

'Left to Themselves': contemporary scenes of adolescence

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ABSTRACT – 'Left to Themselves': contemporary scenes of adolescence. In her work *The Crisis of Education* (1954), Hannah Arendt already raised the need to reflect on the authority of the adult and the place of adolescents left to themselves. The text that we propose tries to outline, between two shores, Brazil and Spain, the words, the acts and the staging of adolescents confined to our cities. The objective is to be able to formulate new questions, in times of excessive responses, about dropouts, protection, the absence and presence of the adult in adolescent lives, the role of public education and clinical care. To do this, we try, as part of an ongoing investigation, to give the floor to adolescents in different social situations.

Keywords: Adolescents. Adults. Authority. Education. Pandemic.

RESUMEN – 'Librados A Sí Mismos': escenas contemporáneas de las adolescencias. En su obra *La Crisis de la Educación* (1954), Hannah Arendt ya planteaba la necesidad de reflexionar acerca de la autoridad del adulto y el lugar de los adolescentes librados a sí mismos. El texto que proponemos pretende esbozar, entre dos orillas, Brasil y España, las palabras, los actos y las puestas en escena de las adolescencias confinadas en nuestras ciudades. El objetivo es poder formular nuevas preguntas, en tiempos de excesivas respuestas, en torno a los abandonos, la protección, la ausencia y la presencia del adulto en las vidas adolescentes, el papel de la educación pública y la atención clínica. Para ello, intentamos, en el marco de una investigación en curso, dar la palabra a adolescentes en diferentes situaciones sociales.
Palabras-clave: Adolescentes. Adultos. Autoridad. Educación. Pandemia.

Introduction

In her text *The Crisis in Education* (1954)¹ Hannah Arendt had already posed the need to reflect on the authority of the adult and the place of the teenagers freed themselves. We intend to outline and trace here, between two banks – Brazil and Spain – the words, acts and staging of adolescence confined in our cities – especially at this time of SARS-Cov2 pandemic (Covid-19), a new virus that contaminated virtually every country on the planet in 2020, with a high capacity for contagion and mortality. Our goal is to be able to ask new questions, in times of excessive responses, about denialisms, abandonments, protection, the absence and presence of adults in adolescent lives, the role of public education and clinical care. To do this, we try, in the context of an on-going research, to give the floor to adolescents in different social situations, overcome by the crosses of social care, educational care and / or clinical care.

We suspect that the present moment in which we live did not necessarily invent the condition of an adolescence left to their own resources or abandoned to its own fate – which is historical at this stage of existence – but, perhaps, it has exponentially elevated this condition to levels never before seen. Many adults today cannot keep their responsibility to accompany their teens, abandoning them or leaving them adrift. We do not ignore that several of these adults are in the same way – adrift – and they cannot help the young ones much on their hard journeys to achieve, as well as to conquer their social standing. The best thing adults could do would be to “survive; to survive unscathed, without abandoning any important principle” (Winnicott, 1975, p. 196). But we do not deny that this is a herculean task, that we live in exceedingly difficult times, in which authority – adult authority – has been severely questioned.

Those who exercise the role of educational, religious, and political authority, typical of the adult world, do so only at the risk of being deposed. The fact is that, practically or theoretically, we are no longer able to know what authority really is or who can take it. In a way, it has disappeared from the world in which we live and two other supports for Western society have also disappeared: religion and tradition. These are worrying warnings from Arendt (1996), whose thesis we will discuss not without first trying to understand how certain teenagers see themselves in these pandemic times, giving us some empirical basis to encourage our reflections.

Contemporary scenes from adolescence

Since the 1960s and 1970s, when Western societies became youthful as a result of the prominence of young people at the time, and even more so after the late 1980s when social ties were virtualized into excessively teenage language, the lives of our young people have diversified enormously. Today we live with distinct, plural and strange teens

in the eyes of a more traditional adult morality, which perceives with great difficulty the constant changes of these teens. Its idiosyncrasies, as in marks on the body, the delimitation of territories, drug addiction, hyper consumption, uninhibited eroticization, the digitization of life, the provocations of language, adherence to crime and the hatred of authority are perceived as some of the traits that our adolescents today hide from us.

Then, to give materiality and compose the reflections of this paper, we decided to return to experience, recovering conversations and also conducting a small survey with eight teenagers from Spain and Brazil, from different backgrounds, questioning them about their lives in these pandemic times as well as their relationships with the adults of reference and what they say about education, school and work. We analyze their daily lives; how they perceive the support of adults in their care; and how they assess their own personal condition. We present each one of them nominally², followed by a small note highlighting the points that we consider essential to compose what we will go on to discuss later.

