

ABOUT ENTREPRENEURIAL PROTAGONISTS IN CLASSROOMS, OR A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF NEOLIBERAL TERMS IN EDUCATION

SOBRE PROTAGONISTAS EMPREENDEDORES NAS SALAS DE AULA, OU UMA LEITURA CRÍTICA DE TERMOS NEOLIBERAIS NA EDUCAÇÃO

SOBRE LOS PROTAGONISTAS EMPREENDEDORES EN LAS AULAS O UNA LECTURA CRÍTICA DE LOS TÉRMINOS NEOLIBERALES EN LA EDUCACIÓN



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ABSTRACT: This text, written in the form of an essay, discusses the use of the terms protagonism and entrepreneurship in education. It is argued that these concepts refer to neoliberal principles that, when incorporated into education, reduce it to processes that serve to maintain the status quo, normalizing utilitarian and competitive education. In this way, the need to reject the ideas of entrepreneurial protagonists in education is presented. In its place, cooperation and the vital inclusion of positive emotions in education are proposed, which society neglects in the name of the self-responsibility of each one for their own successes or failures, without distinction.

KEYWORDS: Education. Neoliberalism. Protagonism.

RESUMO: Este texto, escrito na forma de um ensaio, problematiza o uso dos termos protagonismo e empreendedorismo na educação. Argumenta-se que esses conceitos remetem a princípios neoliberais que, ao serem incorporados na educação, a reduzem a processos que servem à manutenção do status quo, normalizando a educação utilitarista e competitiva. Dessa maneira, apresenta-se a necessidade de se rejeitar as ideias de protagonistas empreendedores na educação. Em seu lugar, propõe-se a cooperação e a inclusão vital de emoções positivas na educação, as quais a sociedade pretere em nome da autorresponsabilização de cada um pelos seus próprios sucessos ou fracassos, indistintamente.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Educação. Neoliberalismo. Protagonismo.

RESUMEN: Este texto, escrito en forma de ensayo, discute el uso de los términos protagonismo y emprendimiento en la educación. Se argumenta que estos conceptos remiten a principios neoliberales que, al ser incorporados a la educación, la reducen a procesos que sirven para mantener el statu quo, normalizando la educación utilitaria y competitiva. De esta forma, se presenta la necesidad de rechazar las ideas de los protagonistas emprendedores en la educación. En su lugar se propone la cooperación y la vital inclusión de las emociones positivas en la educación, que la sociedad descuida en nombre de la responsabilidad de cada uno por sus propios éxitos o fracasos, sin distinción.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Educación. Neoliberalismo. Protagonismo.

Preamble

This text is an essay on protagonism and entrepreneurship in education. Its writing has a single objective: to reject the appropriation of the concepts of protagonism (student, youth, child...) and entrepreneurship in education. These terms, deliberately driven by the neoliberal system that organizes planetary life, have become commonplace in literature, documents and discourses that address formal teaching and learning processes. And this is not new.

We return to the end of the last century, when the world was undergoing a radical transformation in the means of communication, becoming effectively globalized. In this context, explains Marrach (1996), education was already surrendering to neoliberal rhetoric by granting its formative space in the following way: (i.) school education and academic research would be tied to market needs; (ii.) educational institutions would become the main place of dissemination of market ideological principles (competition, each for himself, profit, etc.); and (iii.) schools would become customers of technology products and teaching materials produced in and by the neoliberal system.

It is in this way, harshly and without the slightest indulgence, that formal education has become host to a neoliberal ideology, which normalizes social inequalities. These inequalities result from meritocracy, in which everyone is solely responsible for the successes and failures in their own lives.

This writing arises precisely because I do not agree with this ideology. It is about rehearsing arguments against the misappropriation of the ideas of protagonism and entrepreneurship by formal education. In the end, it is hoped that the foundations presented here will mobilize others, even denser, more substantiated and that also seek to counter the *status quo*.

