

Critical pedagogy and radical democracy in times of hate

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In the spirit of the celebration of ICAE's 50th anniversary, this brief contribution seeks to reflect on the unique importance of a civil society global network in defense of adult and youth's right to education amidst a world in multiple and systemic crises. Why its existence matters and how to catch up with the most contemporary challenges? As the ICAE's *Spotlight Report for Confinteia VII* pointed out, civil society organisations, local community groups and social movements involved in adult education have been and continue to be at the fore, allowing us not just to build our individual lives, but imagine, learn and contribute to achieving alternative collective futures. This piece sheds light on some considerations in view of the years ahead while simultaneously facing old and new challenges of our uncertain times.

In five decades of existence, the dynamic of a non-governmental body for the adult education movement allowed its members to witness and to play active roles in the buildup of new international agreements, to take part in inspiring experiences, to experiment victories and reversals in complex contexts. At the same time, members and activists have seen the rise of inspiring analysis and literature, local experiences, evidence-based research and passionate debates that have emerged over the last decades.

We argue that in times of democracy and education under attack, we should radicalize our principles. In this sense, this piece briefly sheds light on two reflections based on ICAE's principles with particular importance in Latin American debates and proposals: popular education and critical pedagogy as the possibility of recovering the capacity for dialogue and critical thinking in times of hate, along with the presence of the decolonial approach and epistemic justice and the intersectoral connection with other human rights movements as the only possibility of advancing a broad rights-based agenda in times of reversals.

Old and new challenges

Despite the recognition of its vital relevance in achieving gender equality, human rights and all sustainable development goals (GRALE 2023), ALE⁵ has been systematically sidelined in the education sector at international and national policy levels over the last years. Low policy priority accompanied by the scarce allocation in national budgets has resulted in the denial of education rights to a massive part of the population. Data from the last decades suggest little progress, particularly impacting the most marginalized. Moreover, in times of crises and emergencies, ALE programmes have been usually the ones to be cut off, contradicting the evidence of its potential to help in dealing with the crisis itself, offering relevant and effective approaches that provide support (Modé Magalhães and Entenza 2020, Jost 2022).

The 50th anniversary takes place in an unprecedented situation in which never, since the Second World War, has the planet experienced as many armed conflicts as it has nowadays. A recent statement of Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, Amina J. Mohammed, affirmed that there are currently 2 billion human beings living in contexts of war, a quarter of humanity. Violent conflicts coexist with persistent inequalities, discrimination, racism and xenophobia, denying to a substantial part of the population their basic rights.

A closer look into emerging challenges is also essential for a better understanding of the current scenario, such as national or identity-based violence and discrimination, the rise of authoritarianism and new forms of populism, polarization of the political debate, spread of fake news as a strategy of power disputes. A scenario marked by the dissemination of hate speech and extremist ideas, disinformation and conspiracy theories, science and education under attack – with books being banned from schools and libraries and scientific knowledge denied, involving all areas of public debate, from vaccines to climate change to gender and racial issues (Civicus 2022). Such phenomena push back against conquered rights through well-financed cultural wars involving powerful tech corporations.

The insertion of ALE in this broader picture is essential not only to orientate the education we want but also to allow a better reading of the context for civil society actions. As Angela Davis recently said, it is imperative to have an international understanding of how fascism is spreading across the globe and

⁵ The text keeps the international denomination of Adult Learning and Education (ALE) while recalling that the literal translation of the political terminology most used in Latin America would be Youth and Adult Education, therefore giving further visibility to the youth group.

how it connects diverse countries unexpectedly. “The threads that connect various authoritarian regimes appeal to xenophobic nationalism, the call for racial cleansing, and powerful political pedagogical apparatuses that forge a discourse of hate, nativism, fear, and political violence as part of a broader effort to remake collective identity” (Giroux 2023, p. 126).

