

Experience and observation: from Rousseau to the *National Curriculum Reference for Early Childhood Education*

Sueli Soares dos Santos Batista

State University of Campinas

Abstract

The article has as its objective to recover the concepts of experience and observation present in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile*, discussing them in the perspective of an education for emancipation, as it is formulated by the authors of the Critical Theory, specially Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno. Considering the use and valuation of these concepts in the theory and practice of education, the text analyzes the treatment given to them in the *National Curriculum Reference for Early Childhood Education*, with the purpose of highlighting the criticism present in the defense of children's experiences and of their observation in the school daily life. It concludes, based on reflections about Rousseau's texts and about those of the authors of the Critical Theory, that in the above-mentioned document, faced with the polysemy of the formative experience, emphasis is given to the curriculum aspect, to the instrumentalization of teachers' action, to experiences and learning labeled as essential, to the experience that the teacher affords to the children, and to the mapping of subjectivities through observation and systematic recording. If Rousseau asks us to observe the child, as well as to offer and value significant experiences, it is because somehow, making use of a theoretical-methodological resource, he is addressing concrete educators who, after almost three centuries, are still entangled by concepts and social representations of childhood, oblivious to the experience that legitimizes the construction of these same concepts and representations.

Keywords

Critical theory and education - *National Curriculum Reference for Early Childhood Education* - Education and emancipation.

Contact:

Sueli Soares dos Santos Batista
Rua José Telles, 2081
13252-741 – Itatiba/SP
suelissbatista@uol.com.br

Experiência e observação: de Rousseau ao Referencial Curricular Nacional para a Educação Infantil

Sueli Soares dos Santos Batista

Universidade Estadual de Campinas

Resumo

O artigo tem o objetivo de resgatar os conceitos de experiência e observação presentes em Emílio, de Jean-Jacques Rousseau, discutindo-os na perspectiva de uma educação para a emancipação, conforme formulada pelos autores da teoria crítica, especialmente Walter Benjamin e Theodor W. Adorno. Considerando a utilização e a valorização desses conceitos na teoria e na prática educativas, analisou-se a abordagem dada a eles no Referencial Curricular Nacional para a Educação Infantil, com o objetivo de ressaltar a criticidade presente na defesa da experiência das crianças e de sua observação no cotidiano escolar. Conclui-se, a partir das reflexões sobre os textos de Rousseau e dos autores da teoria crítica, que, no referido documento, diante da polissemia da experiência formativa, ressaltam-se o recorte curricular, instrumentalização da ação do professor, as experiências e aprendizagens ditas essenciais, a experiência que o professor propicia às crianças e o esquadramento das subjetividades por meio da observação e do registro sistemático. Se Rousseau solicita-nos observar a criança, bem como proporcionar e valorizar experiências significativas, é porque, de alguma forma, valendo-se de um recurso teórico-metodológico, dirige-se a educadores e educandos concretos que, passados quase três séculos, ainda se emaranham entre conceitos e representações sociais de infância sem se darem conta da experiência que legitima a construção desses mesmos conceitos e representações.

Palavras-chave

Teoria crítica e educação – Referencial Curricular Nacional para a Educação Infantil – Educação e emancipação.

Correspondência:
Sueli Soares dos Santos Batista
Rua José Telles, 2081
13252-741 – Itatiba/SP
suelissbatista@uol.com.br

In the 18th century, Jean Jacques Rousseau already looked for a more rational view of childhood behind the thick veil of the erroneous ideas created about it. In the preface to the *Émile*, he states that with the false ideas we entertain about childhood, “the further we go, the more we deviate from our path” (ROUSSEAU, 1995, p. 6). Rousseau wants us, at all times, to put aside everything usually said about children – the expectations created around them, the artificial and conventional conceptions of them – and look at this being in its entirety, in flesh and blood, concrete; a being which, like all man, was born to be free, albeit temporarily found in a situation of dependence and physical fragility (BATISTA, 2005). The normative character of this work is clear at the moments in which Rousseau (1995) makes an effort at synthesis. This is how he puts forward four maxims of his educative proposal (p. 49-50):

1st maxim: compatibility between the forces and needs of children (so that they do not develop from an early age that which is only made possible to them through the agency of someone else).

2nd maxim: it is necessary to help them by supplying what they lack, both in intelligence and in force regarding all that is related to the physical needs.

