

Hannah Arendt, John Dewey, Confucius and Plato in dialogue on democracy education and the formation of the citizen

Hannah Arendt, John Dewey, Confúcio e Platão em diálogo sobre educação democrática e a formação do cidadão

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ABSTRACT

In the context of democratic crises, declining social trust, and profound transformations of global education under the impact of technology and globalization, returning to classical and modern foundations of educational philosophy has become increasingly urgent. This article conducts a systematic comparative study of Hannah Arendt's educational thought in dialogue with three major traditions: John Dewey's democratic pragmatism, Confucian thought represented by Confucius, and the classical political, educational philosophy of Plato. Through conceptual analysis of democracy, truth, political action, and the aims of education, the article argues that Hannah Arendt represents a "non-instrumental" approach to education that emphasizes adult responsibility for the common world. This approach stands in contrast to Dewey's reform-oriented pragmatism, differs fundamentally from Confucius's moral and hierarchical model of moral cultivation, and simultaneously inherits from and critically challenges Plato's epistemic elitism. The article clarifies foundational philosophical tensions within modern civic education and proposes a theoretical reference framework for educational reform in societies undergoing transformation.

KEYWORDS: Hannah Arendt; John Dewey; Confucius; Plato; philosophy of education; democracy; civic education.

RESUMO

No contexto de crises democráticas, declínio da confiança social e profundas transformações da educação global sob o impacto da tecnologia e da globalização, o retorno aos fundamentos clássicos e modernos da filosofia da educação tornou-se cada vez mais urgente. Este artigo realiza um estudo comparativo sistemático do pensamento educacional de Hannah Arendt em diálogo com três grandes tradições: o pragmatismo democrático de John Dewey, o pensamento confucionista representado por Confúcio e a política clássica e a filosofia da educação de Platão. Por meio da análise conceitual de democracia, verdade, ação política e os objetivos da educação, o artigo argumenta que Hannah Arendt representa uma abordagem “não instrumental” da educação que enfatiza a responsabilidade adulta pelo mundo comum. Essa abordagem contrasta com o pragmatismo reformista de Dewey, difere fundamentalmente do modelo moral e hierárquico de cultivo moral de Confúcio e, simultaneamente, herda e desafia criticamente o elitismo epistêmico de Platão. O artigo esclarece tensões filosóficas fundamentais na educação cívica moderna e propõe um quadro de referência teórico para a reforma educacional em sociedades em transformação.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Hannah Arendt; John Dewey; Confúcio; Platão; filosofia da educação; democracia; educação cívica.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education, ultimately, is not merely an activity of transmitting knowledge or training skills for the labor market, but is always bound up with a fundamental conception of the human being, social order, and the shared future of the political community. Throughout the history of thought, every model of education reflects a particular political and ethical choice: education aimed at maintaining an existing social order, liberating individuals from dependence, forming citizens for public life, or preserving a common world threatened by disintegration under conditions of modern crisis (Bast, 2019). For this reason, education is never a neutral domain; it is always a point of intersection between philosophy, politics, and culture. In the twentieth century, Hannah Arendt stands as one of the few thinkers who placed education at the center of the tense relationship between politics and the common world. In her essay *The Crisis in Education*, Arendt argues that education cannot be organized according to the logic of economics, nor reduced to an instrument of social reform or a means of realizing adult political projects. For her, education is first and foremost the responsibility of the adult generation toward the

common world it has inherited, and at the same time an act of protecting the capacity for new beginnings carried by those who are newly born. From this standpoint, Arendt offers a powerful critique of the instrumentalization of education in modern society, particularly models that treat schools as political laboratories or institutions for producing citizens according to predetermined templates (Nola and Irzik, 2005).

Arendt's position places her in a relationship of both dialogue and direct tension with the democratic, pragmatist educational tradition of John Dewey, one of the most influential philosophers of modern educational theory and practice. Dewey conceives education as a process of reconstructing experience, in which the school functions as a "miniature society" where children learn democracy through participation, cooperation, and problem-solving (Synytsia, 2020). For Dewey, education and social reform are intrinsically connected: education is the most important instrument for building a democratic society in the future. By contrast, Arendt warns that bringing education too close to politics risks turning children into instruments of projects for which they bear no responsibility, while simultaneously undermining the very common world that education is meant to preserve. Beyond this modern axis of dialogue, placing Hannah Arendt in comparison with classical traditions such as Confucianism and ancient Greek philosophy broadens the analytical horizon of education and citizenship. In Confucius's thought, education is primarily a path of moral self-cultivation aimed at forming the *junzi*, a person who lives rightly according to social roles and responsibilities. Education is closely bound to ritual, tradition, and hierarchy, oriented toward harmony and stability rather than political transformation. In relation to this position, Arendt exhibits both convergence, in her emphasis on adult responsibility and educational authority, and a fundamental rupture, insofar as she argues that tradition has been broken in the modern world and can no longer be transmitted as an immutable normative system.