The methodological perspective we use translates into what has been conventionally called *thinking on a case-by-case basis*, as Rodríguez (2018) proposes. The author argues that “singularity implies contradictory association, or at least disconcerting principles or data, which are capable of destabilizing the consciousness of a conviction. This singularity breaks the thread of generalization to provoke reflection” (p. 124). The possibility of *thinking on a case-by-case basis* allows us to intertwine situations and provoke reflections that would otherwise be immersed in stigmatizations resulting from social, educational, and psychological conditions. That is, distance here operates in terms of facilitating a reconciliation from different occupations, professional practices, disciplinary views without implying an obstacle to possible conversations, connections and articulations between speeches. More importantly, they become indispensable in enabling opportunities for work and care to happen in the exchange.

Nevertheless, we go to each of the contemporary scenes of teenagers, hereinafter treated as cases, and to their respective preliminary notes. In the encounters with these teens, and by listening attentively to their words, certainly – at stake and crossed by the current situation – it becomes apparent (as we already pointed out in another text – Solé and Moyano, 2017 –) a certain renunciation of adults in the exercise of the educational function. This aspect can be read as intimately articulated with the function of adult authority. These words, referring to their teachers and their parents, also reflect a particular way of living that Arendtian *left to their own resources*. The author (Arendt, 1996) raises a number of basic assumptions to consider the axes of educational crises. We will try to reflect on the teenage scenes from *three basic assumptions* like the ones we extract from formal and informal conversations with them.

1. The first of the assumptions is based on the loss of authority in the relationship between adults and adolescents, showing scenes of adolescents without adult references, and in which they seem "[...] *tell [the teen] to do whatever they want and then prevent the worst from happening*" (Arendt, 1996, p. 279):

Adrián is 14 years old and does not do very well in school. It is not so much because of his behavior, as his mother often says, but because of what he defines as "being alone in school." A "being alone" that is not described in terms of the relationship with his peers, as he has a wide network of regular friends in the school context. It rather seems to point the other way. Adrián explains that with the pandemic he has realized that "no one cares if he goes to school or not." So, he understands that the moment they open schools, he is not going. Despite new questions related to the reason of this decision, Adrián is silent. There are no more words. Adrián did not go back to school in September, after the start of the new term. After the intervention of social services and several meetings between his teachers and his parents, Adrián has resumed classes a month later. What is in Adrián's initial decision? What did he realize? In a sporadic meeting, and from a casual exchange of comments, we bring up Adrián's words which a few months ago revealed: "Nobody cares if I go to school or not." "We, adults, care" I say. Silence. His face shows boredom and little convincing. He thinks and ends by saying, "It will be like that" between a desire to end the conversation and little confidence. That is where it ends.

We emphasize that the conversation with Adrian places us around the opening of several issues. On the one hand, how to guide the constant search for the relationship between adult authority and educational responsibility. Understanding this in terms of the ability to respond, to take responsibility for acts and to exercise of that authority, Adrian seems to be alone in that shared responsibility that is education. At least the trust in adult figures seems undermined. Building a relationship with the school needs adult-supported social construction. A kind of handover of desire. This chain of transmission is an inescapable part of an idea of authority that enables access to the broad socialization, preventing an initial abandonment of the adolescent. This *We, adults, care* can not only be based on conventionalism, but on a conviction that sustains a strong promise of a future.

Felipe/Solange is a 17-year-old with male complexion, but who claims to be "translesbian", she prefers being identified as Solange and treated with female pronouns. She claims to be "a trans woman who likes to have sex with women." She lives in an exclusive neighborhood of a big city, with her mother and siblings from a family of divorced parents. Fortnightly, he spends the weekend with his father and sometimes a few days of the week. She has a strained relationship with everyone, mainly because of this revelation. She's finishing high school with good grades, and intends to study law in college, she says she is white and middle-class. She is undergoing psychiatric treatment for "my gender transition" using alleged medication for that purpose, but – once verified – it is a psychotropic commonly administered for psychotic seizures. She doesn't talk much,

