CHAPTER 14

Social Pedagogy and Community Networks

Global Coexistence in Pandemic Times

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Abstract

During the 1990s, the report for UNESCO by the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century, led by Jacques Delors (1996), identified some of the principal tensions between the global and the local, the universal and the particular. In its proposals, “learning to live together” was one of the four basic pillars of contemporary education along with “learning to be”, “learning to do”, and “learning to learn”.

Returning to the community entails activating lessons and learning that continue throughout life, from early childhood to old age. And with them, possibilities for educating and being educated that transcend the curriculum and academic programmes, referring to social pedagogy and its identities from the end of the last century to the present day. The return to community solidarities acquires new meanings for knowledge and social action-intervention.

Keywords


1 Responding to the Crisis, Looking to the Future: New Opportunities for Living Together in Times of the Pandemic

In the late 1990s on the eve of a new millennium, a report for UNESCO by the Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century led by Jacques Delors (1996), identified some of the main challenges that would have to be overcome for humankind to make progress with the ideals that uphold democracy, tolerance, mutual understanding, peace, liberty, social justice, the fight against poverty, and the preservation of a healthy and inhabitable environment. All of
them, in one way or another, contain tensions that for decades have harmed or inhibited full respect for people's dignity, their rights and the rights of life in all its diversity: between the global and the local, the universal and the individual, haves and have-nots, tradition and modernity, the long-term and the short-term, the spiritual and the material, the market economy and a society of markets.

To overcome these tensions without ignoring the risks inherent to the socio-environmental crises that threaten the survival of a wounded planet (Delibes & Delibes de Castro, 2006), the report stressed the importance of putting education at the service of economic and social development, of people and peoples. Although the suffering caused by a coronavirus pandemic like the current one could not have been anticipated, the model of a society that reconciles knowledge with experience and lifelong teaching and learning would base its proposals and options for improving the future of humankind and the world on four fundamental pillars: "learning to learn", "learning to do", "learning to be" and "learning to live together". A task that later reports (UNESCO, 2015, 2016), identified as part of the need to rethink education as a common good, linking its practices and achievements to ecological and human rights, the rights of the planet and of people.

The approaches in this report are similar to those that Edgar Morin would carry over to his “seven complex lessons in education for the future" (2011, authors' translation), or that Zygmunt Bauman had previously connected to “the challenges of education in liquid modernity” (2009, authors’ translation) and they confront the growing uncertainties and complexities of the globalised and accelerated society in which we find ourselves: reuniting what is divided, bringing people together, and strengthening democracies by ensuring public policies are dedicated to social well-being, the values of citizenship, living together at a global level, and development on a human scale (Max-Neff, 1994). As this challenge has broad pedagogical and social implication, it should be met through actions that are consistent with their realities, not just making it a priority but also offering an alternative to the inherited models, with a substantial turn in the processes of change and transformation, both nearby and distant (Caride et al., 2007).

Environmental breakdown is far more than a diagnosis by followers of the ideas of deep ecology who analyse and/or propose what to do to save the planet (Riechmann, 2019; Rifkin, 2019; Wallance-Wells, 2019), and it obliges us to explore – consciously and self-critically – the meaning of our own actions. And also, the meanings of the words we use to read the world, ensuring its survival and reproduction. For several years now, many of these options have made global-local relationships into a central theme. With these options, new
ways of relating and communicating with one another have been suggested, not without difficulties, proposing a radical turn in our values, attitudes and behaviour. Education, and all educations, will be decisive: inside and outside school, we must “take the risk of learning together, against the obligations of time itself” (Garcés, 2020, p. 17, authors’ translation).

As a form of scientific, academic and professional knowledge that seeks to foster society’s educational role at the same time as developing the socialising possibilities of education, social pedagogy – and, consequently, what we choose to call social education – can and must contribute decisively to this becoming reality in different contexts and concrete situations. The educational practices it promotes must be directed towards strengthening the social fabric of the community and the internal resources of the territory, as well as improving and strengthening the capacities of people who live there: a forward-looking education that does not contradict itself in its critical-reflexive goals or in its liberatory and/or transformative practices (Caride, 2005).