Rehearsing the rejection of neoliberal terms in education

Proto means the first, the main. Agon means struggle. Agonist, fighter. Protagonist, literally, means the main fighter (COSTA, 2000 apud FIOREZE *et al.*, 2022, p. 702, our translation).

Regarding the concept of protagonism, it is notorious that its use in education does not make sense and should be abolished, since its etymology presented in the epigraph; after all: either education boils down to an individualized process, in which there is only one student, or

we cannot call everyone “the main “. In addition, it carries the idea of struggle, as if they were fighting each other, leaving victors and defeated² .

We can consider another origin for the term, different from the one given in the epigraph. According to Ferretti *et al.* (2004, p. 113, our translation): “when turning to the etymology of the term 'protagonism', it turns out that *protagnostés* meant the main actor of the Greek theater, or “the one who occupied the main place in an event”. Considering that theater is an art form that works with the allegorical representation of life, we can discard the idea of protagonism in education, because it is about living life itself, in a concrete way, with all the risks that being alive entails.

What we have similar in the two etymological definitions is the idea of a person being the main one, the most important one, either in the fight or in the theater. One person. The others are just supporting actors or mere extras. Hence the question: is this really what we want with education, that each student sees himself as the most important fighter and the other people (colleagues, teachers, coaches, administrators, family members...) as opponents or observers?

The text could even end here, because the message is given: there should be no protagonism in education. However, questions remain: what is expected, then, when dozens of protagonists and a teacher gather in a classroom? And we can go further, asking: what show should these protagonists stage and for whom? We know the script: what is well described in the national curriculum, detailed in the didactic material made available, with its (supposedly) correct answers already noted in the teacher's book. Still, and perhaps more importantly, we can ask: how did this idea come about, and why was it accepted and incorporated into education, taken as legitimate in teaching and learning processes?

Returning to Ferretti *et al.* (2004), we find the hypothesis that there would be a semantic problem in the use of the term protagonist in education, being used as a kind of synonym for democratic participation. This means that the general idea of the term would not be that of its etymology of fighter or main character, but that of a student who actively participates in an educational process oriented by democracy. Recently, in a text written in collaboration, we rejected this hypothesis of mere semantic error, stating that “we do not believe in protagonism in education; we are people living in a complex world, not characters in a neoliberal allegory” (FORTUNATO *et al.*, 2022, p. 8, our translation).

² It is important to note that the use of masculine nouns is only intended to make writing and reading more fluid. It is not an exclusion, on the contrary, because it is intended that all people feel contemplated in the text.

Our rejection of the semantic error hypothesis is due to the main fact that the idea of centrality to each person in life processes is the basis of neoliberal discourse, so its use in education would not be mere chance or something refractory to an incorrect use of the term. This means that protagonism is part of a set of ideas and attitudes that foresee individualism and individual responsibility for possible (and inherent) failures in the current social system.

Entrepreneurship is part of this list of neoliberal terms, almost always accompanied by *innovation*. While the academic literature, according to Souza (2023), still presents uncertainties and digressions about the meaning of entrepreneurship, the internet has already appropriated the term well: a simple search on the search engine reveals several virtual sites that, practically in consonance, say that the entrepreneur is a person who, on a private initiative, starts a business selling products or services. One of the definitions found on one of the numerous sites³ is quite clear: “undertaking depends on the 'I', therefore, on the action of a person “.

And it is precisely because the world is increasingly turning to the *self*, practically inhibiting collective, cooperative and democratic processes, that entrepreneurship is accompanied by *innovation*. There are so many people undertaking, that the discourse also needed to adapt to the context, imposing on people who depend only on themselves in their enterprises that, in order to remain, *it is necessary to do differently to stand out*. It is possible to see the effect of this innovative entrepreneurship in the words of Souza (2023):

One of the main reasons that can be attributed to this entrepreneurial escalation is its use as a policy for the creation of increasingly “autonomous “and “independent “citizens, that is, people increasingly self-responsible with the awareness that they must undertake to achieve both personal and professional goals (SOUZA, 2023, p. 76, my emphasis, our translation).

