

# ΣΟΦΙΑ—SOPHIA

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## Quality education from the perspective of human rights

Eduardo Areiza Lozano\*

\*Social Worker, Master's degree in Popular Education and Community Development. Professor at Universidad del Valle - Pacific Campus (Buenaventura). [eduardo.areiza@correounivalle.edu.co](mailto:eduardo.areiza@correounivalle.edu.co)

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## Abstract

This article provides a reflection on the ethical-political sense of education from the perspective of human rights. For this purpose, there are initially needed ethical minima of education from this perspective, and then a comparative analysis is made of the traditional pedagogical model (banking) and the liberator (awareness creator) in relation to the recognition and affirmation of human dignity. Under the definition of education as a social right and a process that should aim at the formation and consolidation of people as subjects of rights, in short, this article proposes that quality education focuses on the formation of an active citizenship, critical and emancipatory, whose purpose is to enhance human dignity.

**Keywords:** Quality, human dignity, human rights, education, pedagogical model.

## Introduction

Education is a social right consigned in the main international treaties of human rights and in almost all the political constitutions of the countries of the world; as such, its essential purpose must be to enhance human dignity and contribute to the formation of people as subjects of law. From this perspective, these purposes constitute the conceptual and political frame of reference for the evaluation of educational quality. An education in the opposite direction, in addition to eroding the dignity of people, violates the exercise and realization of the right to education. This thesis has its backing in the understanding of the deepest sense of education, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that:

[...] education shall aim at the full development of the human personality and the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, in addition to promoting understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations and all ethnic or religious groups, and promoting the development of United Nations activities for the maintenance of peace (article 26, paragraph 2).

In this article, the quality of education is assumed as a series of pedagogical-formative experiences and actions that promote the recognition and self-affirmation of human dignity: therefore, it aims to dignify people's lives and fulfillment of the human, autonomy and freedom. This conception of the quality of education escapes the framework imposed by the technocracy and social educational engineering that defines and evaluates it from the field of efficiency, effectiveness and results according to a system of performance indicators and approval of standardized tests of knowledge.

From this explanatory framework, this writing initially condenses aspects of the ethical-political sense of education centered on human rights; then, key elements of the traditional pedagogical models (or banking) and the liberator one, supported by Paulo Freire, locating how and why the former undermines human dignity, while the latter contributes to its affirmation; and finally, there are described some ethical-pedagogical issues of human rights education.

### Human rights and education: ethical-political sense

In order to analyze the ethical-political meaning (purpose) of education from the field and perspective of human rights, it is necessary and pertinent to note that the moral support of these is the exaltation of the dignity of people, which corresponds to the intrinsic value all they have for their status as human beings, regardless of differences in race, nationality, sex, status, etc. (Papachini, 1998); which means that every purpose of promotion, respect, guarantee, protection of human rights and policy of social equality requires recognition of equal dignity. Regarding this, Nussbaum (2016) argues that: "We have seen that the idea of dignity is formulated from the start in terms of equality: what requires recognition is the equal dignity of human beings" (p.190).

For this reason, from the philosophy of human rights, any action or educational intervention will be of quality, insofar as it is aimed at enhancing human dignity and strengthening the life of people as worthy beings; dignity that, as mentioned above, is the basis and foundation of human rights and the intrinsic value of every individual. Equally, it is

pertinent to point out that a quality education from the human rights is a humanizing education, as it is based on and highlight the pre-eminence of the condition and dignity human. In coherence with the above, Mújica (2006) proposes:

The central conception of an education of this kind will necessarily be a humanizing conception, because what it seeks is to recover and affirm the persons and the respect their dignity. Only the persons are the subjects of rights, the authors of their own realization, and who decides (on) their personal and social life (p.5).

Based on the contributions of the pedagogy of liberation and the critical sociology of education, it is possible to point out in the first place that not every educational intervention -whether formal or popular- is supported in a humanizing conception, because to achieve it, it would need to have the explicit purpose of affirming dignity, respecting people as worthy beings, and promoting them as subjects of rights; that is, it would have to be developed from the perspective of human rights. Next, it is analyzed the meaning and scope of an educational commitment with such an objective, highlighting its ethical minima.

### **Ethical minima in education from the perspective of human rights**

From the perspective of human rights, education poses the challenge of enhancing the three essential ethical minima, in order to achieve true human and human fulfillment, such as: dignity, autonomy and freedom. Dignity, because, as it was said, it is based on the recognition of our inherent intrinsic value to our human condition, which configures us as an end in itself without price or relative value.