This is how Paul Natorp pictured it, albeit with a rather idealistic vision, in the preface he wrote for the Spanish edition of his Sozialpädagogik, associating social pedagogy with “education that is done by the community and makes the community, because its aim is not just the individual” (Natorp, 1913, p. 8, authors’ translation). It cannot and must not be forgotten that local communities are an important point of reference in the everyday construction of citizens’ civic values, rights and duties, prolonging the formative work of schools and families beyond the school curriculum and family coexistence. Consequently, a forward-looking social pedagogy enables processes of social inclusion and cohesion, as well as of democratic culture to unfold, and these are reflected in the broadest sense of being a citizen above and beyond solely individual interests. With this perspective, educating people to live with others, requires rethinking the cultural and social links in which people construct not only their individual subjectivity but also their belonging in the world. As Gimeno Sacristán observes, “social being means forming part of the networks that connect us to one another” (2001, p. 20, authors’ translation), going beyond the immediate – spatially and temporally – to travel through the scenes of life in all of its diversity.

Given that the COVID-19 pandemic was an inescapable context-circumstance, with all of the fears (health, economic, cultural, etc.) it created, we will base our contribution on the theories, experiences and initiatives of an education done in, for and with society. The everyday and communal mission of social pedagogy-education cannot and must not close borders but instead open them (Caride, 2005; Melendro et al., 2018; Petrus, 1997; Pérez Serrano, 2003; Úcar, 2016).
2 Educating and Educating Ourselves Beyond Limits, Between the Global and the Local

Although it may seem obvious, the global refers to the interdependencies encouraged by globalisation: an expression with semantic tracks that are broad, complex and to some extent enigmatic, alluding to processes, phenomena, realities and so on that relate to social, economic, commercial, employment, cultural, political, health, educational, environmental, demographic, etc. relations that have effects on our everyday lives that we are still discovering. The local, the exemplar of the other extreme, refers to the proximities of the geographies – rural, urban, etc. – that embrace people in the landscapes traced by their streets, squares, districts, villages, cities, etc., reflecting who they are as a neighbourhood, community or ‘municipality’, this last term being a basic structure in the territorial and administrative organisation of a country so that it can autonomously manage its common interests.

As Borja and Castells (1998) showed years ago, the advent of a society where the space of flows is superimposed on that of places results in one of its principal paradoxes being that while feelings of local belonging are reinforced, the processes of globalisation that shrink spatial-temporal coordinates in a society woven by ‘social’ and ‘virtual’ networks are at the same time strengthened. Understanding and managing how these two realities combine without weakening citizens’ rights has – for several decades – been one of the main challenges for development policies, supposedly guided since the late 1980s by principles that must guarantee their ‘sustainability’ (CMMAD, 1987). This is a concept that will displease very few and please almost everyone (Bifani, 1999), when it is argued that no economic growth justifies environmental damage or exhausting the resources that maintain life, causing uprooting of the human condition, perpetuating extremes of poverty and wealth, emotional detachment and social exclusion (Dias de Carvalho, 2016).

In this context, the return to community solidarities (Marinis et al., 2010) acquires new meanings for knowledge, social action-intervention, and ‘sustainable development’ (CMMAD, 1987). And inevitably, the threats inherent to climate change or, in recent months, the COVID-19 pandemic. A cruel and intense pedagogy, as Boaventura de Sousa Santos has called it (2020) that reveals the biological, ethical and social sicknesses of a model of civilisation that appears to be exhausted. Given that the expectations raised by the Millennium Development Goals (2000–2015) have been frustrated, as has the sustainability promised by the 2030 Agenda in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), we find ourselves in uncharted waters. Not just because of the uncertainties, risks or vulnerabilities predicted decades ago in works by authors such as Beck (1992),
Giddens (1999), Bauman (2000) and many others, which allude to the risks of globalised society, imbalances in the world and the liquidity of contemporary modernity. Neither the repeated paradigmatic allusions – both theoretical and reflexive – to environmental chaos and complexity, nor the conclusive empirical demonstrations of the limits of growth and global change have been enough to convince political decision makers, economic powers, social actors and the general public that another end of the world is possible (Diamond, 2005; Riechmann, 2019; Servigne et al., 2018).

COVID-19 is exacerbating ongoing geopolitical and social challenges, requiring the adoption of innovative and collaborative focuses by a tired and fractured society. Although environmental risks, especially those resulting from climate change, continue to occupy a very important place, the struggle against the pandemic has become the main priority almost everywhere in the world. The fragility of our societies requires this because the effects of COVID-19 on employment, human relations, the digital divide, processes of inclusion and exclusion and so on can further increase poverty and inequality. Consequently, where problems are experienced, action is vital in order to find answers to them; in the spaces where personal relations weave life in common, re-establishing the central role of citizens and active solidarity in a network society are vital, too. And, with this, the value of deciding, of valuing each person’s initiatives in processes of social change, the assertion that we can do it. Even though these actions have not always followed a sufficiently well-defined model of socio-educational action-intervention or have fulfilled all the expectations placed in them (Civís et al., 2007), they still offer an opportunity to improve learning, educate ourselves in society, increase options for knowledge, and achieve a fairer, more inclusive and supportive coexistence.