3rd maxim: in this help, it is necessary to restrict ourselves to the *useful real*, giving nothing to fantasy or to the wish without reason (anti-natural).

4th maxim: by studying the language of the child (crying, for instance), we can distinguish the *useful real* from the fantasy, what comes from nature from what comes from opinion.

For Rousseau (1995), the human misery consists not in deprivation of things, but in the need one has of them. Therefore, the adult should neither stimulate nor give in to children’s fantasies, so that they do not increase gradually needs that will not be possibly satisfied. To the author, this is the

source of unhappiness: more needs, more lacking, more dependence.

Happiness would be in the natural living, in which man knows fewer needs and, for this reason, is freer both from things and from men:

There is only one man who gets his own way – he who can get it singlehanded; therefore freedom, not power, is the greatest good. That man is truly free who desires what he is able to perform, and does what he desires. This is my fundamental maxim. Apply it to childhood, and all the rules of education spring from it. (p. 67)

Dependence on things, according to Rousseau (1995), has an educative potential, because it is not damaging to liberty:

There are two kinds of dependence: dependence on things, which is the work of nature; and dependence on men, which is the work of society. Dependence on things, being non-moral, does no injury to liberty and begets no vices; dependence on men, being out of order, gives rise to every kind of vice [...] (p. 68).

If the laws of nations, like the laws of nature, could never be broken by any human power, dependence on men would become dependence on things. [...] Keep the child dependent on things only. By this course of education you will have followed the order of nature. (p. 68-69).

This dependence on things referred to by the author is the education chosen for *Émile*, as described in book two. Children learn and know what is related to their present and palpable interest. This observation allows Rousseau to make us rethink the real interest of children in fables, in the teaching of languages, geography, geometry, history, in short, in everything which is for them abstract enough to launch them far away from themselves in time and space. On the teaching of geometry, Rousseau (1995)

makes a comment that suits also other branches of knowledge:

Instead of making us find the demonstrations, they dictate them to us; instead of teaching us how to reason, the teacher reasons for us and only exercises our memory. (p. 147)

The education of sensibility and for sensibility, a need still not sufficiently attended to today, is endlessly reiterated by the author:

To train the senses it is not enough merely to use them; we must learn to judge by their means, to learn to feel, so to speak; for we cannot touch, see, or hear, except as we have been taught. (p. 130)

Thus, it is quite a mistake to think that man's true reason is formed independently of the body; a good bodily constitution is what makes the workings of the mind easy and correct. (p. 121)

Émile is a "pupil of nature", says Rousseau (1995, p. 113). His body and his spirit are exercised at the same time. The stronger and more robust he gets, the more sensible and judicious he becomes. The defense of childhood in Rousseau reaches the point of praising the scruffy street boy, closed in onto himself, full of bruises, ignorant, happy and free, since it has been allowed to him – and he allowed himself – to be autonomous.

One can see that Rousseau attributes to the education of nature and of things rational and moral consequences. It is interesting to observe that he, as Immanuel Kant will do later, associates the development of morality to that of rationality and, consequently, of freedom:

What concerns the moral order and the customs of society should not yet be given them, for they are not in a condition to understand it. It is folly to expect them to

attend to things vaguely described as good for them, when they do not know what this good is, things which they are assured will be to their advantage when they are grown up, though for the present they take no interest in this so-called advantage, which they are unable to understand.

Let the child do nothing because he is told; nothing is good for him but what he recognizes as good. When you are always urging him beyond his present understanding, you think you are exercising a foresight which you really lack. To provide him with useless tools which he may never require, you deprive him of man's most useful tool – common-sense. You would have him docile as a child; he will be a credulous dupe when he grows up (p. 190).

Hence, there is no moral development without the reason conceiving for itself the moral precepts. Otherwise, we obtain from the child the blind obedience, the lie, the idle talk about virtues she does not understand, the mere reproduction of actions whose reasons she ignores. The deepest dependence on men is that which precludes the possibility of developing autonomy, and nobody has the right to trust someone else's judgment.

An idle-talking education produces only idle-talkers. The result of such education is something akin to the disfigured statue of Glaucus mentioned at the opening of the *A discourse upon the origin and the foundation of the inequality among mankind: the humanity of the child loses its character under the pile of external demands*; it attends more to what must not be done or must be done indirectly. Talk less, listen and observe more: "it is necessary to speak as much as possible through actions, and only say what cannot be done" (ROUSSEAU, 1999a, p. 196).