Furthermore, the climate crises cannot be ignored within the ALE debate, as the planet has reached an unprecedented tipping point. As the Brazilian indigenous philosopher Ailton Krenak has recently stressed, “What I learned over the last decades is that all of us need to wake up because if for a while we, the indigenous people, were facing the risk of a rupture or extinction of our ways of life, nowadays we all face the fact that the planet might not bear our demands” (2020, p.45), highlighting that the current model legitimates only one possible way to exist – the one based on the exploration of other forms of life. He states there are many other possibilities of non-extraction models, based on a much more harmonious coexistence with nature and the planet, that must gain further visibility if the planet is to survive.

In this context, civil society movements and networks in different areas such as, education, gender, climate change, culture and communication rights, as well as indigenous and land movements, have been playing a key role – nevertheless often facing retaliation and working under attack. At national and international levels, retrograde trends and shrinking space for civil society are observed, the right to participate is denied and there are fewer opportunities for broad-based dialogue on education, limiting the involvement of civil society in policy making.

As the Civicus 2022 report has pointed out, the lack of recognition of its crucial role and stigmatising narratives are major challenges civil society faces around the world, “not least because they enable violations of civic space and hamper its ability to do its vital work, facing challenges of sustaining demands for justice beyond protests, including climate, gender, racial and social justice, and putting forward progressive economic ideas that expand access to human rights”. Moreover, anti-NGO laws, arbitrary inspections, harassment, and criminalisation all strike at the roots of civic space. Is this part of a trend of ‘reverse transitions’, in which countries slide away from democracy, asks Buyse (2018), exploring the phenomena as a broader global trend, that affects civil society in its various forms.

Popular education and critical pedagogy, a necessary approach

In these circumstances, as stated by Giroux in his recent *Insurrections – Education in an Age of Counter-Revolutionary Politics* (2023), it is vital to acknowledge that education as an emancipatory force is central to politics because it provides the foundation for those willing to engage democracy as a site of struggle, which can only be waged through a consciousness of both its fragility and necessity. However, in such a complex scenario, education itself is under attack, particularly critical thinking in defense of human rights, as part of the cultural wars intensified in the last few years.

In spite of all the international human rights treaties ratified and declarations adopted at global and regional levels that guarantee not only the right of education for all but also its orientation towards the promotion of peace and human dignity, there has been, over the last decades, a clear dispute around the ultimate purpose of education. As a consequence, in times of anti-rights pressure coming from many sectors, progressive groups and movements within civil society are called not only to push the agenda further but also to defend the guarantees that have been achieved so far.

Under the human rights framework, there has been a growing understanding that education makes an essential contribution to building inclusive and democratic societies, in which differences of opinion can be freely expressed and the wide range of voices can be heard in pursuit of the acknowledgement and celebration of diversity (UNESCO, 2020). The Marrakesh Framework for Action, adopted at the VII Confintea in Marrakesh in June 2022, constitutes another tool in reaffirming education as a fundamental right and declaring that its implementation should be guided by a rights-based approach (par. 4; par.10) – a notable achievement of global advocacy led by civil society efforts.

The latter cannot be considered a minor detail, given the contemporary political disputes in the education sector. The active participation and engagement of civil society actors in the last decades have been critical in ensuring the approval of narratives and goals more aligned to the human rights framework, in a context in which results-driven proposals based on measurable learning outcomes have prevailed, pushing for the offer of basic skills and a narrowed curriculum, usually measured by international standardized tests (Croso, da Silva and Magalhães 2023).

The market-driven neoliberal policies, along with patriarchal and colonialist frameworks, that result from an exclusionary foundational origin, have accentuated society's inequalities and have had disastrous impacts (*Ibid, apud* Manahan and Kumar, 2021) – a scenario that has been further challenged, in

the last few years, by the above-mentioned conservative wave, resulting in a direct attack on education, and more precisely popular education and critical pedagogy.