and makes considerable silences in the middle of the sentences, but she is outspoken to talk about herself. Usually, her routine in the Covid-19 confinement is basic: she attends online classes of the private school where she studies in the morning, does the extra activities in the afternoon and reinforces those studies in order to take the entrance exam to university. However, she reveals that she researches “everything about gender identity on the Internet.” She seems to spend a great deal of time with that. She was always a lonely, reserved teenager with fewer social contacts. There are many “adult discussions” with her father about ideas, politics and the arts. And a lot of conflict with her mother, sometimes because she is disorganized, sometimes because she is oblivious to family, sometimes “because she [the mother] doesn’t accept my transition.” But what seems to have changed since the pandemic was the fact that she did not hide her gender identity from all her family and friends. She considers the support and attitude of her parents, as her main adult reference, “a calamity”. She shows a lot of resentment towards this and reveals very invasive attitudes taken by them because of her sexual condition. There is no way of knowing if they are real, but the truth is that she doesn’t feel supported at all by her parents. Unconditional support came from a “non-binary” girl with who started having an affair less than a year ago. They are no longer together because of pressure from their parents. She blame them for that result. All of this seems to heavily affect Solange’s psyche. Her moderate tone, almost in unison, even when speaking of gender, increases as she addresses the relationship with her parents. Questioned, she says she decided to be a “trans woman” after dating a non-binary girl. She was the only person I had sex with. She admits: “She influenced me, but in the sense of waking up to the fact.” Interestingly, she says “influenced” in the masculine gendered conjugation of her native language. She does not remember having experienced sexual or gender-based conflicts during her teenage years, nor has she been stigmatized by it. “Since I was very focused on me, people didn’t know [silence], neither did I.” Her gender transition process still seems timid: she lets her hair and nails grow and shaves. She look for a lot of information about hormones, but without making use of any. She has already undergone some psychotherapies and, nowadays, is medicated by a psychiatrist of apparent biologism, appointed by her mother. About the fact that she is a woman and that she likes another woman, she reaffirms: “I am translesbiano” (masculine-gendered word). So, we asked her, “Why not translesbiana?” (feminine-gendered word) There was a long silence, something inaudible was said and we chose to end the survey. We are still in touch later.

As one can see, in Solange’s case we find an introspective teenager of upper middle class, who seems to have a relationship of guilt and resentment with the reference adults. The support of the parents is lived as a real personal invasion to the point of being manipulated in regard to the treatment she receives for her hesitant gender transition. She constantly challenges and denies the authority of her parents, but becomes quite vulnerable to their influence, as well as those from the psychiatrist and the girlfriend. She feels watched over. It is possible that

the alleged excessive adult care, if there is any, may be a hiding a way to being left to her own resources. The social inscription of their own sexuality, suffering with the gender difference, can mean a demand for help from these adults, a call for their authority, but without overprotection or a barrage of speeches and moralistic acts.

Eduardo is 18 years old, newly graduated from high school with a technical course in computer science. He shares with friends, also graduates, a small company that provides autonomous services in this area, "with all the necessary [health] care". It's his source of income right now, though not enough to support himself. He lives with his parents and siblings in the industrial area of a big city. And his desire to continue his studies in courses is divided, between the areas of humanities and technology. He identifies as mixed race, lower middle class and states no history of coronavirus contamination in his home. He narrates his typical day, since the Covid-19 event, waking up after ten in the morning, dividing his time between film, literature, various videos and studios: "the computer keeps me busy, it's my entertainment." He says he's looking for technological content almost exclusively. It is very quiet in his room and, late in the afternoon, he interacts more with the family, watching a news program or similar shows. At night, he doesn't sleep before 1:30 a.m., sometimes reading philosophy. He doesn't sleep well, he says. Much has changed in his life since the pandemic: becoming distant from friends, lack of social life, not going out for fun. On the other hand, there was an increase in his contact with the family, his privacy and their respect for it. "I study more in the pandemic, but it affects my mental health [questioning]: when will that end?" He reveals spending a lot of time talking to himself, without the others. However, the coronavirus did not eliminate "my basic form of entertainment: the computer". As for the position of the parents, as reference adults, at first it was more tense, but as of now it has improved. "It's very calm now. [With greater family contact], I thought I would argue more, have more tensions. But there's more empathy... everyone started to understand each other better." He says he does not know what those adults would need to support him more. "The situation is atypical, no one has a reference, there is no recipe." About his psychic condition, he feels "bad, sad. An anxiety as a whole, with the news... a lost government, everything is worn out." He complains about isolation and the lack of conversation. When he sleeps, his dreams are always riddled with anxiety. Sometimes he is scared. He thinks about planning better for the future: "I never had to do this, now I do." He does not see himself as a professional of the humanities, but as a technology professional, as he lives with many people from the area. He thinks "the adult world is "more cruel." At the same time, he has a dream: to be independent, to know other cultures to have another view of the world. Among these cultures, American and Eastern cultures are the ones that come to mind. "Knowing Japan would be a shock!" he concludes.

We note that Eduardo is a typical teenager locked in his virtual world and that always confronts the authority of the adults around him. His computer, more than entertainment, is his way of life, his way of self-absorption. However, such a condition does not emancipate him from his parents, from fights with them, or from his nightmares or sor-

rows. The pandemic prompted him to study more, albeit randomly, and to talk to himself more often. He speaks without depth of virtual content, of bad governance and of the consequences of the virus, but his testimony does not hide a disappointment with the adult world, of seeing it as cruel or disoriented. He comes across as a teenager with no ideals, wandering aimlessly, forcing himself to plan his future to be independent. But with a trace of dream: being surprised by other cultures so that he can perhaps find something to aim for.