Similarly, in Plato's philosophy, education occupies a central position in establishing the ideal political order. Plato conceives education as the path to truth and as a mechanism of selection determining who is worthy to rule. This model places epistemic truth above pluralistic political life and treats education as a means of serving an optimal political order (Turan, 2011). Hannah Arendt, while inheriting Plato's concern with the crisis of political life, sharply criticizes the identification of philosophical truth with political power. She thus redefines civic education as preparation for action, judgment, and dialogue in the public realm, rather than preparation for rule based on absolute truth. Against this background, the present article undertakes a systematic comparative analysis of Hannah Arendt's educational thought in dialogue with John Dewey, Confucius, and Plato. It aims to clarify fundamental differences in their understandings of democracy, tradition, truth, and the role of education

in forming the citizen. Specifically, the article addresses three main research questions: (1) How do Hannah Arendt and John Dewey differ in their approaches to democracy and the relationship between education and politics? (2) In comparison with Confucius, does Arendt's educational thought represent continuity with or rupture from moral, social tradition? (3) In critical dialogue with Plato, how does Arendt redefine the relationship between truth, politics, and civic education in a pluralistic modern society?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on Hannah Arendt in political philosophy has expanded significantly since the late twentieth century, particularly in response to renewed interest in totalitarianism, democratic crisis, and the decline of the public realm in modern societies. Major studies focus on core concepts in Arendt's thought such as action, the public realm, plurality, natality, and the experience of totalitarianism. Within this body of scholarship, Arendt is primarily approached as a political theorist and philosopher of action and freedom, rather than as an educational thinker in the strict sense (Zuckert, 2009). Although *The Crisis in Education* is widely recognized as an important text, in-depth studies of Arendt's philosophy of education remain relatively limited and fragmented. Most works treat education as a secondary theme within her broader theoretical system, rather than as an independent conceptual space concerned with authority, tradition, and responsibility for the common world. This has produced a significant gap, especially when Arendt's educational thought is placed in dialogue with other major educational traditions.

By contrast, John Dewey is widely regarded as a central figure in modern philosophy of education, with an extensive body of scholarship ranging from theory to practice. (Landord and Wadley, 2022). Studies on Dewey emphasize the relationship between education, democracy, and lived experience, viewing the school as a "miniature society" in which democratic values are formed through practice. Dewey is often praised for democratizing education, breaking with authoritarian pedagogical models, and emphasizing learner agency. At the same time, a critical strand of scholarship points to the instrumentalization of education in Dewey's thought, insofar as education becomes closely tied to social reform and political progress. Some scholars argue that this approach blurs the boundary between education and politics, turning schools into instruments for realizing adult social ideals. It is precisely at this point that Dewey's thought becomes the object of direct dialogue and critique from Hannah Arendt's position, although systematic comparative studies between the two remain relatively scarce.

Research on Confucius tends to focus on education as a mode of moral cultivation and maintenance of socio-political order. Studies analyze key concepts such as *ren* (humaneness), *li* (ritual), righteousness, and social hierarchy in shaping the *junzi* (Muyunda and Yue, 2022). Education in Confucianism is typically understood as the transmission of moral values and social norms to ensure harmony and stability rather than political transformation. Consequently, Confucius is rarely placed in direct dialogue with modern thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, particularly regarding the crisis of tradition and the rupture characteristic of modernity. Similarly, Plato is commonly studied in relation to education, truth, and ideal politics. Analyses focus on the philosopher, king model, education as the selection of souls, and epistemic stratification in *The Republic*. Plato is often criticized for elitism and for subordinating pluralistic political life to philosophical truth (Santas, 2007).. However, comparative studies between Plato and Arendt tend to concentrate on politics and truth, seldom extending to civic education as an independent analytical category.

Overall, existing scholarship on Hannah Arendt, John Dewey, Confucius, and Plato largely develops along separate trajectories, lacking a comprehensive comparative framework addressing education, democracy, and the formation of the citizen. Direct dialogues between Arendt and the other three thinkers remain fragmented, leaving insufficiently explored both points of convergence and fundamental ruptures. This article seeks to fill that gap by offering a systematic comparative analysis that clarifies the role of education in shaping political life and the public realm in modern society.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Hannah Arendt Education Between the World and Natality

"The reality of the world is therefore only assured because each of us shares it with other people; otherwise, nothing would guarantee that the objects seen are in fact arranged in the world or that the experience one has conceals rather than reveals." (Dias, 2026, p. 19)

In Hannah Arendt's thought, the human condition is defined not primarily by reason, labor, or civic status, but by natality, the capacity to begin anew. Every human birth carries the potential to interrupt existing orders and to open possibilities previously unknown to the common world. From this premise, Arendt develops a distinctive conception of education, clearly separating it from both economic labor and political action. For Arendt, education is not the "production" of citizens according to an ideal model, nor an instrument for realizing adult social or political projects. Rather, education is an intermediary activity through which adults introduce children into a preexisting world while

simultaneously protecting the capacity for renewal that children bring with them. Educational responsibility therefore rests with the adult generation, those who already belong to the common world and bear responsibility for its continued existence (Walsh, 2011).

