Paraskeva and Moreira, 2020). These ways can be found in the interstices of daily teacher's work in schools, when teachers' and students' voices are heard. I do it resorting to teacher narratives, as they are a form of practical knowledge construction that highlights the teachers' struggles to make instructional decisions that democratically serve their (subaltern) students (in public schools) (Moreira *et al.*, 2020, 2021). This ongoing struggle requires an ethical and political standpoint and requires a collective endeavour, but also a willingness to take a long and winding path. Like in Antonio Machado's poem, there is no given and predetermined path – only a path that has to be tread, as *el camino (solo) se hace caminando*.

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5. NOTES

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