Far from closing in on themselves, territorially and humanly, communities have an obligation – as both a need and a challenge – to fling themselves into the world, recognising the interdependencies that characterise social, educational, cultural, and ecological processes and their impact on the construction of a desirable life, stimulating and consolidating shared responsibilities. For Díez and Rodríguez changing course not only involves deconstructing the dominant discourses, “at the same time stopping some practices that negatively affect humankind as a whole, but also linking this analysis and this praxis to the common sense of many people by offering concrete alternatives that give hope and show that another world is really possible ...” (2018, p. 290, authors’ translation) through our practices, through our examples, because future generations need referents that will save humankind and the planet for us.

A few months after the World Health Organisation (WHO) recognised that the illness caused by a coronavirus (COVID-19, a name chosen to avoid stigmatising a geographical location, animal, person or social group) had developed
into a pandemic, the ‘Ideas’ supplement of the Spanish newspaper *El País* (‘El Futuro’, 2020), asked 60 experts and thinkers about what the keys to the new era should be, and their words contained ideas that differ greatly in nature and scope. These included: “recovering the link between generations” (Hartmut Rosa), “organising a more modest life” (Slavoj Zizek), “returning to the dream of the tribe” (Gabriela Wiener); “protecting the earth, air and water” (Saskia Sassen); “restructuring public and private debt” (Yanis Varoufakis); “moving towards a politics of the common good” (Michael J. Sandel); “building a new pact between generations” (Daniel Innerarity); “discovering the human side of connectivity” (Ethan Zuckerman); “a warning to the sapiens” (Pepe Mujica); “urgency in freeing minds” (Aminata Traoré); “tomorrow is for the ordinary people” (Christophe Guilluy). We will stop here, but these quotes do not exhaust the reflections and proposals.

At the same time that their diagnoses and predictions reached us, in addition to the ones that were constantly spread through all of the media (radio, television, press, etc.), a growing number of people and communities organised themselves in their everyday lives in their homes, towns and villages, neighbourhoods and cities. We will briefly consider some of the initiatives they promoted as new forms of communal action, displaying their great potential for confronting the uncomfortable truths of the crisis of civilisation that has affected us for decades.

3 New Forms of Communal Action in Pandemic Times: Solidarity Networks and Mutual Support Groups

In globalised societies, the basic foundations of the common good that acted as a collective insurance against individual misfortune have become weakened, accentuating processes that exclude large sections of the population and/or make them vulnerable, at both the personal and collective levels. Loss of resources and chronic forms of poverty including financial and material poverty have now been joined by other circumstances (relational, affective, emotional, etc.). These circumstances can be situational or structural and are exacerbated by the marks left, for example, on the dynamics of the family, neighbourhood, or employment by lockdowns. However, without being as generalised as could be hoped, the pandemic has also resulted in the appearance and consolidation of community initiatives and/or solidarity networks (Bauman, 2017), which everything seems to suggest could remain in place for years.

The community networks we refer to are collaborative structures intended to manage the communal problem of COVID-19. In most cases their strengths lie in their inclusivity (as they involve various sectors, different professions
and a wide variety of social groups) and flexibility (as they provide multiple options for involvement and cooperation). In the case of Spain, as set out in a report prepared by the Spanish Ministry of Health (Ministerio de Sanidad, 2020), these networks have made it possible to meet specific needs of a variety of types resulting from the pandemic: transmitting information, identifying emerging problems in a changing context, emotional support, care for depend-ent people and groups, coordinating resources and programmes to care for health and welfare, preventing contagion, collaborating on treatments, etc.

Reorganising the patterns of care in Spain’s mediterranean welfare model is one of the main challenges for its social policies, going beyond the families (and especially women) that have traditionally taken care of this task. As Zuñiga and Arrieta note, “the current model of social organisation of care, based on unpaid work by women with little participation by social services and a growing privatisation of household employment, paints a complicated picture” (2021, p. 65, authors’ translation).

Victoria Camps (2021) states that a paradigm change is needed, balancing reason and emotions, putting care – and the ethics of care – in a special place, because there is a right to be cared for and a duty to care, without exceptions: it affects everyone, and these responsibilities must be accepted individually and collectively. The pandemic has demonstrated the growing need to give the care system a more equitable distribution that includes the community sphere, given the lack of response from public services. Advocating for the community as an agent for care will create an effective democratic framework that calls on civic responsibility and active participation in the place where one lives (Martínez Buñán & Vega, 2021); a declaration of intentions that has taken shape in valuable experiences at the toughest moments in the pandemic.