In ALE, the reductionist pressure is also highly present and connected to the overall purpose of education. “The citizenship dimension of adult education in the post-World War II years, with its emphasis on emancipation, solidarity and democracy, has largely disappeared”, says Elfert (2019). Many actors have been promoting adult education guided by a human capital approach, basic needs and acquisition of job skills that are instrumental for economic growth, in which an individualistic way of thinking prevails while knowledge becomes another form of consumerism – namely the World Bank and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

On the other hand, amidst adverse contexts further exacerbated by the pandemic in the last few years, local ALE experiences both from the public education systems and social movements, have shown possibilities and evidence of their potential to foster other human rights (CLADE 2022, UNESCO 2022, Cuenca 2018). Methodologies that, beyond individual and family benefits, are fully connected to communities, others based on environmental rights, or restorative circles in prisons preparing for reintegration, flexible curricula for migrants and refugees, youth appropriate pedagogies, programmes for young mothers and young pregnant women that include social support, others focused on the building up of young women’s life projects, including their sexual and reproductive rights – to mention but a few examples coming from the Latin America region. There are a vast range of experiences to scale up if the political will is in place, with appropriate funding. We argue that, in such a complex scenario, it is precisely the insistence on the polar opposite of such a trend, pushing further the principles of critical pedagogy and popular education that should be at the heart not only of ALE policies but the entire education systems. As Giroux has said, “education, both within and outside schools, should offer a space where hard questions can be asked, people learn how to listen carefully to each other, and where educators and other cultural workers create public spaces where it becomes possible not only to shift the way people think about the moment, but potentially to energize them to do something differently in that moment, to link one’s critical imagination with the possibility of activism in the public sphere” (2023, p. 126). Therefore, the defense of participatory, inclusive and emancipatory education, as stated in ICAE’s letter of principles, must be at the forefront while incorporating new strategies. An education that encompasses “the diversity of groups and which seek to question current paradigms, dominant social structures and global power relationships” and “inspire transformation and

innovative actions towards more distributive justice”⁶ are worth being claimed, along with the principle of democracy, “ALE embraces empathy and solidarity whilst empowering people to challenge the power relationships, structural inequalities and financial interests behind the problems”.

In this area, the Latin American and Caribbean region has a rich and vast experience to recover and contribute from the traditions of popular education and social participation, based on Freire's political and pedagogical principles of emancipation, as well as on its ethical paradigm of justice and horizontal dialogue. The latter has been informing and influencing a range of educators all over the world, in the region and beyond. In a beautifully written narrative on Freire’s influence in her life and teaching, bell hooks (2017) shared her constant search to live those principles in practice, to make the classroom or any other education space an open learning community, to listen to each other, to acknowledge each other’s presence. Each contribution is a different resource to the learning process, having as the main resource the social reality. In this sense, the student is at the heart of a horizontal relationship which creates knowledge and something new, the ultimate purpose of education.

Those same principles at the collective level lead to another layer, a reflection related to epistemic justice, another fundamental call from the Latin American region, very much in tune with the decolonial perspective. Official curricula have systematically excluded several kinds of knowledge that cannot only better represent diversity but also effectively contribute to the most contemporary societal challenges. Undoubtedly different types of indigenous knowledge would add to the way of dealing with nature, forests, climate and living together. In his provocative book “Ideas to postpone the end of the world”, the author (and Brazilian indigenous leader) Ailton Krenak says that the environment, rather than a “development resource”, is part of us, of our families and lives (Krenak 2020). In the same way, Afro communities, in different parts of the world, can share other visions of the African diaspora, in which Africans, instead of subalterns, see themselves as protagonists of world building and transformation, as active citizens and actors of globalization (Mbembe 2013). The false idea that there is only one way to live and understand the world is part of the same colonial ambition. There are different knowledges that have never entered schools and would be more than ever helpful in offering other forms of sharing the planet and alternative possibilities for human existence.

⁶ Letter of principles available on ICAE’s website <http://icae.global/>

Why do those narratives keep being forgotten and deleted, giving room to a superficial global narrative as if we had just one to be told? asks Krenak. “Our time is an expert in creating absences: of a meaningful life in society, of a meaningful life experience. And this generates an important intolerance towards those of us who are still able to experiment the pleasure of being alive, dancing, singing”. There are several small constellations of people that still do it, says the author, while stressing that the kind of humanity we are being called to integrate does not tolerate such a level of joy and life movement.