2. The second of Arendt's basic assumptions points to what she defines as "[...] the most legitimate source of the teacher's authority" (Arendt, 1996, p. 279). It refers to the knowledge that is invested in the teacher:

María is 16 years old. Since the age of 7, she has lived in a residential center under an assumption of administrative guardianship of child protection services. From birth she had lived only with her maternal grandmother after leaving her single mother's family home. She died of an overdose when María was 5. At the age of 7, grandma, very ill with cancer, dies and the girl is welcomed by public social protection services, as the identity of the father is not known and there are no more close relatives who can take over. From the first moment of her entry into the institution, María comes across as a girl eager to learn. Going to school is a festive event for her. She likes to attend, to play with her peers, do her homework, study, learn,... She passed primary education with very good grades and started secondary education at the age of 12. While at first, she struggles to adjust to other rhythms and other demands, in a short time she finds his way to locate herself and progress in school matters. She maintains a very good relationship with both the adults of the residential institution and her companions. The same happens at school; although it is true that with her peers she sometimes maintains a certain distance due to her relationship with the school. That is, cordiality is suspended when she is to do her schoolwork, or when she is to study. She does not succumb to calls to abandon them. She always stands firm because, she says, she has one goal: "to be a doctor and invent the solution for cancer." When the state of health emergency was decreed, María had been 16 years old for two months. The confinement begins and María continues to attend her virtual classes. And it is then, during confinement, that an extraordinary and entirely unexpected event arises. María's father, who has been missing throughout her life and whom she knows nothing about, has made a request in social services and the child protection judge to take care of his daughter. He is willing to get a DNA test that confirms fatherhood and thus get guardianship. She gets the news from the institution's director. Stupor, disbelief, and one question: do I really have to go with him? The current situation is paralyzed, at the expense of a judicial authorization. In the same way as the judicial situation, María is paralyzed. She does not talk to adults beyond everyday demands, she often drops out of schoolwork. She has joined high school for high school, but things are not going well. In these moments, the educational equipment of the protection institution must take on a challenge. How to proceed?

We could agree that the case shows a scenario of paradoxes, obstacles and limits (Moyano, 2020) of education in residential contexts of adolescent care. If we assume that the knowledge of the person who occupies the position of educational agent (the members of the educational team of the institution where María lives) is placed between the social protection assignment they receive and the very challenges and responsibilities of their professional performance, we agree that a paradoxical scenario appears between the rights of the adolescent, the legal frameworks and the institutional possibilities. A terrain that is, no doubt, complex. It is therefore possible that the knowledge of the educator is sailing in all those seas. But what is the point at which an educational team is convened in terms of the exercise of its responsibility? How can we enable the coexistence of María's situation with her commitment to the future? Is it just a matter of time? Although, above all, the call seems to be directed at sustaining the place of the educator and knowing how to combine it with the current circumstances. The team's bet is Maria, her possibilities for the future; and the challenge is, surely, ensuring a place of *not destroying* the desire put into play. And believing, of course, as Arendt says, that the knowledge of the educator is the source of legitimacy of the exercise of an epistemic authority³. A challenge for the educational team to seek the direction of that knowledge. An educational authority that will require adjusting to a certain asymmetry of perspective, placing its gaze between the present and the future.

Juan is a 16-year-old teenager, newly graduated from the judicial enforcement of a socio-educational measure at a government institution for being apprehended for drug trafficking. He lives in an extremely poor neighborhood of a large capital, in a small four-room house where eleven other people (mother, aunt, siblings and cousins) also live. As a legal requirement, he returned to school to complete elementary school (he should be in high school), but dropped out of school again since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. He says he doesn't work ("just a few 'bicos' [odd jobs]"), he's black, poor and doesn't know if he was infected with the virus: "I don't even know how I didn't get, it infected my aunt, my two cousins and a lot of people near home. One even died..." In general, he sleeps "on a mattress in the corner of the kitchen", because in the house there is no room for everyone. So, he wakes up early and leaves: "My house is tight and hot, I can't stay there. I stay in Carvalho's [name of the bar in front of a small square at the beginning of the favela with gymnastics equipment, where young people come together to talk, exercise, spend time and, some, to sell drugs]. That is where I meet the boys, we make fun of each other, we stay well, we don't do a lot of things, no." He says he does this almost every day, comes home for lunch, but wanders down the street until 10 or 11 at night, when he goes back to sleep. Sometimes he plays "games" at the home of one of his friends and asserts with energy that he is no longer involved in drug trafficking, "since the [socio-educational] measures." He reveals that only at the beginning of Covid-19's quarantine did his habits change at home: "There was a lot of bathing all the time, hand sanitizers,

