The social *habitus* of Early Years Education: Processes of learning and unlearning

O habitus *social da Educação Infantil: processos de aprendizagem e de não aprendizagem*

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Abstract

Although Norbert Elias did not explicitly address educational practice or the role of education in society, he was deeply interested in the development of the social learning processes of young children and adults. This paper will begin by looking at Elias's relational perspective on childhood, focusing on the long-term individual civilising processes that young children undergo as they prepare for adulthood in complex societies. It will then focus on two of the major psychoanalytic thinkers of the British object relations school, Donald Winnicott and Wilfred Bion, to understand how these processes of learning are sometimes 'blocked' by teachers in different institutions where it is assumed that pedagogy is predominantly a rational, conscious and deliberate

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process. I will argue that Elias's distinctive approach to learning can be used to integrate the findings of psychoanalysis, developing a relational sociology of Early Years Education that views schools as anxious institutions where young children have to exercise a more intensive and all-embracing control over their emotions.

Keywords: Early Years Education. Learning processes. Norbert Elias.

Resumo

Embora Norbert Elias não tenha abordado explicitamente a prática educacional ou o papel da educação na sociedade, ele estava profundamente interessado no desenvolvimento dos processos de aprendizagem social de crianças e adultos jovens. Este artigo começará examinando a perspectiva relacional de Elias sobre a infância, enfocando os processos civilizatórios individuais de longo prazo pelos quais as crianças pequenas passam enquanto se preparam para a vida adulta em sociedades complexas. Em seguida, ele se concentrará em dois dos principais pensadores psicanalíticos da escola britânica de relações objetais, Donald Winnicott e Wilfred Bion, para entender como esses processos de aprendizagem são às vezes "bloqueados" por professores em diferentes instituições onde se pressupõe que a pedagogia seja predominantemente um processo racional, consciente e deliberado. O estudo conclui que a abordagem distinta de Elias para a aprendizagem pode ser usada para integrar as descobertas da psicanálise, desenvolvendo uma sociologia relacional da Educação Infantil, que vê as escolas como instituições ansiosas nas quais as crianças pequenas têm de exercer um controle mais intensivo e abrangente sobre suas emoções.

Palavras-chave: *Educação Infatil. Processos de aprendizagem. Norbert Elias.*

Introduction

This paper begins by looking at two of the most important educational thinkers, John MacMurray and John Dewey and how they developed relational concepts that can enable us to move beyond traditional dichotomies between care and learning or the sterile debate between 'traditional education' and 'progressive education'. Although Norbert Elias did not explicitly address educational practice or the role of education in society, he was deeply interested in the development of the social learning processes of young children and adults. I introduce Elias's important relational concept of love and learning to focus on the long-term individual civilising processes that young children undergo as they prepare for adulthood in complex societies. My paper then turns to two of the major psychoanalytic thinkers of the British object relations school, Donald Winnicott and Wilfred Bion, to understand how these processes of learning are sometimes 'blocked' by teachers in educational institutions where it is assumed that pedagogy is mainly a rational, conscious and deliberate process. I argue that Elias's distinctive approach to learning can be used to integrate the findings of psychoanalysis, developing a relational sociology of Early Years Education that views schools as anxious institutions where young children have to exercise a more intensive and all-embracing control over their emotions.

Relational Pedagogy

Papatheodorou (2009) argues that development of a relational pedagogy can challenge the dominant performative rationality of Early Childhood Education and Care as a market with its

objectification of the child, overcoming the dichotomy between an outcomes-based and processes-oriented pedagogical praxis. She suggests that relational pedagogy, understood as a complex web of human experiences rather than an individual experience divorced from its cultural and social context, signals a significant change in the conceptualisation of Early Years Education, bridging polarised discourses such as child-centred versus adult-centred learning.

