# Practical Wisdom as an Exercise of Moral Responsibility at School

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SUMMARY: 1. Introduction. – 2. The Great Value Machine of the School. – 3. How can we Ensure the Future of Democratic Education? – 4. Portrait, Role, and Responsibilities of Teachers Towards Current and Future Generations.

## *1. Introduction*

Education is a fundamental universal human right, defined as such not only in the Italian Constitution (Articles 3 and 34)[1] but also in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Articles 28 and 29). These latter two pillars constitute an indispensable framework, not only because they indicate the need to establish effective and equitable educational systems but also because they underscore the requirement to provide quality, inclusive education that offers learning opportunities from early childhood.[2]

Educating has always been a highly challenging artisanal profession that demands great commitment and a broad cultural education. It could prove to be radically effective in preventing, combating, and addressing the emergence of small and large discriminations, inequalities, and disparities in opportunities. The concept of educating in this sense could, therefore, become the basis for concrete and daily work that allows us to coexist responsibly with diversity, the multiplicity of experiences,

[2] "It is the task of the Republic to remove obstacles of economic and social nature that, de facto limiting the freedom and equality of citizens, hinder the full development of the human person". Article 3; "It is the duty and right of parents to support, instruct, and educate their children..." Article 30; "School is open to everyone" Article 34.

[2] UN Sustainable Development Goal 4, 2015-2030 in https://unric.org/it/obiettivo-4-fornire-uneducazione-di-qualita-equa-ed-inclusiva-e-opportunita-di-apprendimento-per-tutti/

and the complex interconnections of contexts, especially those marked by youth distress, school dropout, and educational poverty.

### *2. The Great Value Machine of the School*

Article 3 of the Constitution of the Italian Republic[3] reads as follows:

> All citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law, without distinction of sex, race, language, religion, political opinions, or personal and social conditions. It is the duty of the Republic to remove the obstacles of economic and social order that, by limiting the freedom and equality of citizens, prevent the full development of the human person and the effective participation of all workers in the political, economic, and social organization of the country.

To initiate and carry forward this great and robust set of values expressed in the aforementioned article of the Italian Constitution, as written by one of its founding fathers, the great Italian jurist, lawyer Calamandrei[4], «we must put into it fuel, a fuel made of commitment, spirit, will, and personal responsibility».

This fuel, this vital essence that should educate to values and shape the consciences of future generations, does not arise out of nothing but is primarily built in the great formative agency par excellence, which is the family, and simultaneously within that place primarily designated to make all men equal: the school. The school, if we think about it, represents «the increasingly socio-cultural-political fundamental agency in the complexity of Our Time».[5] It is a cultural artisanal workshop where the future of generations is ordinarily built; it is, as Comeniuswrote in his Didacta Magna, «a great workshop of humanity»[6]. It is undeniable that it represents an institution pivotal for

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[3] Cfr. F. CLEMENTI, L. CUOCOLO, F. ROSA (a cura di), *La Costituzione italiana. Commento articolo per articolo. Vol. 1: Principi fondamentali e parte I: Diritti e doveri dei cittadini* (Artt. 1-54), Bologna, Il Mulino, 2021.

[4] P. CALAMANDREI, *Lo Stato siamo noi*, Milano, Chiarelettere, 2011, p. 6.

[5] F. CAMBI, *Quale scuola per il XXI secolo? Un'identità possibili*, in «Studi sulla Formazione», 2, 2017, p. 21.

[6] J. A. COMENIUS, *Didattica magna*, trad. it. Milano-Palermo-Napoli, Remo Sandron, 2011, p. 109.

educating in democracy, generating quality learning, and constituting a guide to prevent and counteract youth distress, school dropout, and academic failure, while simultaneously deploying all necessary tools to promote social inclusion, attraction to study, active citizenship, equal opportunities, and social cohesion.[7]

The school, therefore, represents the vital space where it is possible to learn to not only acquire cognitive tools useful and aimed at learning disciplines but also those value frameworks that will contribute to maturing in every subject undergoing formation the capacity for reflection, analysis, and understanding of the dynamics of the world in order to interact with it effectively, escaping thus processes of exclusion and marginalization.