these things, all the time..., but now it's okay, people are used to it and it's a normal thing. Sometimes I forget the mask; you cannot do those things, no, but I don't even remember." His mother and aunt attend one of the favela's Protestant churches and, because of their influence, after he fulfilled the socio-educational measure, he also began to attend. Not always. But the church "pacifies people, gives support, these things...". He cannot say what support, or what's missing in the adults of his reference to be any better. "My mother already works too hard, she's a maid, so is my aunt. I don't have a father, I mean, I have one, but I don't even know where he is; he is a piece of shit, I don't remember his face well, he doesn't help us at all, he doesn't even show up..." He reiterates that his emotional state at the time "is fine. There are some guys, some close, who aren't. They're in the 'mouth' [traffic], they get lost there. Not me. I know things, I'm pacified..." On his perspectives related to the Covid-19 event, he reveals prefabricated phrases without much vigor, saying, "After this virus, I will "get real" with my life: I go back to school; there's a guy where I live who has a motorcycle shop. That's where I do some odd jobs for him, help him, earn some money. I want to study and be a motorcycle mechanic too, have my workshop, I don't know. It makes money, this workshop! With the Covid, the motoboys [motorcycle couriers] have increased a lot, everyone fixes their bikes. His workshop is full, he can't even tell".

We emphasize that Juan seems to be a typically poor teenager, abandoned to his own fate, who denies the pandemic and wanders the streets of the city without having any stable references to reflect upon himself. Compliance with a judicial measure, the church and the relationship with family and friends are a tenuous thread of support, but without effect in creating meaning and an ideal. In fact, there are not many ideals in Juan's life: neither school, nor religion, nor family. Left to his own resources, his social status at a step of drug trafficking seems to force him to *get real*, that is, to live an excess of reality that may well tarnish his future. Perhaps the most legitimate source of authority (Arendt, 2002) who presents himself timidly in this teenager's life is the owner of the motorcycle workshop who, without much demand, teaches him a trade and opens up a horizon, albeit not a wide one.

In an opposite scenario, Sofia, 18, studies in France, where she moved just before the Covid-19 pandemic. She had barely adapted and then had to live an unexpected quarantine. She identifies as of mixed race, middle-class and has attentive parents who fund her studies in a foreign country. She was not contaminated by the virus and follows the necessary protocols. Usually, her day involves waking up, taking virtual and face-to-face classes alternately, meeting her new local college friends at the end of the afternoon, coming home, watching a TV series and sleeping. She always makes light meals and says she is learning not to connect too much to the internet and social media: "at most two hours a day." With the pandemic she says that a lot has changed: the social relations, the fact that she cannot go out on the street, go to parties, and have physical contact with people. "Everything is more laborious and more careful [health-wise]." However, she continues to attend classes, even more than before the pandemic, she

likes teachers, maintains her friendships and also her interest in drawing and yoga. She believes that she receives good support from reference adults, with good examples, since, in quarantine, they obeyed the health determinations. She gets the help she needs, she manages what she needs most and notices how welcoming the lady who rents her a room is – one of her adult references. Psychologically, she thinks he can handle “the wave very well. I have ups and downs, but I don’t use medication for anxiety or depression.” She knows it is hard to be away from family, to be by herself, to be alone with people who are not so close, but she adapts and makes use of meditation and yoga. This helps her not to “deceive herself with anything and being down-to-earth. I don’t dream.” So, with regard to future prospects, Sofia says she already understands how college things work, the need for less social contact, and uncertainty about the future. She thinks the professional subject does not affect her and does not know where she will live after college. “I don’t think much of that. One day at a time!”

As you can see, Sofia seems to be a teenager who adapts relatively easily to the circumstances that are imposed. Not effortlessly, though. Meditation and yoga can help her overcome any anxiety or sadness because of this, alleviating her *ups and downs*. Despite being out of her country, she has a simple life and a routine without many challenges. The pandemic may have contributed to such a thing, as well as to an extra focus on studies. She recognizes the authority of teachers and college over her life. But it is striking that there is nothing to deceive her much, she has no dreams and is *down-to-earth*. She feels supported by adults, they are sources of authority, but the possible absence of idealism, which makes her live *one day at a time*, can mean how much she is left to her own fate, without even realizing it.

3. Finally, Arendt’s third case. The one that refers to the substitution in the educational processes of cultural transmission by teaching what Arendt (1996) calls the *art of living*. A finding, always current, of the contents of education, and even of life. A Place, too, full of paradoxes and difficulties in the contemporary settings of teenagers. What, how and why teach? What, how and why live?

Silvia is 13. She is the eldest of four siblings and lives with them and their parents in a small flat in a humble neighborhood of a big city. As a result of the confinement for Covid-19, her parents are unemployed. All six live together in no more than 30 square meters. In those months, economic difficulties are increasing. Silvia maintained a school life in primary education with quite a few learning difficulties. Since then, she has attended a school support and educational follow-up service with a scholarship from the town hall where she resides.. That is where the interview takes place. In this space Silvia performs her schoolwork and reviews some of the contents presented in the secondary education institute. Since entering the first year (September 2019), Silvia’s school turnaround is reasonably important. She passes the subjects, shows great interest in many of them, and a new way of being in school appears. From interviews in the school support service, it is detected that one of the elements that causes the change in Silvia is her teacher of language and literature. She’s constantly talking about her.