According to Papatheodorou (2009), the dialogical aspects underpinning relationships between learners and teachers offer the opportunity to challenge teaching as a technical act, resisting the imposition of a priori beliefs of who the learner is or should be. Teachers can re-examine their attitudes and understanding of students, making 'thinking with' possible. A good example of the type of concepts that underpin this relational form of Early Years Education is the Maori word '*ako*' which means both 'to learn' and 'to teach', reflecting the reciprocal processes implemented in *Te Whariki curriculum* in New Zealand. These concepts entail a web of 'betweenness' that emphasises the relational dynamics of various contributions that each individual can make.

The educational writings of the Scottish philosopher John Macmurray have a special relevance in developing this relational view of education, one that enables us both to ask questions we too often ignore and develop responses that overcome the more superficial aspects of contemporary educational debate. Writing about these pedagogical matters more than eighty years ago, the Scottish philosopher John MacMurray insisted that we should educate the emotions, placing relationships and care at the heart of teaching and learning. We are, in MacMurray's view, deeply and irrevocably relational beings whose creative energies are best realised in and through our encounters with others: he insists on education as a relational, caring undertaking:

> A child is born human; […]. He can survive only by being cared for. He can do nothing – just nothing – to help himself. He has to learn everything – to see, to move about, to walk, to speak: and while he is learning these basic elements of humanity, his human life consists in his relation to those who care for him – who feel for him, think and plan for him, act for him. This dependence on others is his life – yet to be human he must reach beyond it, not to independence, but to an *interdependence* in which he can give as well as receive (MacMurray, 2012, p.666, author's emphasis).

MacMurray distinguished between three types of knowledge. The first kind of knowledge, which he calls 'knowing how' is typified by the sciences. The second kind of knowledge, 'knowing why', helps us to determine ends and assign priorities and is typically represented by the arts. What is particularly significant for my argument in this paper is the addition of a third, even more important, kind of knowledge that was central to Macmurray's work and received its fullest expression in his 1955 Gifford Lectures (MacMurray, 1957, 1961). He refers to this kind of knowledge as "knowledge of community" (MacMurray, 1965) which has important implications for how we view the following relationships: the importance of schools as living communities; the centrality of relationships of care in the educational process (he insisted that we should educate the emotions, placing relationships and care at the heart of teaching and learning); the techniques and methods we use to engage each other in learning; and the curriculum itself through immersion in forms of community life that affirm our mutuality as persons.

In an innovative paper, Quennerstedt and Quennerstedt (2014) develop a theoretical approach that integrates aspects of the sociology of childhood with John Dewey's Educational focus on growth. Dewey (1938) believed that education should be based on growth in terms of the re-organisation and re-construction of experience: "the educational process has no end beyond itself": it is a process "of continual reorganizing, reconstructing, transforming" (Dewey, 1916, p.50). Experience here refers to the transactions of living organisms with their environments which are best understood relationally and as mutually constituting. He characterises living organisms as capable of establishing and maintaining a dynamic coordination with their environment. Through this process, the predispositions – or 'habits' as Dewey preferred to call them – of the organism become more attuned to ever changing environing conditions. This learning, however, is not the acquisition of information about how the world 'out there' is. It is a learning process through which living organisms acquire a complex and flexible set of predispositions for action.

This idea of co-ordination remained a central theme in Dewey's work, as can be seen from book titles such as "The School and Society" of 1899, "The Child and the Curriculum" of 1902, "Democracy and Education" of 1916 and "Experience and Education" of 1938. The appearance of the word 'and' in the title of many of Dewey's books signifies that he was wary of one-sided thinking that places emphasis either on the school or on society, either on the child or on the curriculum, either on experience or on education. He observed that human beings like to think in terms of extreme opposites by formulating their beliefs in terms of "either-or, between which it recognises no intermediate possibilities" (Dewey, 1938, p.17).