Émile is not spared of adversities and of experiencing the pain and precariousness of life; he is not directed at looking in books for

cluttered information that will later be repeated to obtain social approval. The accumulation of information without an experience, the intellectual knowledge separated from the knowledge of self and others, the cult of heroes and competition produce a child precociously inserted in the world of conventions, a child that wants to enter quickly into the world of adults without having ever been a child. But that is not the worst of it. This child will never find such adult world, but infantilized adults who try to gain knowledges and words as if they were disposable toys:

When I see a man in love with knowledge, yielding to its charms and flitting from one branch to another unable to stay his steps, he seems to me like a child gathering shells on the sea-shore, now picking them up, then throwing them aside for others which he sees beyond them, then taking them again, till overwhelmed by their number and unable to choose between them, he flings them all away and returns empty handed. (p. 181)

Franco Cambi (1999) says in his *History of Pedagogy* that at the basis of Rousseau's formation novel there is an open debate against the pedagogies of his time. The modernity of *Émile* would rest not so much in its affinity with contemporary pedagogies, whose paternity is attributed by many to Rousseau; as we understand it, the modernity of this work resides in the questions it puts before us, educators and educated alike. *Émile or On Education* does not aim simply at the education of children, but at the formation of educators who can be surprised by one of Rousseau's most intriguing questions:

Now neither child nor man can be read at a glance. Where are the observers who can at once discern the characteristics of this child? (p. 170)

Observation for verification as the basis of an educational theory is something

revolutionary if we think of a conservative and adult-centered theory of education, but yet not radically opposed to the modern scientific thinking.

In her studies, Carlota Boto (2005) says that the *Émile* does not concern the educative experience, neither from the viewpoint of the educated, nor from that of the educator. *Émile* is not a pupil, never was and never will be. Just like the state of nature and the social pact are not historically determined, so it is not *Émile*:

Rousseau formulates a different, hypothetical temporality, from which he believed he could deduce valid implications for social life [...]. It seems plausible to us, however, to think about *Émile*'s educative project under the same reference, that is to say, the boy *Émile* does not exist, never existed, and was never thought to exist. (p. 379)

Émile who is not a son, neither a pupil [...]. He is a theoretical construct and an operative support for the conceptual analysis of the educative act. (p. 380)

The precepts applied to *Émile* could not be hypostasized, insofar as he would be just a logical-deductive device created by Rousseau in order to develop his meditations on education and the direction of teaching. The author compares *A discourse upon the origin and the foundation of the inequality among mankind* with *The social contract*, in which Rousseau privileged operatory and instrumental categories not necessarily verifiable in the real world. This is how, in Rousseau's philosophy of history, an imaginary temporality is presented in which we have gone from nature to civilization. Similarly, *Émile*'s education would reveal a metonym of the civilization process, in which mankind leaves its infancy and move towards the creation of the civil man, of the legitimate contract (BOTO, 2005, p. 380).

In an attempt at a Weberian reading of Rousseau's work, Boto demonstrates how the construction of the ideal type called *Émile*

has fulfilled its operatory and instrumental function up to the present day. It would be this logical-formal character of the work, and not its re-readings aiming at the ordinary educative experience, that would ensure the universal character of the work, thereby justifying its modernity. It would be this fictional, invisible, ahistorical, and merely conceptual character of the *Émile* what would allow us to see therein the contemporary child.

The question with which this reading of the *Émile* is faced is: to what extent can we still rely on the universality of the childhood category, and why is it that Rousseau's reflections can still be relevant, even if they do not refer to any child? Was *Émile* not written to oppose the concepts and prejudices related to the childhood faced with the lack of experience with real children of its time? If the universality of Rousseau's considerations regarding childhood and education relate to the formulation of a logical and instrumental category, would we not be perpetuating this procedure by defending the need for a universalization of the concept of childhood when it no longer can be justified? What is the relation between concept and experiences in Rousseau's work? In what way did Rousseau, famous for his critique of the Enlightenment, make of the *Émile* just a logical-deductive device? We agree with Danilo Streck (2004) when he considers that the answers given by Rousseau may no longer be ours, but that it is possible that, in his questions, we find indications to formulate the questions of our own time.

If Rousseau asks us to observe the child, to offer and value significant experiences, it is because, making somehow use of a theoretical-methodological resource, he addresses concrete educators and educated who, after almost three centuries, are still entangled in concepts and social representations of childhood unaware of the experience that legitimizes the construction of these same concepts and representations.