Situating ourselves in the Spanish context, we will present some examples of community action led by members of the public in the context of the pan-demic. These form a point of reference for solidarity, collaboration and mutual help, acting as measures of collective responsibility in the face of new (and old) social hazards. A set of initiatives that allow us to reaffirm, in full agree-ment with Zubero, “that the community still enjoys excellent health among ordinary people” (2016, p. 59, authors’ translation).

Networks of solidarity and mutual support groups have developed in places where there was a prior social fabric and organised citizen collectives, but also in settings where they had not previously flourished. Among the social support or mutual aid networks, it is worth noting various initiatives that have had a notable presence in contexts of nearness, for example: neighbourhood sup-port networks to cover basic needs and provide care (for children, the elderly, the unwell, etc.).
In many districts and neighbourhoods, support networks appeared as an emergency measure given the lack of cover for people's basic needs. The lack of response by an overwhelmed social services system meant that many people – especially workers in the informal economy and other groups in vulnerable situations (single mothers, the elderly, migrants with an irregular administrative status, etc.) – found themselves without the resources to cover their basic needs for food, housing, etc. This lack of a guarantee of a basic minimum for subsistence meant that residents in these areas offered help and collaboration, for example, in the form of food banks, mutual emergency funds, and basic shopping. Special attention was also paid to physical and psychological care, providing help for older people, people with disabilities and people in positions of dependence, owing to the social isolation and unwanted solitude forced on them.

Initiatives flourished – some run by private individuals – that focussed on guaranteeing access to culture, fostering reading and continuing education. They were, in a way, little ‘pedagogical missions’ that developed in these neighbourhoods.

3.1 The Experience of “Somos tribu”

The “Somos tribu” (We are a Tribe) initiative developed in the Puente de Vallecas district (Madrid) from the start of confinement at home on 14 March 2020, when a state of alarm was declared throughout all of Spain. The first step was the creation of a WhatsApp group, which filled up in a few hours. People joined this to offer help by running errands for vulnerable people, dog walking, or providing any other type of support that was needed. Pharmacies, supermarkets, and other places in the neighbourhoods hung up sheets with the telephone numbers of individuals who were offering help and a safety protocol was developed.

From late March, a great demand for food developed since many residents of the Puente de Vallecas district worked in the informal economy (at markets, cleaning, etc.) and did not have employment contracts or any financial cover as they could not go out to work. Consequently, food banks were created (one in each neighbourhood), guaranteeing a basic weekly basket for the families that used them. These had the support of social centres such as La Villana and La Brecha, the La Horizontal cultural association, the Atalaya social centre and the neighbourhood associations of Puente de Vallecas.

Mutual emergency funds were also created to collect money and provide cover for people and families that could not afford the basic costs of food, rent, etc. In addition, specific groups were set up to provide support for mothers, creativity, employment support, etc., and these are in late 2021 still working.
3.2 Shared Culture: Reinvented Neighbourhood Libraries

Many initiatives relating to community support and fostering reading as a means of supporting personal and social development were put in place from the first days of lockdown. These also acted as an element of social support and a strategy to encourage continuous learning. Examples of these include experiences such as the following:

- Sharing books with neighbours: Writers and other people with an interest in reading who had small – or large – libraries at home made their books available to their neighbours. Among them, the writer Jorge Carrión decided to become the librarian for his building, leaving the books his neighbours had requested from him via WhatsApp at their doors. In La Coruña, the writer and university lecturer Héctor Pose made “his library available to his neighbours during lockdown” (La Voz de Galicia, 6 April 2020, authors’ translation), so that they could immerse themselves in the wonderful world of literature. Like them, other people and groups encouraged delivering book loans to people’s homes and book swaps, thus democratising access to culture during quarantines.

- Librarians facing unwanted solitude: Initiatives such as that of the librarian Lluís Agustí made it possible for reading to become an antidote to unwanted solitude. On 19 March he offered on Twitter to read novels, short stories and poetry over the phone for free to facilitate access to culture while at the same time carrying out important social support work. He selected three pieces to read or recite in Spanish, Catalan, French or Portuguese. For months he read to an average of three people a day, and sometimes eight or nine. Almost all of the people who took him up on this offer were women aged between 30 and 90, and almost all of the requests were for poetry, along with a few short stories and some essays and non-fiction texts.