A central argument in Arendt's thought is the distinction between education and politics. Politics is the realm of action, where equals appear in the public sphere to speak, deliberate, and act. Children, lacking the capacity to bear political responsibility, must not be drawn directly into political logic. When education becomes politicized, when schools are turned into sites for social experimentation or instruments of human engineering, education loses its core function and enters into crisis. Arendt is particularly critical of educational models that grant children complete "self-governance." In her view, the abdication of adult authority is not a manifestation of freedom but an evasion of responsibility for the common world. Children are placed in the impossible position of managing a world they neither understand nor are responsible for, leading to the collapse of both education and authority. Education thus requires a distinctive form of authority, not authoritarian imposition, but responsible guardianship of both the world and the child against the pressures of adult politics and society.

3.2. John Dewey Education as Democratic Experience

In contrast to Arendt's cautious stance, John Dewey develops a conception of education closely intertwined with democracy and social reform. Within Dewey's pragmatist philosophy, education is understood as a continuous process of reconstructing experience, through which individuals learn to adapt, cooperate, and solve social problems. Dewey does not regard democracy merely as a political institution or electoral system, but as a way of life formed and sustained through everyday practices. Schools, in his view, should function as "miniature societies" in which children learn democracy by participating in shared activities, dialogue, responsibility, and problem-solving. Education thus does not merely prepare for future citizenship; it is itself a democratic practice (Bruno-Jofré, 2019).

A key feature of Dewey's thought is the blurring of boundaries between education and social reform. Dewey believes that society can be gradually improved through education oriented toward democratic values, justice, and rationality. Schools are not external to society but integral to its transformation. From this perspective, education has a pronounced instrumental character, it serves as a means for realizing desired social ideals. This is precisely where Dewey diverges fundamentally from Arendt. While Dewey places faith in education as a driver of social reform, Arendt warns that instrumentalizing education turns children into means for adult political ends. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Dewey does not advocate ideological indoctrination; rather, he emphasizes

openness, experimentation, and lived experience as the foundations of democratic education. The difference between the two thinkers lies not in their commitment to democracy, but in their understanding of the relationship between education, politics, and intergenerational responsibility. "In this sense, the teaching of philosophy is presented in an artificial, moral, and almost vocational logic, contributing ideologically to the undervaluation of its teaching, pedagogically reducing it to instrumental, universalizing, timeless, and functional precepts of thought." (Santos Junior, 2026, p. 13).

3.3. Confucius Education Morality and Social Order

Within the Confucian tradition, education occupies a central position in forming moral persons and maintaining social order. Unlike Arendt and Dewey, Confucius does not develop an educational theory directly linked to democracy or political reform, but focuses on personal cultivation within a web of communal and hierarchical relationships. Education, for Confucius, is the path to forming the junzi, a person who lives in accordance with proper roles and obligations within society (Ruhal et al., 2024). Concepts such as ren (humaneness), li (ritual), righteousness, and wisdom function not only as personal virtues but also as foundations of political and social order. Through education, these values are transmitted across generations, ensuring stability and harmony. A defining feature of Confucian education is its emphasis on moral authority and tradition. The teacher is not merely a transmitter of knowledge but a moral exemplar. Education is inseparable from ritual and social hierarchy, reflecting an ordered vision of society in which each individual occupies a defined place. From a modern perspective, this model is often criticized as conservative and resistant to change. Yet within its historical context, Confucian education played a crucial role in establishing a political order grounded in moral cultivation rather than coercion.

In dialogue with Hannah Arendt, both thinkers stress the importance of adult authority in education. Their divergence lies in their understanding of tradition: for Confucius, tradition is a foundation to be preserved; for Arendt, tradition in the modern world has been ruptured, requiring education to introduce the world without relying on fixed normative templates.