Émile is an eloquent appeal to observe and consider the experience of the child,

without which the moral and intellectual maturity cannot be consolidated. If there is the need for such appeal it is because the educative practices known to Rousseau were not exactly centered on what he regarded as fundamental.

Since the writings of Michel de Montaigne, the emphasis on experience can be interpreted as a resistance to the increasing devaluation of the individual experience, which was gradually substituted by discourse and scientific experience.

As observed by Giorgio Agamben (2005), modern science set up the distrust in experience as linked to supposed chance events and tradition in favor of the experiment previously conceived.

It was precisely based on the common experience that Montaigne (1996) wrote his *Essays* and that Rousseau (1986) conceives his *Reveries*. The experience based on useful, prudent, ordered, well-disposed and pondered procedures opposes the discontinuous and upturned experience typical of labyrinths, of forests, of sensibility and of the unconscious. Rousseau's negative education goes in this direction by attempting to recover the immediate childlike experience, as little mediated as possible by the competent discourses of the time. Education establishes a paradox: it is needed but, if carried out to its last consequences, in other words, if totally successful, produces its opposite.

However, this same emphasis by Rousseau on *Émile*'s experience, in his refusal of a book-based, pedagogical formation centered on words upon words, is that which refuses traditions, the precepts without reasonable explanations, the power of authority by itself, and the fables. The impossibility of the transmission of experiences seen by Walter Benjamin at the start of the 20th century was already present, in incipient form, in Rousseau's time. Lessons traditionally transmitted from generation to generation steeped in fantasies are no longer acceptable for *Émile*'s education. With that, we intend to show that the *Émile* is

a treatise in education which, whilst recovering the value of an almost immediate experience of nature (recall that the preceptor does not let *Émile* out of his sight), is a manifest against experience in the traditional sense of social practices of a knowledge organized by others. Having as its subtitle *On education*, this treatise questions and presents the limits of educability.

Between common sense and nature Rousseau chooses the latter for *Émile*'s education. Fantasy comes in not as a component of experience that leads to knowledge, but as a distortion produced by society, preventing children from developing and from having the experiences they are capable of. Consider the following passage:

As for my pupil, or rather Nature's pupil, he has been trained from the outset to be as self-reliant as possible, he has not formed the habit of constantly seeking help from others, still less of displaying his stores of learning. On the other hand, he exercises discrimination and forethought, he reasons about everything that concerns himself. He does not chatter, he acts. Not a word does he know of what is going on in the world at large, but he knows very thoroughly what affects himself. (ROUSSEAU, 1995, p. 113)

To some extent, we find in Rousseau the ideal of an autonomous reason capable of judging, foreseeing, reasoning and calculating having in mind what interests it. Rousseau is not against rationality, but against the irrational ways in which it is presumed to be constituted. The fantasy would be one of the obstacles in the path to developing reason. This is how Rousseau presents the maxims of his treatise, which has as its basis attending to the real useful of children's needs, and not of those overcome by fantasy. The latter for Rousseau is not natural and one should not make concessions to it, insofar as through it the desires are multiplied infinitely, beyond the utility and reality proper to nature.

Evidently, we should not oppose in Rousseau rationality to nature, or rather, society to nature. In this sense, the natural and rationally determined experience is what leads to true freedom, not voluntariness.

In the *Émile*, the conscience that produces knowledge of itself, of nature and society, is removed from precepts, from what cannot be said clearly and distinctly, from what is constructed from the idols of fantasy and imagination. Although Rousseau's thinking diverges from that of Francis Bacon as to human nature and to the relation that must be established with nature in general, there are important approximations. Bacon (1979) envisages the task of knowledge and of the autonomy of reason as a struggle against the idols, which he represented as being four: idols of the tribe, idols of the cave, idols of the forum, and idols of the theater (aphorism XXXIX). The idols of the tribe are grounded in human nature itself, in the tribe itself or in the human species: "the human intellect is similar to a mirror reflecting unevenly the rays from things, thereby distorting and corrupting them" (aphorism XLI). The idols of the cave are those of men as individuals: due to each one's singular nature, due to education and to conversation with the others, due to the reading of books or to the influence of respected authorities, due to changes in moods and dispositions (aphorism XLII). The idols of the forum are those coming from the interchange and reciprocal association of individuals (aphorism XLIII). The idols of the theater stem from the various philosophical doctrines and from the vitiated rules of demonstration (aphorism XLIV).