For its part, autonomy is essential for the completeness of people, because only through this it is possible to set limits to certain situations that can diminish the intrinsic value of human beings. Although there is a vast and deep philosophical and pragmatic discussion about it that will not be addressed here, it is assumed that autonomy is the faculty and conscience that people have to establish their own laws, make their own decisions and choose the solutions and paths that better consider, respecting the ideals and decisions of self-realization of others, so as not to violate them.

Finally, freedom for human fulfillment is based on two notions: one positive and one negative. Sen (2000) clarifies these notions when he defines that positive freedom refers to the freedom to do something (freedom of agency); in other words, to be able to make decisions about what is desired, about the lifestyle that persons prefer to live according to their own plans, purposes, projects and desires, for which it is essential to enjoy capabilities, operations, options and social opportunities. On the other hand, the negative notion of freedom is understood from the point of view that people be free of privations, emancipated from limitations or impositions that come from other people, or from the State itself and its institutions. Sen (2000) illustrates these typologies of freedom with the following example:

If I did not have the possibility to walk freely in the park because I am handicapped, this would go against my positive freedom, but there would be no trace of violation of my negative freedom. On the other hand, if I cannot walk in the park, not because I am handicapped, but because criminals would assail me, there would be a violation of my negative freedom (and not only of my positive freedom) (p 37).

Thus, it is pertinent to understand that talking about quality education from the perspective of human rights requires strengthening the ethical minima outlined above, as these are core aspects of any educational project that seeks to truly exalt human dignity and strengthen dignified living conditions of people. To that extent, they should be pillars of the pedagogical model that is developed and the foundation of liberating pedagogy as an alternative to the traditional proposal, in which these ethical minima are not evident. Let's see the reasons for this statement.

### **Educational pedagogical models and strengthening of human dignity**

It is made a conceptual approximation of the traditional and liberating educational models from the contributions of the new sociology to the analysis of the educational phenomenon.

For the traditional educational theory, schools are centers of instruction that form and promote the social ascent of people, ignoring that in the background, they are more than that. According to (Giroux, 1990), they are cultural and political spaces where ideology is transmitted, the work

force is formed and it is created in people the uncritical and naive conscience demanded by the capitalist system for its reproduction on all fronts (economic, social, political and cultural).

From this perspective, learning is conceived as the consumption of knowledge that is transmitted, and schools as instructional spaces, where the values of the dominant culture are reproduced and the learning of skills and competences is promoted in order to effectively operate within society. This educational practice focuses on preparing students especially for the labor market; and, in the same way, for subordination to the prevailing cultural model. Regarding this model, Giroux (1998) states:

*The ideology that guides the dominant view of education in the United States is relatively conservative or is interested, first, in questions related to how to do, and rarely questions the relationship between knowledge and power, or between culture and politics. In reality, culture is often reduced to an artifact that gives substance to the values of the dominant groups; a store of dates, names and events to be recorded in the memory for a future examination (p.80).*

In this way, the traditional school operates and develops the pedagogical model that Freire (2011) calls banking, and whose main characteristics Gordillo (2011) summarizes. This last author states that it is a narrative-contemplative paradigm in which students are simple recipients of information and the teacher is the (re) transmitter and evaluator of their learning; besides, within this paradigm, the curriculum crystallizes disciplinarily, predominating the epistemic as a value of change, where the educational relationship is markedly institutional, linear, unidirectional and centered on teaching.

In this paradigm, the teacher is the only repository of knowledge; while students are the deposit and resonance box of knowledge of the same, which receive as unique and true, and without controversy. In this logic, the educational process revolves around the teacher as the central axis; as such, he has the power to decide and prescribe on the contents that are taught, which among other things, in almost all cases come from the higher decision-making instances of the education system. Additionally, in this model, the teacher has the power to discipline and educate; on the other hand, students abide by the prescriptions and norms that

he imposes, and silently listen as mere receivers and reproducers of the knowledge imparted by the teacher.

In such context, the method of work from this perspective is expository and masterly. Basically, its goal is to get students to accumulate information and knowledge about which they evaluate and rate their learning. To that extent, the school, as a social institution eminently of social and cultural reproduction, is in charge of transmitting socially and traditionally accepted contents, knowledge and values (Moreno, 2003); from this perspective, its role is limited to the adaptation of different groups to society (Giroux 1998).