In the passage quoted, the author emphasizes the words autonomous and independent by putting them in quotation marks. It seems that these are those sarcastic quotation marks, used to qualify things with irony, skepticism and/or to indicate contradiction. In the case of the autonomous and independent predicates used in the quotation, the case seems to be all of these at the same time; that is, an irony, a demonstration of skepticism and the identification of a contradiction.

The irony lies in the observation that there is a discourse of autonomy and independence governing the neoliberal system, but while such words proclaim this individual freedom, the

³ Direct link: <https://g4educacao.com/glossario/significado-empreendedorismo>. Access: 10 Mar. 2023

system operates by making people increasingly dependent on the system itself. Hence the skepticism: one cannot believe that the excess of entrepreneurs in the world is the realization of a project of freedom and equality; much less of fraternity.

So, the contradiction is clear: becoming an entrepreneur, in this world of individual projects, of every man for himself, is often not a choice. In many cases, it is the only option for survival. In this sense, there is no autonomy at all, because entrepreneurship, this individual attitude of employing oneself, is not a choice of a way of life. Just as there is no independence; on the contrary, because by undertaking as the only alternative, the person remains totally dependent on his enterprise, which, in turn, is subject to the conditions of the system.

This leads to the term highlighted by me in the quote: self-responsibility. This means that the autonomy and freedom gained by the *protagonism of the entrepreneurial self* leads to the responsibility of oneself for failure or success by one's individual attitude. Of course, the idea of failure or success is circumstantial, however, in our system it means, respectively, closing the enterprise for lack of resources or prospering financially.

It is thanks to this perspective of self-responsibility that education is so fond of talking about protagonism. This is because, when an entrepreneurial person prospers, it can be said that the reasons for such a fertile situation was the fact that he or she made a copious effort to appropriate the skills provided during the years of study, therefore, success is the result of an excellent quality education. On the other hand, when there is failure, there is nothing to regret, except for the very unwillingness to assimilate everything that was delivered in school banks. In short, the protagonism implemented from childhood, which runs throughout schooling, tends towards entrepreneurship.

The words of Vicentin and Silveira (2021) could well capture this relationship between protagonism in school and inevitable entrepreneurship. According to the authors,

[...] by proposing that students, via educational policy, assume the protagonism of their lives and become responsible for the development of their projects and dreams, that they take responsibility for the chosen trajectory, State and school act and subjectively produce subjects who, immersed in a neoliberal reason, must act as companies, must constitute themselves as entrepreneurs of themselves, because this is the world and the challenges of the contemporary that the proposal of a new school presents and represents (VICENTIN; DA SILVEIRA, 2021, p. 32, our translation).

It is evident in the quote that the protagonism arrives at the school for the neoliberal reason. In Brazil, this reason enters the school through our National Common Curricular Base (BRASIL, 2018), better known as BNCC. A document that should guide actions, it is taken as

a rule for the elaboration of teaching material, municipal and state curricula, large-scale assessments and teacher training.

In this document, the term “protagonism” appears 46 times throughout the text (protagonist appears nine times), and “the itineraries must guarantee the appropriation of cognitive procedures and the use of methodologies that favor youth protagonism” (BRASIL, 2018, p. 478, our translation). Although the Base does not focus on defining protagonism, there are cases where it seems to be synonymous with autonomy, but there are others where it appears alongside autonomy, implying that it is something else; this appears, for example, in this excerpt on literacy: “[...] learning to read and write offers students something new and surprising: it expands their possibilities of [...] participating with greater autonomy and protagonism in social life” (BRASIL, 2018, p. 63, our translation). In other cases, the word only appears as an adverb, without clarifying exactly what is proposed, as, for example, when it is stated that “[...] the act of writing is also conceived as a social practice [...], giving students the opportunity to act with protagonism” (BRASIL, 2018, p. 244, our translation).