His concern with the relationship between subject matter and the learner stems from the ongoing debate between 'traditional education' and 'progressive education'. In "The Child and the Curriculum" of 1990 he identifies two main schools of thought. On the one hand, the "subject matter school" emphasises the importance of the subject matter over and against the learner's own experience. Proponents of the "subject matter school" aim for learners to receive and accept "logical subdivisions and consecutions of the subject matter" so that learning becomes the mere "acquisition of what already is incorporated in books and in the heads of the elders" (Dewey, 1938, p.19). Driven by the emphasis on the acquisition of skills, its learning methods are primarily "sheer imitation, dictation of steps to be taken, mechanical drill" rather than the training of the learner's intellectual and reflective powers (Dewey, 1997, p.52). At the other end of the spectrum is the school that underscores the importance of the learner rather than subject matter. Placing the learner as the "starting-point, the centre, and the end", proponents view the learner's growth through self-realisation as the ideal (Dewey, 1990, p.187). Advocates of the 'learner school' favour the 'natural' or 'psychological' school of educational theory by marginalising subject matter in support of "freedom, self-expression, individuality, spontaneity, play, interest, natural unfolding, and so on" (Dewey, 1997, p.58).

Rather than subscribing to this 'either natural or logical' position, Dewey argues for the need to see the validity of both. What matters for Dewey is the connection, or a more technical term he introduced towards the end of his career, the transaction (Dewey; Bentley, 1949). For Dewey, education is neither about putting the curriculum into the child nor about the child just doing anything, but about establishing a productive and meaningful connection between the two. Subscribing to a "both subject matter and learner" thinking, Dewey points out the need to abandon the assumption that subject matter

and learner are unrelated. Subject matter is not something fixed and ready-made that is outside the learner's experience; the learner's experience is also not unconnected to the subject matter. Therefore, it is a fallacy for educators to assume an 'either-or' logic in instruction: to either leave the learner to his or her own unguided spontaneity or to direct him or her externally. Instead, educators need to do both, to direct indirectly. In Dewey's words:

> Now, the value of the formulated wealth of knowledge that makes up the course of study is that it may enable the educator to determine the environment of the child, and thus by indirection to direct. Its primary value, its primary indication, is for the teacher, not for the child. It says to the teacher: such and such are the capacities, the fulfilments, in truth and beauty and behaviour, open to these children. Now see to it that day by day the conditions are such that their own activities move inevitably in this direction, toward such culmination of themselves (Dewey, 1990, p.209).

Love and learning relationships

Like Dewey, Norbert Elias wanted to dismantle the Cartesian subject and free the subject from the monopoly of a knowledge "set over against the world to be known" (Dewey, 1917, p.30). Although Elias did not explicitly address educational practice or the role of education in society, he was deeply interested in the development of the social learning processes of young children and adults. For young children there are "natural human structures which remain dispositions and cannot fully function unless they are stimulated by a person's 'love and learning' relationship with other persons" (Elias, 2009a, p.147). This important relational concept of love and learning aptly summarises a great deal of previous psychological research on young children's development, bringing together specialised areas within psychology (particularly the separation between cognitive, social and developmental psychology).

To highlight the strong, affective ties that link people with one another, Elias used the notion of "valency" to refer to the relational way in which people are directed toward other people: some are already firmly connected with certain people, while others are free and open, and search for people with whom to form bonds. Elias therefore emphasises the importance of personal interdependencies and emotional bonds which binds society together: human beings are social beings embedded in figurations which are interdependent webs and networks that are always moving, changing and developing. In "On the Process of Civilization" he writes that "Since people are more or less dependent on each other first by nature and then through social learning, through education, socialization, and socially generated reciprocal needs, they exist, one might venture to say, only as pluralities, only in figurations" (Elias, 2012, p.525).

An integral aspect of this civilizing process is that young children should eventually grow up through their own self-regulation. Elias mentions a unique human capacity "for controlling and modifying drives and affects in a great variety of ways as part of a learning process" (Elias, 2007, p.125). He argues that though there is a great deal of psychological and physiological literature on learning there is very little on the structuring of the habitus through learning (Elias; Dunning, 2008). According to Elias (2012) one of the indispensable keys to the problems posed by the steering of human conduct is that the child never learns to control his or her behaviour without the fears instilled by grown-ups consciously or

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unconsciously, eventually reproducing themselves more or less automatically. The malleable personality of the child is so fashioned by fears that it learns to act in accord with the prevailing standard of behaviour.