The current educational system of our schools is dominated, as pedagogical literature on the critical approach in education has confirmed for the past ten years, by the regime of "business pedagogy". A completely instrumental pedagogy that, imitating market logic, promotes a bare pedagogy aimed at commodifying knowledge, indoctrination, training in techniques and methods, mnemonic learning, conformism, disinterested knowledge formation, unrestrained individualism, excess competition, and dequalification.

In this direction, even though every classroom is inhabited by individuals embodying a colorful mosaic of identities, woven with many value systems, languages, and socio-cultural peculiarities that exert a considerable influence on the construction of their identity and their schooling process, they are deprived of their criticality, and teachers are subordinated and trivialized. The result of such pedagogy is the promotion of conformity that urges students not to feel responsible towards others and to perceive critical thinking, social responsibility, and justice as «an unbearable burden to be tamed and self-reflective practice as a threat to their own identity».[8]

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[7] Cfr. C. SIRNA, *Verso una scuola comunità di* apprendimento, In C. SIRNA, A. MICHELIN SALOMON (a cura di), *Operatività ludicità cooperazione. Idee, percorsi e buone prassi a scuola*, Lecce, Pensa Multimedia, 2005.

[8] H. GIROUX, *Education and the Crisis of Public Values: Challenging the Assualt on Teachers, Students, and Pubblic Education*, New York, Peter Lang, 2012, p. 176.

This instrumental view of education inevitably produces a "brainless culture"[9] and, at the same time, causes both students and teachers a socio-political-cultural death, making them forget the social relevance of education in favor of measurement and quantification, fostering mental habits of social and cultural classification and depriving students of any vital form of critical teaching and learning, and therefore, of valuable knowledge.[10]

This educational approach, grounded in the economic philosophy of neoliberalism, unfortunately incorporates the erosion of the possibility of critical reflection in a context dominated by the "new knowledge economy"[11] that constantly seeks to reduce all knowledge to a commodity for an unrestricted market. Knowledge production itself becomes a trade subject to the efficiency requirements of commercial production, incorporating the educational system into new rules of management and responsibility. Market logic, structured on human competitiveness, operates constantly in a concealed manner to conceal its blind imperatives and therefore demands that students, defined as human capital, be educated for global competitiveness, thus bypassing long-accepted and shared values such as democracy, freedom, and human rights.

This passivity includes the inability to imagine life differently and to accept the human victimization of a paradigm that wants us to be passive facilitators of a declining worldview. How can we not share McLaren's thought when he writes that "we are capitalism, capitalism is us".[12] In fact, the subtle modus operandi of the market has taken residence in our bones, our brains, the structure of our daily lives (such as food, play, travel), even affecting how and why we educate, and therefore, as

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[9] Ivi, p. 171.
[10] Cfr. D. MAVIGLIA, *La natura etica e formativa del ruolo dell'insegnante nel tempo della bare pedagogy*, in G. ELIA, S. POLENGHI, V. ROSSINI (a cura di), *La scuola tra saperi e valori etico-sociali. Politiche culturali e pratiche educative*, Lecce, Pensa Multimedia, 2019, pp. 493-502.
[11] D. G. SMITH, *Teaching as the practice of wisdom*, New York, Bloomsbury, 2014, p. 61.
[12] P. MCLAREN, *Rage+Hope: Interviews with Peter McLaren on War, Imperialism+Critical Pedagogy*, New York, Peter Lang, 2006, p. 78.

Kadarkay[13] would say, we are so entangled that becoming aware of it would mean "committing suicide".