Other elements of this banking educational model that are decisive for strengthening the vertical relationships and the power that are found in this are: the silencing of the voice and the denial of the participation of students, as well as the ignorance and invisibility of their life histories and the reproduction of their conditions of existence as a social class relegated with few expectations, who are given limited knowledge and little relevant to their lives and development as social and political subjects (Giroux, 1998).

On the basis of the above, it can be said that the characteristics and practices of the traditional model of education undermine and limit the dignity, autonomy and freedom of students, since they are reified and instrumentalized, making them submissive and subordinated subjects; in the words of Freire (2001), oppressed beings, incapable of acting as subjects of political judgment, that is, as active citizens, understanding that: "From the point of view of the participant, the judgment is the faculty of the citizen who decides how to act in the public sphere" (Bárcena, 1997: 236). In this same sense, the educational model in analysis is contrary to Freire's pedagogy: "Of the '*gentification*', of the '*gentitud*' [which] aims to form good people and not only specialists" (Freire, 2008: 72). In short, this model runs in counter way to the process of dignifying life; while "The recognition of human dignity requires not instrumentalizing people or harming them" (Cortina, 2006: 18); which is exactly what, in fact, causes the banking pedagogical model.

Finally, based on the above, it is pertinent to point out that the education banking model greatly limits the full condition of human beings, their ability

to transform the world, their ability to transform the world, their capacity to produce authentic knowledge and their power to act reflexively with complete independence (Freire, 1985). Likewise, it should be noted that this model is based on an extension educational practice, that is, the transmission of a cultural world from an active subject (who extends or transfers) to a passive subject (who receives), which is translated into a process of cultural invasion with all the negative subjective and objective implications that this represents for whom are invaded.

On the other hand, liberating education is problematizing, awareness-making and, in fact, humanistic and humanizing. In essence, this perspective seeks to deepen the awareness of man about his reality, under the exaltation of his condition as an active subject of his own life and existence.

For Freire (2005), liberating education fights the essential purpose of banking education, which is to numb and manipulate the conscience of people. Liberating education breaks with the uncritical, taxing, vertical character and creation of false conscience, characteristic of traditional education. Essentially, liberating education promotes that students analyze and critically understand reality, since it has the purpose of breaking with the domestication, manipulation and the educator-educating and subject-object dichotomies that is essential in banking education, giving way to a horizontal and dialogical relationship between the educator-student where both assume cognizant subjects; this relationship is the basis for his statement: "Nobody educates anyone, just as no one educates himself, men are educated in communion, and the world is the mediator" (Freire, 2011: 61).

Under that same precept, in liberating education, the man-world relationship is problematized and the critical position is promoted against the social reality that mediates the subjects; with this, it is sought that they become aware of the social and power relations that determine such reality, and (that they) assume the role of participants of their own life and of the processes of social transformation necessary for human dignity and life.

Within the epistemological rationality of liberating education, knowledge is constructed from research, analysis and understanding of specific social contexts and realities; since knowledge

is conceived as a human, social, historical and contextual phenomenon, which is constructed through a pedagogy of co-participation and dialogue of knowledge between educator-student and the student-educator as cognoscent subjects. This is what Freire says:

In essence, one of the radical differences between education, understood as a dominant and dehumanizing task; and education, understood as a humanistic and liberating task, is that the former is a pure act of knowledge transfer, while the latter constitutes an act of knowledge (Freire, 1990: 123).

Such an act of knowledge is of the social reality that is based on critical pedagogy, which reveals injustice, inequality, exclusion, violation of human rights, domination, submission and power relations that determine these realities. In this sense, Freire himself (1990) states: "Liberating education is a process by which the educator invites learners to recognize and critically discover reality" (p.116).

In synthesis and based on the elements provided about liberating education, it is valid and essential to affirm that a true education of quality is humanistic and humanizing, creator of awareness and mobilizing men as agents of social change; it is the training of social and political subjects that assume the commitment to build a society that is increasingly inclusive, equalitarian and peaceful. It is a pedagogical practice that forms with critical conscience the relationships, conditions, situations that subjugate and undermine human dignity, promoting them towards their vindication and defense. Precisely, in the field of critical pedagogy, such education is creator of awareness and trainer of subjects, where teachers legitimize the school as a public sphere, educating students as active citizens for the exercise of an emancipatory citizenship, where teachers also assume themselves as intellectuals committed to the transformation of subjectivities and social realities and (Giroux, 2012).