Elias (2012) argues that these fears add fuel to the "fiery circle of inner anxieties" which hold the behaviour and feelings of the growing child permanently within definite limits, binding him or her to a certain standard of shame and embarrassment, to a specific accent, to particular manners, whether he or she wishes it or not. Although these parental anxieties may sometimes bring about what they are supposed to prevent, even though the child might be made incapable, by such blindly instilled automatic anxieties, of succeeding in the struggle for attaining social prestige, it is always the tensions of their society that are projected by parental gestures, prohibitions and fears on to the child.

Such tensions can be explained by the historical development of processes of civilisation which has had a dual impact on childhood: first, the distance between childhood and adulthood gradually increases as the requirements of societal membership become more demanding, so that childhood requires more time and effort in socialisation and education prior to the achievement of adult status through entering the workforce. Second, the adult's investment of time, skill, effort and emotions in young children also increases, making them both more 'precious' and demanding at the same time. The continuous concern by parents on whether their child will attain the standard of conduct of their own or even a higher stratum, whether it will maintain or increase the prestige of the family – fears of this kind surround the child from its earliest years. They play a considerable part in the control which the child is subject to from the beginning, in the prohibitions placed on him or her. I will now build on Elias's very suggestive phrase 'fiery circle of inner anxieties' by integrating the findings of relational psychoanalysis, developing a suitable sociology of Early Years Education.

Relational psychoanalysis

A distinctive school of relational psychoanalysis developed from the early 1980s in the work of Greenberg and Mitchell (1983), who posited a relational model in opposition to the classical Freudian drive theory. This 'new tradition' draws on three long-standing bodies of thinking in psychoanalysis: The American interpersonal tradition (see, for example, Sullivan, 1953), which emphasised the importance of understanding the network of relationships within which individuals exist; the British object relations tradition (Bion, 1962; Winnicott, 1965; Bowlby, 1969); and the work of American psychoanalytic feminists (Benjamin, 1998; Chodorow, 1999; Dimen, 2003).

According to Roseneil and Ketokivi (2016) each of these lineages of theory posed its own challenges to the monadic model of drive theory, with its primary focus on intra-psychic processes, on the quest for rational control by the ego and the developmental goal of separation and autonomy. Their shared orientation conceptualises the self as relationally constituted, where the matrix of mother-or carer-child relations provides the very conditions of possibility of existence for the young, dependent child. Hence, from the beginning, the self is intrinsically social, our sense of autonomy and agency inherently relational.

I will now discuss two of the major thinkers of the British object relations school, Donald Winnicott and Wilfred Bion and some of their important concepts for developing a sociology of Early Years Education, one that does not assume that pedagogy is predominantly a rational, conscious and

deliberate process. Rational definitions of pedagogy have traditionally been based on the actions of the pedagogue and proceed from the assumption of building incremental knowledge upon the edifice of the learner. Bibby (2011) contends that this explanation of the teacher/learner is too simplistic and does not take into account how young children are part of a relational, less linear process.

Winnicott (1971) has argued that relationships precede individuality and are governed by the need to relate. He wanted to show how young children bridge the gap between egocentricism and recognition of an external world, and how they negotiate and renegotiate relations between self and other. Playing the other enriches and expands the boundaries of the self and at the same time sharpens the differences between the two. It is designed to attach the infant to the caregiver and at the same time enable him to keep the right distance from her. In this space, the baby identifies something, an object, which is at the same time 'not me' and 'not mother'. Using that object is important since only by identifying it as non-self can it act as a transitional object and enable the infant to relate his inner reality to what is outside.

Here Winnicott (1971, p.51) introduces the important concept of a transitional space that is: "outside the individual, but it is not the external world […]. Into this play area the child gathers objects or phenomena from external reality and uses these in the services of inner or personal reality".