It is a virtuous and shared opinion to think, instead, that all educational institutions should represent a democratic organism of literacy and acculturation capable of evaluating the merit and individual talent of each student. And that the school as a "constitutional organ" of democracy, and as an educational-formative agency, must promote equal opportunities to achieve "a complete democracy that gives everyone effective equal dignity"[14]. And all of us citizens, for this concrete educational and social purpose, should take on the responsibility of protecting and maintaining democracy. Nowadays, however, most of us teachers, as well as students, simply think that living in a democratic society is our birthright and do not think in the slightest that we ourselves have the duty to offer opportunities to learn the means that will allow ourselves and students to guarantee and maintain a democratic lifestyle.[15]

### *3. How can we Ensure the Future of Democratic Education?*

Every day we fall into the mistake of thinking that the enemies of democracy are always and only some "others", nor do we fully grasp the thoughts of past and present scholars who have taught us and continue to teach us the meaning and value of democracy. For example, those of us who are educators remember Dewey's powerful statement in his famous work "Democracy and Education"[16] that "democracy must be reborn in every generation, and education is its midwife".

To make such a dynamic discourse on democratic values concrete, each of us, in the role of a teacher, should necessarily possess the awareness of being a crucial bearer

[13] Cfr. A. KADARKAY, *Georg Lukacs: Life, Thought, and Politics*, Cambridge MA, Basil Blackwell, 1991.
[14] Cfr. P. CALAMANDREI, *Per la scuola*, Palermo, Sellerio editore, 2008.
[15] Cfr. J. A. BEANE, M. W. APPLE, *The Case for Democratic Schools*, in M. W. APPLE, BEANE J.A. (Eds.), *Democratic Schools: Lessons in Powerful Education*, Portsmouth NH, Heinemann, 2004.
[16] Cfr. J. DEWEY, *Democrazia e educazione*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 2000.

of democratic ideals aligned with a deep and continuous commitment to social justice through praxis.

Supporters of democratic values and ideals, like myself, who continue to work to educate for the practice of freedom, firsthand experience how democratic education is undermined by the interests of corporate capitalism, to the extent that students are encouraged to see education solely as a means to achieve material success rather than as a means to acquire knowledge or learn to think critically. So, what and who do we need to ensure the future of democratic education? In an era where the harmful trends of market imperatives are becoming more evident, the need for teachers who responsibly engage in creating a school as a place to sow, nurture, and cultivate conditions for a critical and democratic consciousness becomes indispensable.

After all, educational systems should be the primary place where freedom of speech, dissent, and pluralistic opinions embody both pedagogical theory and educational practice. In a deep meditation on democracy, in "Healing the Soul of America", Williamson[17] emphasizes that the democratic principle of unity in diversity always remains the foundation of democratic values. Overemphasizing our unity but failing to appreciate the importance of diversity or emphasizing diversity but failing to appreciate the importance of our unity, represents a limitation. It is imperative, instead, to honor both because both our unity and diversity "matter," and their reciprocal relationship reflects a truth and a socio-political-cultural path outside of which we cannot mature and grow.

However, the future of democratic education will be determined to the extent that democratic values triumph over the "spirit of oligarchy" that tries to deny citizens access to "problematic education". The ability to think is, in fact, a sign of responsible citizenship that generates an even more fundamental democratic impulse, namely the desire to broaden consciousness. Therefore, since democratic education is based on the assumption that democracy is the foundation of all authentic teaching and learning,

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[17] Cfr. M. WILLIAMSON, *Healing the Soul of America: Reclaiming Our Voices as Spiritual Citizens*. Simon & Schuster, [revised ed. Healing the soul of America: Reclaiming our voices as spiritual citizens, 1997 onward], 1997.

it is necessary for teachers not to shy away from the collective responsibility they hold in this direction, that is, to educate students to participate in an inclusive democracy to identify, defend, and promote the school as a place of values, democracy, and the common good.

Intellectual Said[18] argues that to alleviate this serious threat to the promise of democracy, which disfigures contemporary society, it is indeed necessary to create pedagogical and formative conditions that promote critical awareness, thinking, and dialogue: these being necessary ingredients for any future democracy. Therefore, as students do not become critical thinkers overnight, it is important to understand who and how can help them embrace, first and foremost, the joy and power of thought itself and then enable them to think critically.