Precisely, the same Giroux (2012) characterizes the form of emancipatory citizenship as an action that is aimed from the public language at combating the ideological and practical conditions that foster modes of subjugation, segregation, brutality and marginalization at the level of society; conditions that are normally objectified through discriminatory and oppressive social forms on a racial, class and

sexist level. For the author, the emancipatory citizenship is constituted in a new social awakening movement that seeks to contribute to the creation of new social relationships, which allow to expand and strengthen the possibilities of dignifying human life.

Based on the above, it is pertinent to assert that quality education is one that dignifies human life and strengthens the lives of people as worthy beings. Regarding this perspective, Aguerrondo (2009) proposes:

A quality education is essential for the development of people as human beings subject to other human rights. It implies an educational offer that meets the needs and social aspirations in general; and especially, those of the most disadvantaged groups (p.89).

The contribution of this author ratifies the perspective of educational quality that is being sustained, articulating it to the construction of a human sociability centered on the search of the common and collective good.

In sum, based on what is supported, it can be affirmed that quality education is humanizing, creator of awareness, mobilizing, in the way that people are agents of their own change, of social change, as subjects of rights and active citizens, and their fundamental is critical pedagogy. From this point of view, quality education is primarily political education for the dignity of human life, social groups and society in general.

### **Quality education is political education for the dignity of human life**

Political education is crucial to form individuals, groups, communities and societies capable of participating in the debate of the public, who claim their existence, demand and be committed to the defense of public goods, because they have as a center of struggle the satisfaction of the aspirations and public needs. Political education fosters the formation of citizens, the exercise of citizenship, civility, social cohesion and a sense of belonging to the political community, as well as political judgment, democracy and political participation, without which, human life would be incomplete (Bárcena, 1997).

For Otálora (2010), the purpose of political education is to create in the individuals critical

political skills and attitudes, which allow them to develop a conception of the world and life, and (that) have a political foundation as a basis for participating in the public space; being this, in turn, constitutive of democratic spaces and contexts. For the author, political education is not limited to the mere transmission of information and knowledge through acts or discursive actions and rhetoric of persuasion, or in the development of pedagogical strategies for a civic culture of societal ideals, making students simple recipients of them; on the contrary, this education is crystallized in a real way when it is possible to build favorable attitudes towards the public and towards social action and mobilization (that is, for the exercise of citizenship). For this reason, the same author affirms that political education and citizenship are inextricably related, so that the one must lead to the other or, rather, must be reconstructed simultaneously.

Given this relationship, political education for citizenship, in addition to requiring the development of cognitive learning, requires first and foremost the implementation of practical and experiential processes that make it possible to create and strengthen attitudes, social skills, civic competencies and civic values necessary for the profession in an active way. Hart (2005) denotes the *praxical* condition of the exercise of citizenship, arguing that it does not impose itself but is built, which means that it is a social and political process that requires constant action.

In this sense, Hart himself (2005) raises the skills and competencies required for the practice of active citizenship, the scenarios, socio-relational processes that this office implies, and the political judgment that it requires. With regard to skills and competences, this author argues:

For the person to be an active citizen, an effective member of society, he or she must be someone who is safe, trusting, reflexive, thoughtful, considerate, knowledgeable and responsible. This involves developing certain skills, an area that we do not know enough about, and that should be related to other issues. Among these are: participation, self-reflection, self-determination, identification and problem solving, discussion and group decision making. If persons do not feel good about themselves and their own abilities, they will not be able to develop them and affirm themselves as citizens (Hart, 2005: 58).

With regard to the scenarios, the socio-relational processes and the political judgment for the exercise of citizenship, the author states:

The area of skills or competences requires strategies for its continuous construction, both by individuals and by groups, because citizenship is not something that happens in a particular domain, the school curriculum or home, but it happens and it is built all the time, in each scenario in which children are (present). Since it is about active citizenship, they must practice and reflect. You learn to think about your own actions in order to do not act [...] precipitously; to act in accordance with your own rights and those of others; in collaboration with others; to constantly evaluate one's actions; to act in accordance with what is believed to be right, and then again it is reflected, not only for oneself, but with the others. It is an increasingly complex process in which skills and responsibilities are mixed. That is why active citizenship is a new way of thinking about the subject (Hart, 2005: 58).

Such personal qualities, abilities and competences for the office of citizenship should be formed and cultivated in school, in the family and in all the stages of social life, so that they can be established as a cultural way of life on a personal and social level.