A teacher who, according to Silvia, is very demanding: “she makes us read aloud, corrects us, has brought us books of adventure, of love, of crimes,...”; “she wants me to write well because she says that writing is the mirror of the soul”, “she has told me that I have beautiful handwriting but that I have to improve it”, “the whole class is talking about books and she reads us pieces of novels that she likes”. Silvia constantly talks about her language teacher. In March 2020, mandatory confinement came because of the pandemic. Sessions with the school support service are done virtually. And Silvia’s position has changed. “It’s a school thing,” “I don’t have time to do what teachers ask,” “I get bored.” The hypothesis of the support professional relates to the undergoing general situation, in addition to Silvia’s particular situation, where she has to share a living space with her family that is difficult to manage, with poor digital connection and from her mother’s mobile phone. Nevertheless, time makes the true cause of Silvia’s school unrest emerge. In a third session, Silvia shows that she has such a hard time following classes in virtual format: “the teachers have changed a lot”, “they look like psychologists”, “my language teacher no longer talks about books”, “they spend all the class saying that we have to do breathing exercises, talk to the family, take good care of ourselves”, “and today we have all done yoga” , “I don’t like that,” “school is a bore,” “I’m embarrassed.”

The professional who saw Silvia put into play a working hypothesis of the adult world: the current situation produces an absence of the teacher that has negative effects on school development. Physical presence is very important. But Silvia dismantled that hypothesis. That was not it. The presence goes beyond *being present* physically. It did not look like it was virtuality or connection difficulties that had undermined Silvia’s school interest. But, rather, the exchanges done during the contents of teaching. If anything put Silvia in learning disposition, it was the possibility of finding an adult who was committed and concerned about the content they were teaching. Reading, writing, listening, and knowledge of cultural elements made Silvia connect to her teacher and, above all, connect to content, to the world.

Roberto is a 21-year-old still in adolescent dependency. He lives with his parents and siblings on the outskirts of a big city. He attends a renowned public university where he already prepares his final paper . He works informally teaching private lessons, and says he is Caucasian, middle class and has no history of Covid-19 contamination at home. He does psychotherapy and also uses antidepressants in high doses and another one that induces sleep. He had been taking them before the pandemic, but they were intensified over the course of the event. During most days of confinement, he gets up early and plans what to do: help at home, study, write his final paper. He does not always do what he plans, but it helps “withstand the boredom of isolation, living with the same people... it’s despairing.” The beginning of the pandemic seems to have been worse, with a lot of anxiety and sadness, but now he is used to it. At night, he feels “very active” and tries to read and write. He reveals that Covid-19 “changed everything”: from routine to relationships. He feels more withdrawn, not as open to

friends, "with fewer social skills." It reduced the number of conversations, even chat rooms, and meeting new people and flirting. He realizes that "conversations [even with friends] are more neutral, since nothing happens. Leaving home is scary. The mind asks for intimacy, the body asks to find someone, but finding someone is the same as a job interview [to check the risk of contamination]." He notices the reference adults (parents and final paper adviser) striving to minimize the effects of the pandemic. This wears him out when he realizes they care too much. He believes it is a new situation for everyone, so there is no need for excessive material compensation or attention asphyxiation. For them, they should "just think it's normal [what they live today] and that's enough. The adult is afraid to notice the lost youngster. There are many stimuli, but no one knows what to do." For Roberto, adults don't understand that "life is not like before when you chose something and got it. Now it's stimulus chaos." He thinks that adult life is not good, nor benevolent, and that no one dreams. Just work, buy some land and the bare minimum to live. He finds that his psychological condition is bad. It was worse, but he is struggling to adjust. Withdrawn in his room, he had a panic attack, tears, despair and a feeling of helplessness and emptiness. "Where am I going?" He misses human affection: "laughing, drinking, shouting." As for the prospects, he says that "real life totally hit my face." It's more "hold your feet on earth, because the dream is over." He will graduate, teach, have his apartment, and move on. He reveals that he has no great ambitions and does not want to kill himself for a living. "People in general don't care about anything, they're selfish; politics are very difficult; real life is harder and more complicated than you think." He thinks that education is an outlet and that, by teaching, he can contribute in some way, letting out a residue of idealism.

We emphasize that Roberto's potential problems, which led him to different treatments, intensified greatly with the Covid-19 pandemic. But they were already there: anxiety, sadness, isolation, helplessness. Widespread inhibition seems to tame him like it does to many teenagers. Left to his own resources, nothing gets him out of this place, not even the college he spends most of his time on. His reference adults, even a teacher, perceive him as lost and suffocate him with overprotection. He sees no dreams in their lives and recognizes that his dreams are gone too. He now has his feet on the ground, is reserved in his room and has no greater ambitions in life. What art of living would he have left? Perhaps a considerable identification with education, with the will to teach, the last frontier of possible idealism as a "[...] task of renewing a common world" (Arendt, 2002, p. 247).