Furthermore, the teaching staff and student classes, considered as the primary resource of economic and moral investment and as a symbol of hope for a democratic future, must be empowered to explore new paths of humanization capable of actively promoting democratic practices.

Therefore, to confront all antidemocratic tendencies, which are covertly shaped by the dominant power in the political and educational spheres, each of us, especially teachers, must strive to concretize the transition from a repetitive apparatus school to a community life school,[19] with the intention of recovering the sense of this task of humanization and sharing it with all forces engaged in a democratic and humanistically solidarity sense.[20]

In this pedagogical-educational framework, the teacher should encourage students to acquire a comprehensive critical view of educational and social reality, helping them to question particular paradigms, value structures, epistemological and political

[18] Cfr. E. SAID, *What is the Role of the Intellectual in Pubblic and Political Life Today?* Interview by Michael Phillips on Social Thought, February 1991.
[19] C. SIRNA, *Globalizzazione e interventi educativi formali*, In XLI Convegno di Scholé (a cura di.), *Globalizzazione e nuove responsabilità educative*, Brescia, La Scuola, 2003, pp. 103-116.
[20] Cfr. C. SCURATI, *Fra presente e futuro. Analisi e riflessioni di pedagogia*, Brescia, La Scuola, 2001.

orientations. The teacher, in agreement with what Kincheloe[21] affirmed, should thus wear the attire of the Critical Researcher and should possess a sort of "knowledge briefcase" (such as profound inspiration, high ethical motivation, rigorous commitment, a deep sense of care, guidance, animation, and mediation, great competence, sense of responsibility, balance, and participation), which, when deployed with intelligent sensitivity, becomes functional to initiate the construction process and the conquest process in students of their identity, autonomy, and, above all, their openness to social commitment and co-responsibility.

### *4. Portrait, Role, and Responsibilities of Teachers Towards Current and Future Generations*

I dedicate special attention to the educational figure of the teacher because we are the primary agents of change and enhancement of new educational paths. Inspired by profound ethical motivations, care, guidance, and a strong sense of personal and collective responsibility, we should help the new generations equip themselves adequately in terms of knowledge. In this regard, the teacher should not be perceived as "a clerk offering a bag full of techniques",[22] serving students like a waiter offering "trite and obvious truths that reinforce both common sense and what is self-evident".[23] Neither should the teacher be considered a fast-thinking specialist in "disposing of thought" by providing "pre-digested and pre-thought-out fast-food culture"[24], as this would mean depoliticizing their role entirely. The teacher, as conceived in this way, represents a personality that "loses its sense of public commitment" because it adopts an educational practice that generates "a dangerous

[21] Cfr. J. L. KINCHELOE, *Critical Pedagogy, Primer, 2nd Edition*. New York, Peter Lang Publishing, 2008.
[22] H. GIROUX, *Op. cit.*, p. 110.
[23] Z. BAUMAN, *Afterthough: On Writing Sociology*. In «Cultural studies/critical metodologies», 2(3), 359-370, 2002.
[24] Cfr. P. BOURDIEU, *On television*, The New Press, New York, 1996.

calm".[25] This implies a commitment to offering only limited hope of confronting the oppressive structures of dominant power, thereby downplaying complex issues and diminishing fundamental values to the point of draining them of their authoritative significance.

To prevent teachers from condemning critical thinking to extinction[26] and becoming veritable engines of antidemocratic behavior[27], it is vital for them to exercise the "ethical and aesthetic responsibility" mentioned by Freire[28] in "Pedagogy of Autonomy". This responsibility is socially and historically constituted not as an "a priori of history" but as a nature in the making that recognizes and values itself as such when lived through practice. Teachers become lively witnesses to those they educate, exercising ethical correctness, respect for others, coherence, and the ability to live and learn with differences.