Rousseau's thinking about nature is incompatible with what Francis Bacon calls the idols of the tribe, engendered in human nature itself. However, as to the other idols, relative to men as individuals in society, they also appear inside Rousseau's rhetoric as responsible for the deformation in Glauco's statue.

In developing the concept of autonomy, Rousseau comes close to the concept of

experience in modern scientific thinking, in which valuing the experience means to position oneself critically with respect to the knowledge before the Enlightenment, depicted as saturated with opinions and myths. Bacon (apud AGAMBEN, 2005), when comparing common experience with the rationally guided experience, says that:

[...] this kind of experience is nothing but a loose faggot, and mere groping in the dark, as men at night try all means of discovering the right road, whilst it would be better and more prudent either to wait for day or procure a light and then proceed. On the contrary the real order of experience begins by setting up a light, and then shows the road by it, commencing with a regulated and digested, not a misplaced and vague course of experiment, and thence deducing axioms, and from these axioms new experiments. (p. 25)

Common experience as a *loose faggot* that proceeds groping in the dark is far removed from the concept of experience described by Rousseau in the *Émile*, which refers rather to the search for a specific knowledge applicable to the infant world, having as its horizon the autonomy of reason.

The *Reveries of the solitary walker*, and not the *Émile*, would be more in line with this removal from such a regulated experience as proposed by Francis Bacon. Perhaps that is why, when dealing the concept of experience and childhood in the works of Montaigne and Rousseau, Agamben does not sight the *Émile*, but only a passage from the *Reveries*. In the selected excerpt, Rousseau recalls an accident he suffered that made him experience more than just an anticipation of death: an experience of birth. For Agamben, this narrative of Rousseau can be compared to a similar text present in Montaigne's *Essays*, written two hundred years before. In both narratives, in a moment of danger, the unconscious would have appeared

embryonically for a later elaboration of a theory of experience. Such theory of experience, however, is not centered on the cognizant subject, on consciousness, but would be more closely linked, to Agamben, to the idea of childhood as a new experience. The complexity of a theory of childhood interlinked with a theory of the end or decline of experience was analyzed by Benjamin, but certainly has its grounds in the discussions about the unconscious as considered by Agamben (2005):

[...] psychoanalysis shows us indeed that the most important experiences are those that belong not to the subject but to 'it' [Es]. The Id is not, however, deaf, as in Montaigne's fall; for now the limit of the experience has been turned around: it is no longer deathwards, but backwards towards infancy. In this inversion of boundaries, as also in the passage from the first to the third person, we must decipher the features of a new experience. (p. 51).

Émile is guided by an omniscient preceptor. When an adult, he himself should have the wisdom of the citizen of a new social contract, fairer and more promoter of freedom. We try here, nevertheless, to demonstrate that both Émile as a project, and his preceptor as the groundwork of an educator, are centered on the idea of the autonomy of reason and of the conscious individual who, for this reason, is free in a world that is not free. With respect to Émile, the readings are almost always focused on the prototype of the pupil in the educational methodology, and rarely on the omniscient preceptor. Would he not be the model of an enlightening rationality capable of deducing axioms and of moving forward with new procedures, as Bacon considered in his definition of experience?

What we want to say is that the *Émile* documents the decline of experience, and that it seeks an alternative to such decline, which itself has already been superseded. The subject of

knowledge, even when formed through nature, is still the subject of knowledge: who judges, foresees, and reasons, as stated by Rousseau.

When we recall Rousseau's thinking to speak of the end of childhood, either to denounce this fact, or to *salvage* some model of childhood, would we not be forgoing thinking about how is childhood conceived today? The conception of childhood is tied to that of experience. The concept of experience is problematic, both in Rousseau, in the *Émile* itself, and in relation to what today is understood by experience.

The valuation of experience in education became a kind of truism, and one of the pillars of the critique to education viewed under a traditional and conservative way. But it is not but the simple fact of emphasizing the importance of childhood experiences that education is progressive. Given the unanimity around this approach, valuing experience became itself a discourse that needs to be analyzed in a wider sense, confronting it with reality. Maria Terezinha Galuch (2007), reflecting on the concept of experience in Theodor Adorno, and researching with educators of early childhood education, noticed that the defense of experience appears usually as a pedagogical resource in which experimentation is used to verify and reinforce what has been transmitted in theory. The common argument is that children, when having sense and concrete experiences with given contents, learn more easily and quickly. Discussing the content in question, putting it into perspective and problematizing the relations between theory and practice are not within the horizon of this approach, which gives priority to experience as a strategy of stimulus-response.