In relation to the values and civic ethics demanded by the task of citizenship, Cortina (2001) argues that there must be educated fundamentally around the exercise of freedom and the social foundations of the values of equality, solidarity, active respect and dialogue. For the author, freedom is interpreted as the lordship of itself, that is, the owner of its own decisions and actions that is expressed for her in freedom as participation, independence and autonomy.

The perspective of political education that is being supported is summarized by Bárcena (1997), in the following terms:

All civic-political education necessarily poses problems of conscience. And to save its independence, education must form a critical conscience, a capacity for reflection and independent thinking. [...] Education holds a treasure, education in general must be; therefore, a trial formation process (p.80).

The judgment referred to by the author is of a rational and political order and, because of the

meaning he attributes to civic-political education, it is assumed as the ability to judge, to act with ethics and sensitivity as citizens; likewise, it includes the appreciation we have of the reality, and the political and political changes happening in society.

The clarifications made about education, participation and the construction of political judgment, give clarity about the importance of these processes to enhance human dignity, and for an educational process with a focus on human rights. These processes are vital for the formation of political subjects, as well as for their existence and the exercise that is their responsibility.

### **Education in human rights, ethical and pedagogical issues**

Literature about human rights education teaches that it transcends the mere transmission of information. It is an education centered on the person, in the defense of life and a dignified life, humanizing, liberating; trainer of social, political and autonomous subjects, capable of thinking, acting, deciding and taking control of their own destiny and contributing to the construction of collective destiny. It is an education that produces meaningful learning for the defense of a dignified life, which touches the integrality of people: the cognitive, the corporal and the feelings; it is experiential, individual and social; it forms and favors the participation, the democracy and the active and social exercise of the citizenship to claim the enjoyment of life in worthy conditions.

The ethical-political sense of education in human rights has total correspondence with the purposes of liberating education, referred to awakening the consciousness of the subjects about the structural problems of society; in addition, it substantially concerns a political education process. This is what Magendzo (2011) affirms:

Education in human rights is ethical-political education. It aims to link education with the major problems facing society, such as our fragile and unstable democracies, poverty, social injustice, the phenomenon of violence, the culture of impunity and corruption, discrimination and intolerance, etc. (p.3)

In liberating education, this awakening of consciousness occurs through dialogue between the participants in the educational process:

educator-student, who are problematized and, at the same time, they make aware to each other. Dialogue and *dialogicity* in the liberating educational processes are key elements, unlike banking education, which centers on:

Bringing lots of information to students for standardized exams taken at national level, [...] students [stay] sitting down in desks without doing anything, while teachers and textbooks present materials to be assimilated in a non-critic way (Nussbaum, 2014: 40-41)

In line with all of the above, it is important to point out that human rights education has the following ethical-political goals: to promote respect for and defense of life and human dignity, as well as to shape the personal and cultural identity of persons as reflexive and critical citizens with the ability to participate in the construction of social coexistence as an act of social responsibility, with respect for human rights as a guiding principle. It is an education that inculcates the great social values, attitudes and behaviors such as: respect for the person, solidarity, defense of justice, freedom, equality, tolerance, participation as a way of life and commitment with the construction of real democracy.

Similarly, it is vital to note that the foundation of a true education in human rights is the training of people as subjects of rights from real pedagogical and social processes and practices that strengthen the knowledge, skills and civic competencies that such condition demands. In line with what Magendzo (2011) proposes, the subject of law is one who is able to make use of his freedom, respecting others; a subject of law is the person with the knowledge and appropriation of fundamental rights that not only claims them, (but) also demands their protection and guarantee, defends them in their favor and that of others.

## Conclusions

The approach made to quality education from the perspective of human rights allowed to locate the centrality that has the exaltation of human dignity as a fundamental educational purpose in processes of this nature. From the same, it has been argued how and why the traditional-banking pedagogical model, for its intentionality of manipulation and reification of people, is contrary to the formation of people as subjects of rights.

Fundamentally, the analysis made (here) allows us to clarify that educational quality from the perspective of human rights is humanistic and humanizing education, creator of awareness, mobilizing and educating people as subjects of law and agents of their own change and social change; as well as it is critical education and education for citizenship.

In the same way, it is clarified that quality education must necessarily be political education, that trains people as subjects of rights for the exercise of an active, social and emancipatory citizenship, which allows to combat oppressive ideological and practical conditions; leading to a movement of social awakening to help create new social relationships that contribute to the dignity of human life.

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### Footer

[1] Origin of this article: Reflection of the author as a result of experience as a teacher and trainer in human rights.