- Libraries reinvented: Municipal libraries, as amenities that are close to citizens, had to reinvent themselves after having to close their doors because they were not an essential service. For example, the municipal library in Utrera (Seville) along with Civil Protection developed a project called “Más libros: menos virus” (More books: less virus) in which volunteers from civil protection took books to the homes of the people who requested them. Many municipal libraries as well as the central libraries of Spain’s autonomous regions and university libraries also opened up access to part of their collections.

3.3 Virtual Communities: Solidarity Interactions Online

Technologically mediated community initiatives are new ways of living (together) and relating to one another and they have great potential for people
who actively participate in them. However, the limitations on access and use that particularly affect vulnerable groups (people without income, the elderly, etc.) should not be discounted, and reducing the digital gap remains one of the challenges of the moment. Even so, their benefits have been evident in this crisis, connecting people despite social distancing and forming links in the intangible spaces and times of the internet.

Among others, we believe that “Frena la curva. JuntXs somos más Fuertes” (Slow the curve: we're stronger together) is worth noting. The citizen platform “Frena la curva” (FLC) started development on 12 March 2020 with the aim of listing and connecting the citizen initiatives that were starting to appear in Spain in response to the coronavirus crisis. The team from the Aragon regional government’s Laboratorio de Gobierno Abierto (Open Government Laboratory) started thinking about the need for a digital tool that would channel the wave of solidarity expected given the spread of the virus. Subsequently, groups of volunteers, companies and social organisations joined the initiative. The online platform was launched on 14 March and acquired a nationwide reach.

Technology was put at the service of solidarity, becoming the largest repository of public innovations in Spanish. This is a platform where volunteers, entrepreneurs, activists, social organisations, crafters and public open innovation laboratories cooperate to channel and organise social energy and civic resilience in the face of the pandemic, giving a response by society that complements that of the government and that of the existing public services (www.frenalacurva.net). The following indicators of the impact of this experience stand out: listing more than 900 initiatives in the citizen innovation guide; replication of the platform in 22 countries; more than 140 common challenge projects; 28,000 face masks donated; 300,000 visits (Spain) to the map of citizen initiatives, etc.

4 For a Pedagogy of Opportunities with a Social and Civic Commitment

The community initiatives that developed spontaneously in districts and neighbourhoods complemented – and sometimes substituted – the work of a social services system that was nearing collapse. Ensuring greater public involvement is essential at present – and will continue to be so in the post-COVID era – to offer sustainable responses with communal participation, in line with the complexity of common challenges. When the biological immunity needed to overcome this health crisis will have been achieved, it will be necessary to consider social immunity and its impacts on people's everyday lives, connecting public
initiatives with active participation by citizens. In this context, social pedagogy could help “make access channels possible that help people and accompany them – in person and/or virtually – as they progress towards social and communal inclusion” (Úcar, 2012, p. 11, authors’ translation).

In our current pedagogical and social coordinates, it should be noted that the pandemic has involved new ways of making communities and has revitalised experiences that already had a long history of collaboration in local communities. Given their importance and involvement in the search for collective responses to the public health crisis, it is important to recognise the community networks created in neighbourhoods and districts, which emerged in strength during the lockdowns, and also the virtual communities whose role in generating and maintaining social ties beyond physical boundaries was fundamental. If the pandemic can be regarded as a “total social fact” (Ramonet, 2020, authors’ translation) that has shaken social relations as a whole and involved all agents, institutions and values, it has also entailed a system of shared obligations and responsibilities, put at the service of the common good (Subirats & Rendueles, 2016).

On foundations of joint responsibility, Marco Marchioni (1997) more than two decades ago recalled that the organised community is the most important resource and is “a contribution to strengthening democracy, to revitalising it, to its ability to be a living thing in the body of society and not a purely formal element” (p. 549, authors’ translation). Change, commitment and participation must go hand-in-hand in this process, seeking an equitable relationship between the public and the communal, since we need a broad vision of social protection that emerges from collective participation and supports our coexistence, beyond our individual interests (Martínez Buján, 2020).

Adverse situations, such as those caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, require a social pedagogy that criticises inequalities and is committed to development that is more just, more inclusive and more human, as communities have to work on their vulnerabilities seeking alternatives to the discrimination, exclusion and suffering that all crises cause. The pandemic has revealed an urgent need to implement shared efforts where community action and public intervention create alliances for the common good, promoting dialogue and a community focus when tackling the social challenges it has posed.

Notes

1 See Lucio-Villegas in Chapter 2 on this point.
2 https://somostribuvk.com
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