From this perspective, teachers, in relation to future generations, should be imagined as individuals with a strong ethical and formative imprint, ready to provide students with the tools for acquiring theoretical and practical skills. These skills will enable students to identify and combat various forms of inequality and injustice, contradicting and undermining the principles of freedom, equality, justice, and respect for others.

Teachers following this approach will actively employ knowledge and information in the classroom through analysis, problematization, argumentation, and critical dialogue. This approach encourages students' self-reflection to make them capable of reading and critically using diverse themes, issues, times, and contexts. Consequently, students' perspectives and their respective critical and cognitive abilities become a stimulus and guide to expand and deepen knowledge, transforming themselves into future social actors.

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[25] Cfr. M. NUSSBAUM, *The Professor of Parody*, in «The New Republic», 2 novembre 2000.
[26] Cfr. H. GIROUX, *Op. cit.*, 2012.
[27] Cfr. A. ARENDT, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report of the Banality of Evil*, New York, Penguin, 1963.
[28] Cfr. P. FREIRE, *Pedagogia dell'autonomia. Saperi necessari per la pratica educativa*, Torino, EGA-Edizioni Gruppo Abele, 2004.

Implementing and effectively using this approach naturally requires, in the exercise and defense of the dual "ethical and aesthetic" nature of educational practice, embarking on a dialogical relationship based on a willingness to engage in dialogue and intersect with the ability to listen. This emphasizes that teachers, knowing they are dealing not with things but with people in formation, changing, growing, reorienting, improving,[29] must be capable of breaking down the condition of considering oneself as the other's object. This will be possible through the practice of teaching and learning that allows students to understand what an important "personal capital" they represent and, at the same time, to acquire the value of criticality as the ability to reflect, analyze, interpret, compare, and reinterpret, reacting and taking action in the world.[30] In doing so, the teacher will promote the full development of the individual in social, cultural, and moral terms: shaping individuals capable of ethical, intellectual, and political autonomy.

Following this trend, critical thinking becomes a present ingredient in the learning of all subjects, the yeast that guarantees the growth of the mind and the growth of a school as a "community of free doubters",[31] where a spirit of open and tolerant discussion on all issues prevails. Of course, some educational strategies such as group discussion, research with students, reasoned and open lectures for critical dialogue, the practice of giving and asking for reasons, and others, encourage this process and promote the idea of a school conceived as a democratic community, where relationships are based on free discussion and democratic deliberation rather than hierarchical relations.

Fostering these practices, therefore, offers students fertile ground to cultivate both critical thinking[32] and a future that leads them to the "understanding of history as a possibility and not as determinism",[33] in lively and full respect of freedom and social justice. This path represents the necessary weapon to participate in democratic

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[29] *Ibidem*.
[30] Cfr. P. FREIRE, *La pedagogia degli oppressi*, Torino, EGA-Edizioni Gruppo Abele, 2007.
[31] Cfr. L. BORGHI, *L'educazione e i suoi problemi,* Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1953.
[32] Cfr. M. BALDACCI, *La scuola al bivio. Mercato o democrazia?*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2019.
[33] P. FREIRE, *Pedagogia della speranza*, Torino, EGA-Edizioni Gruppo Abele, 2008, p. 91.

political life and navigate the defense of freedom, justice, peace, and values currently at great risk. Educating for dialogue and critical thinking means, therefore, finding the will and courage to contribute to the democratic education of our present and future by choosing to adopt a critical approach in the classroom as an opportunity to resist the pressures and temptations to retreat from collective responsibilities. On the other hand, as Bauman[34] argues, a society that wants to engage its members in the difficult and imperative task of caring for each other and managing common affairs in full respect of collective well-being "does not need disciplined subjects or consumers seeking satisfaction from socially provided services but rather sometimes obstinate, but always responsible citizens".[35]

[34] Cfr. Z. BAUMAN, *Life in Fragments. Essays in Postmodern Morality*, Oxford, Blackewell Publishers Ltd., 1995.
[35] Ivi, p. 326.