Left to their own resources: the place of authority

It is impressive to perceive to many teenagers, each in their own way, left to their own resources. All idealism, imagination, rebellion, confrontation, disobedience, desire for ruptures, so commonly expected at this time of life, seem to be too appeased in the scenes here narrated by the subjects interviewed. What predominates is the *feet*

on earth, the enormous sense of reality and the absence of illusions, dreams or future. Anxiety, depression, sadness, ups and downs lurk in their lives. Isolation is a fact and social ties are quite fragile. Adults are almost always surrendered to repetitive routines and are perceived by these young people as disoriented or lacking authority. In the face of the pandemic, some tend to overprotect or abandon them, others still maintain some control over adolescents, but most appear to be, indeed, a fallen authority. Their moralistic discourses are rejected, their excessive care is questioned and their possible material compensation is despised. The school appears devitalized in the narrative of several teenagers, even if it takes up much of their lives (except for those who are not currently studying). Religion seems absent even to those who said they followed it and they are categorically oblivious to politics. Instead, life locked in a room, social residences, street wandering, and social media take too much of the lives of these young people. In other words, neither the authority of the referring adults, nor tradition, nor education, nor religion, nor politics prove to touch them enough to stimulate idealisms, passions, or desire to renew a common world.

What's going on? Arendt (2002) helps us recognize that, even under a setback, authority is seen as a pillar and a political-social symbol of the Western civilization in which we live. In fact, it is increasingly worn, eroded, and challenged. We suspect that the political crisis in our present world is also, fundamentally, a crisis of authority. A society governed by the *Pater* today sees the undermining of social institutions that are no longer able to renew the broken thread of tradition, nor to restore old ones and found new political bodies.

The authority we have lost in the modern world is not exactly an *authority in general*, which remains among us, but a very specific form, that had been in force throughout the West for a long period of time. Its nature is essentially political. The emergence of movements of this nature, the development of new totalitarian forms of government and, recently, of neoconservative forms, even in the name of democracy, were fundamental to a more or less general and dramatic rupture of all traditional authorities. This is reflected even in prepolitical relationships, such as that of parents and children or that of teachers and students, in which authority is accepted as a *natural* necessity. Not even the helplessness of children and adolescents, who need to be guided and educated, as well as the political need for the continuity of civilization through the presence of teachers, were sufficient imperatives to retain authority itself. For Arendt (2002), its loss is simply the final but decisive stage of a process that has undermined it for centuries.

This loss of authority did not happen alone. It was preceded by the loss of the other two pillars of Western society, namely tradition and religion. It is not that they are both not among us, but here it's about the loss of a particular way of exercising them. Without confusing tradition with the past, this loss led us to loosen the thread that guided us safely through the vast domains of past times. Contemporaneity has made us put ourselves on less firm ground. Something similar is happening

with religion. Modern times question belief in religious truths. Belief and doubt go hand in hand. Faith, not so much. Long protected by religion, faith has also been eroded and seriously threatened by the drifting values that prevail today. As we put in another text (Pereira, 2008), a drifting society can even invoke religious neoconservatives to return to a north and gather wandering souls, but they no longer enjoy the benefit of certainty. Everything became transient.

The education of our time, before being a solution to the matter of the crisis in the West of political authority, tradition, and religion, is established as a problem. This crisis takes the world *off the axis*. That is why we are always educating for a world that's *off the axis* or going that way. It is an inherent world, made by mortals, and that is why it wears out with the naked eye. Our institutions and values change very quickly, as they cannot be regulated according to more stable deified precepts. The pedagogical discourse, even without being able to hold any certainty, continues to carry the flag that it is possible to educate to put things in order or within the axis. Therefore, such discourse, by its nature, cannot renounce neither authority nor tradition. But how can this be done if both are undermined by modern ideals? How can we evoke authority and tradition, if Western culture is no longer structured or maintained by both?

Arendt (2002) argues that, under the principles of rational pragmatism and modern psychology, pedagogy has become a *science* of teaching in general, to the point of completely emancipating itself from the effective knowledge to be taught. Their professionals see their training focused on teaching and not on mastering some theory required for that same teaching. There may be an epistemology of teaching there, but this often leads the educator to find himself only one step ahead of the students who surrender to his authority. If pragmatism is about replacing thought with doing, educators become skill-instilling, which constantly puts them under the threat of dismissal. A science of teaching in general, as Arendt claimed to be modern pedagogy, contributes little for the formation of teachers according to their budgets and guarantee their authority. As the author proposes (Arendt, 2002, p. 239), "[...] although a certain qualification is indispensable for authority, qualification, however great, never engenders authority on its own".