This potential space must avoid being challenged because it belongs to neither an inner nor an outer reality, but must remain in-between. Winnicott does not separate the child from his or her environment in terms of the discovery of self, objective distancing, naming, or rationalizing but proposes a fluid process of separation involving intuition, experimentation and play. This space of pedagogy and creativity is one that cannot be defined by the terms 'inner' or 'outer' and thus highlights the agency of children and their ability to make use of space in conceptualizing identity, place and difference. Winnicott's (1971) concept of transitional space and playful pedagogy therefore provides a radical outlook on young children's learning processes.

Learning to be civilised

> The child, in learning to be civilised, naturally also feels frustrations acutely, and is helped in becoming civilised not so much by the teacher's precepts as by the teachers' own ability to bear the frustrations inherent in teaching (Winnicott, 1964, p.202).

Bion (1962) contends that the growing toleration of frustration allows 'thinking' to develop. For Bion, the process of thinking and learning is rooted in the developing ability of humans to tolerate 'uncertainty' and 'unknowing'. This process is fraught with the difficulty of staying with the experience of uncertainty. Uncertainty is what education feels like, it involves getting to know one's emotional experience from the pain and vulnerability of learning from ambiguous experience. Bion (2004) calls this 'knowledge', arguing that the process of coming to know depends on how we manage to tolerate the frustration of uncertainty – of 'not knowing'. According to Bion, the conceptualization of experience is quite different from our taken for granted view that it is acquired and cumulative.

Another key aspect of Bion's argument is his belief that the toleration of pain and frustration is central to learning since all learning requires that we take a risk. To move from not knowing to knowing

we must necessarily move through a period that will involve uncertainty, frustration and anxiety that inevitably carries risk. Failure and success both entail risk. In discussing Bion's insistence on the centrality of the relationship between learning and experience, Britzman (2003, p.28) comments, "having to learn is [not] an experience that can be known in advance. And this radical uncertainty […] is the structuring tension in education".

Bibby (2009) argues that Bion's work offers a powerful way of thinking about knowledge, knowing and relatedness and has important implications for understanding the processes of learning for young children in Early Years Education. In one of her studies that examined children's learner-identities in primary school mathematics, she demonstrated the difficulties associated with 'refused' or 'blocked' relationships: 'knowledge about' – curriculum content knowledge –, was only acceptable when it was intimately bound to the emotional connections to, and work with, teachers and peers. When curriculum content knowledge was taught alongside a denial of this interconnectedness, it was reduced to unsatisfying, disconnected knowledge.

Schools as "anxious" institutions

The work of Menzies Lyth (1988) can be used as an important stepping stone to integrate the findings of relational psychoanalysis and sociology. Her ideas have become the point of reference for researchers seeking to make sense of the interplay between organisational processes and anxiety across a range of contexts including health, education, social care and commercial management (Taylor; Beckett; McKeigue, 2008). In her seminal study of the organisation of the nursing service within a London general teaching hospital, she linked difficulties in staffing and training to an organisational failure to deal positively with the anxiety-provoking and emotionally intense nature of the nursing task.

Menzies Lyth (1988, p.63) argued that there was an absence within the hospital of any mechanism through which to "positively help the individual confront the anxiety-evoking experiences and by so doing to develop her capacity to tolerate and deal more effectively with the anxiety". In a departure from the highly valued concept of 'professionalism' within health and social care, whereby practitioners must maintain a 'caring but distant demeanour' and suppress and control their emotions (Bolton, 2001), she suggested that emotions should be confronted, rather than suppressed or ignored. This provides a key link with Bion's concept of containment:

> The relationship between emotion and its 'containment', that is, the ways in which emotion is experienced or avoided, managed or denied, kept in or passed on, so that its effects are either mitigated or amplified. The capacity to think, on the part of individuals or groups, is related to the capacity for containment of anxiety (Lawlor; Webb, 2009, p.525).