Adorno (1993), in his *Minima moralia*, when reflecting about child play and the type of experience that the child has when playing, considers that:

The little wagons on wheels lead nowhere, and the tiny barrels on them are empty; but they keep face with its destination,

by neither practicing nor taking part in the process of the abstractions which level out that destination, but rather preserve them as allegories of what they specifically are. (p. 200)

More than just reproducing practice pure and simple, child play, for Adorno, has the potential to transform practice in praxis. This means that in her spontaneous activities, the child carries out exercises for the just life.

The child gesture, grounded on ephemerality and on simple manipulation as a specific manner of dealing with objects, is not related to the pedagogical concept of experience in which the idea is to scrutinize everything in the evaluation of teaching and learning.

These meanings and practices reveal a reduction of the critical meaning of experience, a meaning which is, first of all, of a critical self-reflection. Within the context of a process of teaching and learning mediated by the concrete experience with materials, experimentation pure and simple is what captivates children the most by the direct handling of substances such as earth, water, ink etc. But experience in the meaning given to it by Benjamin and Adorno requires the right amount of distance. That is to say, one must keep the primacy of the object, which does not mean an unrestricted immediacy. Some distancing is also necessary for the analysis of the simple doing. This holds both for the children involved and for the educators, and also for the very conception of education.

From the works of Adorno and Benjamin it is possible to establish an intrinsic relation between experience, emancipation and autonomy. If experience is simply regulated, just adaptive and reinforcing socially determined theories and practices, it cannot promote autonomy, and even less emancipation. The occultation of the negative element of experience, that is, of its moment of opposition to the predictable, banalizes its meaning, turning it into an adaptive strategy.

In Rousseau, observation as the starting point for children's education became a little contested paradigm. Observing the real need of children became a mandatory attitude for parents and pedagogues. The concept of childhood arises already full of mediations, and a pure, disinterested observation of it cannot be conceived. The look of an adult observing a child, discrete and silent as it may be, is charged with objective and subjective mediations which, to a large extent, not only assess what is being observed, but also form the object of their observation.

The hypothesis of the observation in Rousseau's educational theory cannot be sustained by the idea of a simple receptive look. To a large degree the preceptor, even when respecting education through nature, projects and constructs his *Émile*. The observation of the child, a kind of permanent listening, needs to be considered also from the standpoint of the observation. What is the intention of the educator? If it is necessary to observe in order to educate, it is necessary first to ask oneself about the meaning of education, insofar as these presuppositions direct the gaze of the observer.

Childhood seems to be to a large extent an empty place that is gradually filled by social representations and by the different manners in which children learn to deal with these representations.

The assumption of the observation of children as a means for education runs along the centuries, having in Rousseau one of its strongest defenders, and finding in Jean Piaget in the 20th century a whole structuralist theory to teach educators how to observe children in the different stages of their development.

Walter Benjamin in 1928 also argued for the observation of children in his anti-pedagogical attitude, considering that if this observation is centered on the adult, and considers the intellectual and moral superiority of the observer, "there is no good in a pedagogical love that is never conducted by the observation of child life itself" (2002, p. 115).

Also for Benjamin, as for Rousseau, education begins with observation. However, for the latter, there is the search for a teleology which can be theorized by an ulterior psychology of development. Benjamin defends an observation for which every action and every child gesture are turned into signs. In this respect, Benjamin exposes vigorously all his critique to the pedagogy and to the psychology of development, and even to the psychoanalysis of children that feeds, even if indirectly, on a Rousseauian perspective of childhood.