Their students, and especially the teenagers, often see themselves abandoned to their own theoretical and practical resources. This may result, for example, in a manifestation of contempt, disrespect, denial of authority or, on the contrary, but equally undesirable, in conformity, acceptance and submission. It looks like those instillers are under crossfire. Exaggerated pragmatism in the pedagogical field does not guarantee professional serenity. On the contrary, it induces dispersion and disorientation.

The global pandemic created controversial situations in this area about its role in society, the need to open schools to accommodate those who did not have the necessary support in their homes, its importance

for the emotional development of children and adolescents, the need to contact peers, etc. Without leaving aside these issues, voices were heard inside and outside the school demanding the importance of teaching and transmitting valuable content for the lives of children and adolescents. During many months of school closure, the centrality of the importance of the school was in terms, almost always, of emotional value. And teenagers like Silvia, María, Solange, Roberto, Eduardo and others didn't seem to agree too much. The questioning of authority by these youngsters is visible. Once again, a look at what the other needs, based on a knowledge built around the deficit and not the possibility.

Left to their own resources: the educational promise

Thus, we return to the three supposed Arendtians which show us the need for renewal, review, and redefinition of ways of establishing educational links that allow adolescents to connect with the world. An update, of sorts, for the educational promise. The conceptual and practical apparatus that provides tools, opportunities and links to possible futures to teenagers is a pedagogical apparatus. Meirieu (1998), explains the opportunity that we adults have to create conditions so that the other (the adolescent) learns, discovers and can situate themselves as a subject in the world, not as a fabricated object, not as a result of what we want them to be, nor to give their life the meaning that we think they should have for their own good. To create these conditions, to facilitate the discoveries that the world offers, to provide different elements in the face of the massive attack that adolescents receive to take over their identity and that really goes in the direction of placing it as an object, for example, of consumption. All these actions – not aimed at providing meaning, but at building places and times so that the adolescent can discover that meaning is necessary for life – are educational actions. Thinking and rethinking the proposals that we make around education, to the educational support of adolescents, implies thinking (not only about adolescents) but, in a special way, also about adults.

In education, as adults, we cannot resign from our functions. On many occasions we find adolescents in institutions, projects or services, inserted in a previous series of social failures. In other words, the task is to take charge of a situation that has been neglected in the past. What cannot happen, then, is to neglect the adolescent again. It is, precisely, to break a series. This would be the real task. This is the starting point for an educational, social and clinical support with a real interest in building a possible future. Throughout adolescence, adolescents meet many adults who want to accompany them. In all cases, that accompaniment that makes a social bond, which facilitates discoveries of meaning, is one where one of the key points is the sustainability of the adult function. This adult function, in our case, is intimately related to the professional function. Therefore, we must be able to raise some questions: How, in what way, does all this that we have been talking about challenge us as an adult and as a professional; how can we sustain these

adult and professional functions within the framework of our activity; what role is played by the constant appeal to the importance of management? It seems that everything can be managed now: time, stress, emotions... How, then, can we incorporate a renewing perspective of the common world - as Arendt states - that justifies our practices?

All these elements lead to the question: where is the educational promise? We are referring not only to the school institution, but to every educational act: where is the promise that through education the future will be better? We do not assert categorically that it does not exist. Although we can hypothesize that it is hidden, or is disguised as something else, or has other configurations that, for the moment, we do not know.

The educational promise, as we have known it, does not exist. The promise of going to school, studying, taking a series of more or less drawn or designed routes, has fallen. We are sure that we have all found ourselves in moments when we are asking teenagers to do things that, in reality, deep down, we are almost sure do not serve, or that do not provide the meaning they provided to us. But still, we are stubborn. Maybe the time has come to redirect this promise, or to open up futures by generating vital projects that have previously rethought this promise of a future, and that many of us have clear in our minds. Without a doubt, the global pandemic has come to confront us with these questions... again.

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Notes

- 1 We use in the writing of the article the following versions of Hannah Arendt's texts, "Crisis de la educación" and "¿Qué es la autoridad?", In: Arendt, H. ([1954] (2002). *Entre o passado e o futuro*. 5th ed. São Paulo: Perspectiva (in Portuguese); Arendt, H. ([1954] 1996). *Entre el pasado y el futuro*. Madrid: Ediciones Península (in Spanish).
- 2 We used fictitious names and changed some data that could identify the teens who answered the survey and those who participated in different interviews.
- 3 While the concept of authority refers to many epistemological fields and there are many authors who delve into it, the meaning we give it in reference to the educational field comes, pre-eminently, from the works of Bochenski (1989) and Bernfeld (2005), referring to epistemological authority and technical authority, respectively. Both refer us to the need to provide the role of the educator with knowledge and pedagogical and cultural knowledge. This endowment depends to a large extent on the subject's interest in learning.

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