In the absence of the effective containment of anxiety, a set of defensive techniques developed in the organisation of the nursing service, such as detachment and denial of feelings: this related to the requirement for the nurses to acquire adequate professional detachment, which was linked to frequent ward moves for junior nurses. It also related to the expectation that nurses should not show emotion and maintain a 'stiff upper lip'. According to Menzies Lyth (1988), not only did these defensive techniques

fail to fully alleviate the task-related anxiety experienced by the nurses, but they also caused a set of secondary anxieties. These were defined as a threat of crisis and operational breakdown, where nurses, constrained by the full weight of prescriptive and rigidly defined tasks, were afraid of being unable to keep up with their duties as workloads increased; and underemployment of student nurses, whereby they were denied the opportunity to use their discretion or judgement in the face of strictly prescribed tasks. Finally, the excessive movement of student nurses resulted in a sense of disorientation amongst staff, lack of team spirit, less patient engagement and lower quality of care.

If we turn to education and ask whether Menzies Lyth's analysis can be applied, there are two important areas of convergence, helping to explain how educational institutions produce anxiety and shape how teachers and young children respond to it. The first, paralleling her analysis, requires us to think about the relations of teachers, children and their parents to the 'primary task' of the school. According to Bibby (2011), its main task is the creation, control and transmission of knowledge by facilitating the overlay of knowledge on the developing child. She argues that this leads to the development of an impossible space that enables adults "who are not children to construct children as variously mad, stupid, evil, lazy, sinful, wilful and suggestible and therefore in need of control, supervision and socialization" (Bibby, 2011, p.21). In a similar way, Elias explains that during a process of socialisation adults can easily forget that they too were young children, where a high level of civilizing restraint forms part of their social habitus. This restraint appears to grown-ups as "automatic," a part of their "second nature" which is treated as something with which they were born:

> […] the perspective of adults who have lost sight of their own and other people's development from a child, who proceed in their reflections about human beings as if they had all been born as adults, and who see themselves from within their armour as single individuals interacting with other adults equally armoured (Elias, 2009b, p.179).

Secondly, we need to consider some of the social defences established by aspects of the teaching and educational system to protect against and alleviate these anxieties. Hoggett (2010) has argued that the neo-liberal reform of public services has introduced an intensified proceduralism which ensured that, where face-to-face work did occur, the encounter was itself highly regulated and subject to standardized behavioural repertoires. This auditable surface of outcome indicators and returns, plans and reports, risk assessments and reviews acted as a proxy or stand-in for relating to the user. In conditions of increasing accountability, measurement and anxiety, teachers are labelled and categorised as excellent, adequate, at risk or vulnerable, which provoke certain defences. Labelling, for example, enables a distancing and removal from the actual person that becomes synonymous with standardised task performance. In this scenario "anxiety tends to remain permanently at a level determined by phantasies rather than reality" (Menzies Lyth, 1988, p.44), interfering with the development of thinking that could be oriented to reality.

Final Considerations

This paper has argued that we need to need to develop a relational sociology of Early Years Education. I used Elias's understanding of the relation between love and learning as a sensitising concept to discuss how young children's education is both a cognitive and affective process, one that

is fraught with a great deal of emotional anxieties that gradually require more self-regulation. I turned to two of the major thinkers of the British object relations school, Donald Winnicott and Wilfred Bion, to question the assumption that pedagogy is predominantly a rational, conscious and deliberate process. By refocusing on the unconscious processes of risk and uncertainty in the classroom, we can offer a way beyond the dead-end approach of accepting or rejecting prescriptive advice on how to teach better or how to deal with "difficult" pupils.

I then suggested that the work of Menzies Lyth is important because it provides a bridge between relational psychoanalysis and sociology, enabling us to explore how educational institutions produce anxiety and shape how teachers and young children respond to it. I drew on the work of Tamara Bibby to consider the ways in which the anxieties experienced by teachers are related to the organisational context of the school, discussing the institutional defences that lead to a fear of the loss of control and the denial of emotional relations in learning between teachers and young children.

To further develop a sociology of Early Years Education, we should look to Dewey's attempt to capture the uncertainty of the educational endeavour itself and the radical uncertainty of thinking. Perhaps one of the key aspects of his educational thinking is that while undermining the possibility of finding a linear causality between educators' actions and students' experiences, he emphasised the importance of preserving the openness of the educational process and the realm of possibilities that education engenders.

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