Words related to the action of undertaking appear only five times, appearing for the first time in one of the objectives of secondary education, called “basic preparation for work and citizenship” (BRASIL, 2018, p. 465, our translation). The Base considers that the school, in order to achieve this objective, must “provide a culture favorable to the development of attitudes, skills and values that promote entrepreneurship [...] provide support for young people so that [...] they develop an entrepreneurial, ethical and responsible attitude to move in the world of work and in society in general”.

In addition, although little mentioned in the Base, entrepreneurship is highlighted, being one of the so-called *structuring axes* of the training itineraries proposed by the document, being “TV - entrepreneurship: it supposes the mobilization of knowledge from different areas for the formation of organizations with varied missions aimed at the development of innovative products or services with the use of technologies” (BRASIL, 2018, p. 479, our translation).

To put it bluntly: the BNCC recognizes that educational processes must provide opportunities for the establishment of *protagonists* (each one being the fighter or main character and their colleagues and teachers the supporting and extras), because in the end it will really be every man for himself, facing each other in the competitive market of innovative entrepreneurs. Success will be achieved by those who make good use of the skills offered during the years of schooling. Failure will only be the self-responsibility of each protagonist, who did not want to take advantage of the years of study.

In contrast to protagonism and entrepreneurship, *cooperation* is used 13 times in the BNCC. Cooperation has its origin in the Latin *cooperare*, which means to work together; in the online dictionary, its definition is practically exhausted in itself, being understood as helping other people, doing things together, etc. In this sense, while protagonizing is to take a prominent place (in a fight or in a staging) and entrepreneurship is the action of one person, cooperation implies acting together, therefore, one does not cooperate alone nor is there a figure of the most important. As Frantz (2001, p. 242, our translation) put it well: “I will define cooperation as a social process, based on associative relationships, on human interaction, by which a group of people seeks to find answers and solutions to their common problems, to realize common goals [...]”.

Of the few mentions of cooperation, five appear alongside “conflict resolution”, two others appear as international political and economic alliance and another appears in a list of skills, alongside autonomy and entrepreneurship. When it is mentioned in the sports’ thematic unit, in the section on Physical Education, cooperation becomes a criterion of internal logic, as well as interaction with the opponent. In this sense, it is observed that the cooperation expressed in the Base, is not understood as the previous definition given by Frantz (2001), but a skill apparently without ballast in its etymology of collaborating, assisting, working together...

Thus, in addition to presenting this disproportion between the individual nouns (protagonism and entrepreneurship) and the collective (cooperation), the BNCC ignores, throughout its six hundred pages, the word happiness. This means that, at no point in the text, does the idea arise that schooling should be a process that aims to promote happiness in our society, nor that people could at least consider the hypothesis that planetary life tends to be happy. It is thus characterized that the important thing is that each of the protagonists takes the part that belongs to him in the system, being self-responsible for his entrepreneurial share.

The document also disregards the possibility of *joy*, except in the first sentence of the presentation, being the feeling recorded by the then minister of education, when publishing the BNCC. Other positive emotions such as *hope*, *love*, *affection* and *fraternity* are ignored by the Base, except with another mention in contexts that do not deal with these feelings in educational processes. After all, a top fighter should not even show such feelings, except perhaps *joy* when defeating his opponents.

I have already written about how the school works with this mismatch between leading a world of individual endeavors and being happy in a place of cooperation (FORTUNATO, 2021). In this writing, I made a fractional reading of the classic film *Dead Poets Society*,

focusing on the contrast between the pillars of excellent education at the fictional college where the plot unfolds, and the absence of joy and happiness in its students. The fictional school in the film only dramatized the reality experienced by students around the world, as seen in our current BNCC and in the most general expectations about school education, that is: a school that must prepare its students for the future, even aware that this preparation is belligerent and exclusionary, strengthening the *status quo*.