The kind of children observation defended by Benjamin finds signs in action and in child gestures to avoid looking for marks of the unconscious, of latencies, repressions, and censorships. According to him, as we can find in a text written in 1929, the bourgeois pedagogy has been gathered around two poles: psychology and ethics. Psychology inquires about the nature of the educated: the psychology of childhood, of adolescence. Ethics proposes the ends of education: the integral man, the citizen. For Benjamin (2002),

[...] the official pedagogy is the process of mutual adaptation between these two moments – the abstract natural predisposition and the chimeric ideal – and its progresses follow the orientation of substituting more and more cunning for violence. (p. 121)

The 1929 text, entitled *A communist pedagogy*, can be read from the ideological and theoretical opposition between a communist pedagogy and a bourgeois pedagogy. But it can also be read from the perspective of a dialectic of enlightenment. The cleavage that the bourgeois pedagogy attempts to resolve by substituting cunning for violence in an orthopedic manner, without discussing the natural predisposition and chimeric ideal of a redeemed mankind, even if such conciliation would be possible, is a problem pointed out by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1985), which refers to the limits of enlightenment.

For Benjamin (2002), psychology and ethics only conceptualize what he calls the “mutually complementary masks” (p. 122): on one side, the human, and on the other, the citizen, both of which come together in the subject “useful, socially reliable and conscious of his position” (p. 122).

An education that considers the observation of the child, according to Benjamin (2002), would not see this being simply as adaptable and adapted, but as something undergoing a process of emancipation:

The bourgeoisie sees its offspring as heirs; the disenfranchised, however, see them as support, as avengers or liberators. This is a drastic enough difference. Its pedagogical consequences are incalculable. (p. 122)

Despite the political choices, what Benjamin deals with goes far beyond historicizable or abstractly considered bourgeois or communist pedagogies, considered as pedagogical ideals. It is something inherent to the formative process: the necessary moment of adaptation, and the even more necessary and seldom reached moment of emancipation.

We consider, therefore, that these texts written by Benjamin in the 1920s are part of a wider conceptualization of what Adorno later discussed as formation (*Bildung*) and semi-formation constituting alongside Horkheimer the *Dialectic of enlightenment*.

Enlightenment, caught up in the myth of its omnipotence and of the disenchantment of the world, produced a formative process that relinquished emancipation, educating subjects for the mere adaptation that guarantees them only survival or ruin.

The presupposition of emancipation must be, if what is intended is a transformation through education, that which constructs the practice of observation. It is not a theory of childhood that must be confirmed in practice. The concrete way in which children deal with their own bodies and with the world they

inhabit points toward another reality, if we are willing to see it.

Overcoming psychology and ethics as poles of the education and as masks of a cleavage that is at the basis of the civilizing process cannot be done with a new pedagogical theory. There is a political choice that cannot simply be attached to education as a complement of it. Education, in order to be emancipatory, must be eminently political, which means not minimizing the contradictions.

When reflecting about the presupposition of observation as the beginning of education, it is important to recall the warning made by Horkheimer (1989) that:

The facts which our senses present to us are socially preformed in two ways: through the historical character of the object perceived and through the historical character of the perceiving organ. (p. 39)

Thus, it must be investigated how the historical and social factors act upon the way in which the subject perceives the objects and conducts observations of himself and of the other. It is not enough to take these perceptions as fundamental (or irreducible) facts from which the diagnostics, the theories, definitions, and educative practices will be constructed. The concept of observation appears, therefore, in a constellation in which observation, experience, and emancipation are articulated. The exhaustive repetition of these concepts as interchangeable words does not guarantee their effectiveness in a transforming education. Concepts conceived and applied under the perspective of a traditional theory have little or nothing to add to critical theory and practice.

In her *Childhood and machineries*, Maria Isabel Bujes (2002) shows how the National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education has been converted into an important tool technologically definable for the constitution of a norm-based early childhood education. The institutional machineries, in

their format of disciplinary technologies, are producers of child subjectivities and of capturing childhood. Even when they highlight discourses defending autonomy and the experience of the educated, always accompanied by observation and recording, this approach is clear:

The intentional intervention based on the observation of children's play, offering them adequate material as well as a space structured for playing, helps to enhance the imaginative, creative, and organizational competences of the children. (p. 29)

The observation and the recording constitute the main instruments at the teacher's disposal to support her practice. Through them the teacher can record contextually the learning processes of the children, the quality of the interactions established with other children, workers, and with the teacher, and follow the development processes, obtaining information about the experiences of the children from her institute. This observation and its recording give teachers a complete view of the children while revealing their peculiarities. (BRASIL, 1998, p. 58)

As to the experience, it appears in the Guidelines as something that is offered to the child:

[...] the teacher must plan and offer a wide variety of experiences that respond simultaneously to the demands of the group and to the individuality of each child. (p. 32)

Thus, playing is presented through various categories of experiences, which are differentiated by the use of the material or resources predominantly implicated.