Strengthening connections with other human rights movements

Along with the call for a renewed commitment to popular education and critical pedagogy as a possibility to recover the capacity for dialogue and critical thinking, the connection with other human rights movements is a further critical point to help advance ALE connected to a broad rights-based agenda. Transnational solidarity is vital in struggles to resist regression. Movements will learn from each other while sharing strategies and pushing common horizons. The claim for educational rights must be framed within a broader political struggle, one of transformation, and one that has as its horizon more just and egalitarian societies.

All over the world, education advocates have been disseminating evidence that, beyond a right in itself, ALE is a means to achieve all human rights treaties and commitments, including the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as gender, climate and ecological justice. The literature has highlighted the contribution of ALE to the development of democratic values, to peaceful coexistence and community solidarity, as well as more just societies and well-informed citizenships. The promotion of diversity, arts and cultural heritage has also been registered, along with the vital alliance with the health and nutrition sector, promoting a less harmful way of life. Not to mention maternal lactation and infant nutrition, resulting in a reduction in child mortality.

Multiple connections with a broader human rights agenda at national, regional and international levels have been at the forefront of the International Council for the last decades. “By the early 1980s the women’s movement, the peace movement, trade union movements, movement of indigenous people, and other movements were gaining momentum, and the Council, among many other activities, worked to strengthen the links between the adult education movement and other movements”⁷.

⁷ History available at <http://icae.global/en/about/history-of-icae/>

A vocabulary that keeps including the demands of a broader popular social movement in its newest forms and strategies, actively promoting synergy based on common principles, seems to be another vital pressing point for the years ahead. A stronger link with women's and indigenous movements, youth groups, communications rights, migrants and refugees, to name but a few, makes the connection clearer, amplifying the outreach of a joint agenda and transformative narrative.

In the last few years, inspiring movements for women and LGBTQI have had important gains against the odds (Civicus 2022). After many decades of social struggle on several fronts, ranging from the streets to the highest courts, Colombia and many Mexican states have recently recognised abortion rights, and same-sex marriage became a reality in several countries. These victories, though, have made civil society the target of a ferocious backlash. The transformative potential of ALE and its contributions to achieving gender equality has been widely registered, in an education process committed to the overcoming of all forms of discrimination and violence against women, while achieving the empowerment and autonomy of women in all their diversity, particularly rural indigenous women, women with disability, Afro-descendants, migrants and refugees, as well as LGBTQI people.

Another example worth mentioning are the young people in their multiple representations - far from being homogeneous, student and youth movements in different parts of the world have incorporated a vocabulary and claims that go far beyond their legitimate immediate demands, such as education and a decent job, but also including critical thinking, dialogue, decolonial and intercultural curriculum, gender rights, racism among other points. New strategies, forms of expression and platforms reshape traditional ways of occupying public spaces. At the same time, the desired synergy is only possible if the youth as a subject, its voice, claims and needs, are made further visible along the ALE movement and agenda.

The newest disinformation agenda is also crucial to have in mind in the years ahead, echoing and strengthening communications rights movements in different parts of the world, particularly in "an era in which algorithms get people hooked by feeding them increasingly extreme and simplistic content that reinforces their pre-existing views, distorts their perspectives and isolates them from diverse viewpoints" (Civicus 2022). Still according to Civicus (2022), civil society should play a leading role in developing anti-disinformation strategies, including fact-checking, enhancement of media literacy and, crucially, advocacy for higher regulatory standards for social media companies, consistent with respect for freedom of expression. Fact-checking

initiatives, however, are only a first step and are eclipsed by the sheer scale of the task. The challenge remains of forging a joined-up, multi-faceted global effort to counter disinformation – which must include better regulation of the social media and tech industry, developed through participatory processes and including safeguards for freedom of expression.

Final remarks

Throughout this brief reflection, we have suggested that in times in which democracy and education are under attack, we need to return to – and radicalize – the movement’s principles. On one hand, we point to popular education and critical pedagogy as a possibility of recovering the capacity for dialogue and critical thinking in times of hate, along with the presence of the decolonial approach and epistemic justice. On the other, we suggest the intersectoral connection with other human rights movements as the only possibility of advancing in a rights-based agenda in times of reversals. In celebrating five decades of existence, ICAE’s strength and power comes precisely from its history, legacy and territorial outreach. The capacity to resist and reinvent itself with different strategies and partnerships, is very much connected to its non-negotiable principles and the way it is part of a broader transformative agenda for a fairer world.