The movie also reveals to us that confronting the system by going against it is an excellent way to strengthen the system itself by making the one who offers resistance wrong. Thus, what is left to the school are the pillars of quality education: tradition, honor, discipline and excellence. Joy, happiness, affection, hope, cooperation, etc., therefore, do not enter the classrooms, as they are not considered pillars of excellent education.

Thus, I dare say that happiness only becomes a pillar of an education that cares little whether it is of excellence or not. Such places exist, but they are very rare. In particular, I know only the Summerhill school, established by Alexander S. Neill in Suffolk, England, where there are three pillars that have supported his way of working since its foundation in 1921: freedom, self-government and *happiness*. I have already written about these pillars in a laudatory text, celebrating the school's 100th birthday (FORTUNATO; PORTO, 2023).

The pillars of the concrete and centenary Summerhill school are diametrically different from the pillars of the allegorical school in the movie - although the school in the movie represents in a more concrete way the general idea of the objectives of formal education, offered in schools and universities, practically all over the planet. While one has as its purpose collective life, the discovery of oneself and respect for others and the place where one lives, the other only aims at the repetition and strengthening of a society where each one is the protagonist of his own enterprise. While Summerhill was founded with community life in mind, the traditional school of excellence thinks about individual results, cheering on its best fighters/actors.

To me, which path is better seems obvious. Nevertheless, the daily life seen and lived, public policies and even the most generalized conception of society about education, show that the route of tradition, honor, discipline and excellence is the one that continues to be increasingly strengthened.

Prologue

Everything is happening as if we have gone from a school that is very dependent on a very narrow cultural nationalism to a school that is corroded by utilitarian egoism. This conception of education that dominates today is an integral part of the vision of a humanity composed of small soldiers of the world economic war (LAVAL, 2004, p. 322, our translation).

To conclude this writing, I share and agree with the words quoted in the epigraph. The students qualified as *little soldiers*, that is, the *protagonists*, each one being the most important fighter, each one as the main character of a neoliberal spectacle promoted in and by society. These *small soldiers* face each other in this *economic war through the* tools acquired throughout life, in which each one builds his headquarters, or rather, in his innovative individual enterprise.

As a consequence of every war, there is much damage, just as there are those who lose and those who win.... And in economic warfare, they say, winning or losing is only the result of one's own effort; that is, each is self-responsible for his success or failure.

Education does nothing to change course. On the contrary, it continues to strengthen the *status quo*.

This is exactly what Silva, Moura and Brunet (2023, p. 13, our translation) recorded, “the undisguised advance of market interests in the construction of curricula, teaching methodologies, teacher training, management and school financing “, are reflections of the invasive way of neoliberalism to education. Next, as a negative side effect, they state: “education loses its transformative and critical capacity, in view of the unrestricted service to market designs and the development of human capital “.

Here, in this text, I sought to highlight two *neoliberal mantras*, whose excessive use in education has apparently already become an order. To reiterate: protagonism and entrepreneurship. These concepts are popularized in curriculum documents, which, although they are presented as guides, are prescriptive doctrines followed with conviction by all spheres of education. They come to us, teachers, with the seal “comply”.

When daring to contradict the compass of entrepreneurial protagonism, the system soon responds with censorship; in case of recurrence, punishment. Responses are swift to the audacity of confronting the established order, which is accepted by practically the whole of society. There is no room for utopia, for affections, for cooperation or for hope. In fact, this was worked on in another text, which addressed how education has served to propagate evils in our psyche, preventing the understanding of our way of life from being less rational and more affective, less pragmatic and more subjective (RODRÍGUEZ; FORTUNATO, 2021).

Therefore, in the end, even aware that all the elucidation brought here is nothing more than a rhetorical exercise in the face of the utilitarian, pragmatic, economic, skeptical and disenchantment context that we live in, there is the feeling that enunciating all this is necessary. Pointing out different paths from what is set, I think, is a double way of resisting and hoping. Resisting against a world of main soldiers of the silent but lethal economic war. To hope for a world of affection and cooperation. Who knows, maybe education will soon be on that path!

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