Faced with the sociocultural and natural world which presents itself in a diverse and polysemic way, we have opted for a curriculum approach that seeks to instrumentalize the action of the teacher, highlighting the spheres of essential

experiences that must serve as reference for the educative practice, considering the peculiarities of the age group between zero and six years, and its specific forms of learning, curriculum categories were created to organize the contents to be developed in the early childhood education institutes. This organization aims at covering diverse and multiple spaces of development of knowledges and of different languages, the construction of identity, the socialization processes, and the development of autonomy of the children, offering in turn the learnings regarded as essential. The spheres are understood as domains or fields of action that give visibility to the main lines of the educative work, so that the teacher can organize her practice and reflect upon the width of experiences offered to the children. (p. 45)

It is not difficult to observe how the expression *autonomy* appears in a widely managed context in which rather than problematizing the polysemy of the formative experience, what is highlighted are the *curriculum approach*, the instrumentalization of the action of the teacher, the *essential* experiences and learning, and the *experience* offered by the teacher to the children.

In the text of the *Guidelines* (BRASIL, 1998), there is also a warning that its directions "do not represent a closed model defining a unique pattern of intervention", being, on the contrary, "indications and suggestions to give elements to the reflection and practice of the teacher" (p. 54). But it also adds:

Each mainline document contains general didactic directions and those specific to the various blocks of contents. In the general didactic directions conditions are made explicit with respect to: general principles of the mainline; organization of time, of space and of materials, observation, recording, and assessment. (p. 54)

The supposed flexibility of the document vanishes at the description of the guidelines that encompass, without room for maneuver, the whole educative process, seeking to rule it by scrutinizing it: organization of time, of space, of materials, within a context in which assessment is projected on observation, recording, reflection and teacher practice. Assessment, labeled as formative, appears in other terms as an

[...] instrument focused on reorienting the educative practice, taking place in a systematic and continuous manner, having as its main objective the improvement of the educative action. (p. 60)

In the text of the Guidelines, the word *experience* appears almost always associated to the training of professionals for early childhood education or to the grouping of children. In the rare instances in which the term appears associated directly to children's experience and to children, it is mentioned in the following way:

[...] education may help the development of the capacities for appropriation and knowledge of body, affective, emotional, aesthetic, and ethical potentialities under the perspective of contributing to the formation of happy and healthy children. (p. 55)

The possible contradictory moments, incomplete as to the continuous process of formation, are reduced to the contribution to the formation of happy and healthy children based on their help *to the development of the capacities for appropriation and knowledge of potentialities*. Within what has been agreed

to be called the *pedagogy of competences*, the assessment process does not appear as assessment of the educative process as a whole, but of its impact on what the Guidelines refer to the imaginative and organizational

Imaginative competences and *organizational competences* are not clearly explained in the body of the text, but being imagination subordinated to the term *competence*, in what do these expressions differ from the term *organizational competence*? We wish to recover a discussion present in Adorno which, in general terms, also appear in other thinkers associated to the critical theory, such as Benjamin and Herbert Marcuse (1997): the recognition of the element of barbarism and the affirmative character of culture.

The search for a complete administration of life in the name of an efficacy that seeks to manage every moment of every process, including educational ones, has been designated by researchers inspired in Michel Foucault and Benjamin as *biopolitics*. We wish here to emphasize the problematic relation that Horkheimer and Adorno identify between culture and administration. The contradictions between culture and administration would be only apparent. The very idea of culture would bring with it an affirmative element by uniting in a single concept multiple and contradictory dimensions.

The Guidelines in question here silence the discourse of education, instituting the discourse about education. The reading, the study, and the incorporation of this document into the daily school practice implies a critical attitude that actualize at each moment the transforming potentiality of concepts so often repeated, without being always considered in their emancipative character.

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Sueli Soares dos Santos Batista has a degree in History from the University of São Paulo (USP), and in Philosophy from the State University of Campinas (Unicamp); she has a Master degree and a PhD in Psychology of Learning and Human Development from the Institute of Psychology (USP); she carried out postdoctoral studies at the Faculty of Education of Unicamp, and is associated to the Paidéia Research Group (Faculty of Education, Unicamp), to the Center for Studies of Technology and Society (NETS, Fatec-Jundiaí), and to the Culture and Society Group (Fatec-Unesp). She conducts studies on the relation between technology, culture and education.