As critical pedagogy has said over the last decades, old paradigms give way to new ones through the medium of culture, language, and education. “It is in this space of communication and pedagogy that the incubation period takes place in which identifications are formed, consciousness settles on modes of recognition, and agency is constructed”, says Giroux. Narratives emerge, stories change lives, and politics becomes a flashpoint. In this pedagogical space of uncertainty, radical ideas can be born, take hold, and shape a social order” (*Ibid*, 2023, p. 125), says the author, stressing that not only is a counter-narrative necessary but a mass social movement to implement it.

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Abstract

In the spirit of the celebration of ICAE's 50th anniversary, this brief contribution seeks to reflect on the unique importance of a civil society global network in defense of the right to adult and youth education amidst a world in multiple and systemic crises. This piece recovers and sheds light to some considerations in view of the years ahead while simultaneously facing old and new challenges of our uncertain times, marked by national or identity-based violence and discriminations, the rise of authoritarianism and new forms of populisms, polarization of the political debate, disinformation and the spread of fake news as a strategy of power disputes. We argue that in a context of democracies and education under attack, we should radicalize our principles, particularly fostering popular education and critical pedagogy as a possibility to recover the capacity for dialogue as well as the intersectoral connection with other human rights movements to advance a common encompassing rights-based agenda.

Key words

ICAE, civil society networks, youth and adult right to education, popular education, critical pedagogy.

Pédagogie critique et démocratie radicale en temps de haine

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Résumé

En commémoration du 50e anniversaire du CIEA, cette brève contribution vise à réfléchir sur l'importance singulière d'un réseau mondial de la société civile dans la défense du droit à l'éducation des adultes et des jeunes dans un monde confronté à des crises multiples et systémiques. Elle reprend et éclaire certaines considérations en vue des années à venir, tout en faisant face simultanément aux défis anciens et nouveaux de notre époque incertaine, marquée par la violence et les discriminations nationales ou identitaires, la montée de l'autoritarisme et de nouvelles formes de populisme, la polarisation du débat politique, la désinformation et l'utilisation de "fake news" comme stratégie de lutte pour le pouvoir. Nous soutenons que dans un contexte où les démocraties et l'éducation sont attaquées, nous devrions radicaliser nos principes, notamment en encourageant l'éducation populaire et la pédagogie critique comme une possibilité de récupérer la capacité de dialogue ainsi que la connexion intersectorielle avec d'autres mouvements des droits de l'homme pour faire avancer un agenda commun et englobant basé sur les droits.

Mots clés

CIEA, réseaux de la société civile, droit à l'éducation des jeunes et des adultes, éducation populaire, pédagogie critique.

Pedagogía crítica y democracia radical en tiempos de odio

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Resumen

En el espíritu de la celebración del 50 aniversario del ICAE, esta breve contribución busca reflexionar sobre la singular importancia de una red mundial de la sociedad civil en defensa del derecho a la educación de personas jóvenes y adultas en un mundo marcado por múltiples y sistémicas crisis. Este escrito retoma y aclara algunas consideraciones de cara a los años venideros, enfrentándose simultáneamente a desafíos antiguos y nuevos de nuestra época incierta, caracterizada por la violencia y las discriminaciones nacionales o identitarias, el ascenso del autoritarismo y nuevas formas de populismo, la polarización del debate político, la desinformación y la propagación de "fake news" como estrategia en la lucha por el poder. Sostenemos que en un contexto donde las democracias y la educación están siendo atacadas, debemos radicalizar nuestros principios, especialmente al fomentar la educación popular y la pedagogía crítica como una posibilidad para recuperar la capacidad de diálogo y la conexión intersectorial con otros movimientos de derechos humanos, con el fin de avanzar en una agenda común y abarcadora basada en derechos.

Palabras clave

ICAE, redes de la sociedad civil, derecho a la educación de jóvenes y adultos, educación popular, pedagogía crítica.