3.4. Plato Education Truth and Politics

In ancient Greek philosophy, Plato constructs one of the most influential educational models, tightly binding education to truth and ideal politics. For Plato, education is not merely personal development but the foundation of the just political order. Only those who attain knowledge of the Forms are fit to rule (Ramsey, 2009). In *The Republic*, education is designed as a process of selection and

stratification, distinguishing those capable of grasping truth from those confined to opinion (doxa). The philosopher, king model reflects the belief that political power must be guided by philosophical truth. Education thus serves the construction of an ideal political order. It is precisely this identification of truth with politics that becomes the target of Hannah Arendt's critique. Arendt argues that politics is not the domain of absolute truth, but of opinion, dialogue, and plurality. When philosophical truth is imposed upon political life, the public realm is extinguished, and education becomes a tool for legitimizing power rather than preparing individuals for freedom. In critical dialogue with Plato, Arendt redefines civic education not as preparation for rule based on truth, but as preparation for action and judgment in a pluralistic world without absolute political truths.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Hannah Arendt and John Dewey Two Conceptions of Democracy and Education

Comparative analysis shows that Hannah Arendt and John Dewey share a crucial premise: democracy cannot survive without education. Yet this shared commitment quickly gives way to fundamental differences in how they understand the relationship between education, politics, and historical time. For Dewey, education and democracy are continuous and internally connected. Schools function as social microcosms in which democratic values are both taught and enacted through experience, cooperation, and problem-solving. Education is simultaneously a means and an expression of democracy. Early participation in democratic practices is seen as essential to forming future democratic citizens. Democracy thus has a future-oriented character, tied to reform and continuous progress. By contrast, Arendt is deeply cautious about merging education with politics. She argues that politicizing education transforms children into instruments of adult social projects. Education must temporarily stand apart from politics, not to reject democracy, but to protect both children and the common world from erosion. Children are not yet political agents; they must be introduced into an existing world rather than charged with transforming it.

This divergence reflects two contrasting temporal orientations. Dewey views education from the perspective of the future: education today builds a better democratic society tomorrow. Arendt emphasizes the present and the past: education is adult responsibility for the existing world, which must be preserved long enough for new beginnings to occur. Democracy, in this view, cannot rely solely on reformist hope but must be anchored in intergenerational responsibility. From the standpoint of civic education, the tension between Arendt and Dewey reveals an irreducible conflict between education as an instrument of social reform and education as a space for preserving the common world. Rather than

mutually exclusive, these approaches represent two poles of a conceptual spectrum, compelling policymakers to carefully consider the boundary between democratic practice and protection from political instrumentalization.

4.2. Hannah Arendt and Confucius Tradition and Modernity

Comparison between Hannah Arendt and Confucius reveals a striking convergence despite profound historical and cultural differences. Both oppose the abdication of educational authority and emphasize the decisive role of adults in forming the younger generation. Education, in both systems, cannot be fully delegated to children or to spontaneous social mechanisms. Yet this similarity conceals a fundamental divergence regarding tradition. For Confucius, tradition constitutes the moral and social foundation that education must preserve and reproduce. Education forms the *junzi*, who understands and enacts proper ethical norms, ritual practices, and hierarchical relations. Social order is secured not through political coercion but through moral cultivation.

Arendt, by contrast, begins from the diagnosis that tradition has been ruptured in modernity. Normative frameworks that once guided action no longer possess binding authority, preventing education from functioning simply as transmission. In this context, education's task is not to impose immutable traditional values but to introduce children into a common world in crisis while safeguarding their capacity for renewal. Tradition, if it survives, exists as an object of interpretation rather than a reproducible template. This divergence produces two conceptions of modernity. Confucius does not confront a world of broken tradition; his educational model aims at stability and harmony. Arendt reflects within modernity, where the collapse of tradition raises urgent questions about adult responsibility for the world. Education, in her view, is simultaneously preservative and open-ended, incapable of relying on a closed value system. The comparison suggests that while Confucian thought offers a model emphasizing moral authority and continuity, Arendt situates this model within the tensions of modernity. This insight is especially relevant for societies shaped by Confucian heritage yet operating within globalized modern contexts, where education cannot simply reproduce inherited orders.

4.3. Hannah Arendt and Plato Politics Truth and Civic Education

The critical dialogue between Hannah Arendt and Plato highlights one of the deepest tensions in political and educational philosophy: the relationship between truth and politics. Plato places education at the core of his ideal political project, grounding political authority in knowledge of universal truth.

Only those who grasp truth are fit to rule, and education functions as a selective process identifying such elites. Arendt accepts Plato's concern with political decay but rejects the solution of equating philosophical truth with political authority. For her, politics is not the realm of absolute truth but of opinion (doxa), where equal individuals appear, speak, act, and persuade one another. When philosophical truth is imposed upon politics, the public realm collapses, and education becomes a mechanism of legitimization rather than preparation for freedom.

"The difference with Plato is decisive: Socrates did not want to educate the citizens so much as he wanted to improve their doxai" [...] For him [Plato], each citizen would have to be sufficiently articulate to show their opinion in its truthfulness. In this view, the philosopher has a public function [...] (Aguiar, 2026, p. 11).

From this perspective, Arendt reconceptualizes civic education. Education does not aim to produce philosopher-kings or truth-bearers, but individuals capable of judgment, action, and responsibility in a pluralistic world. The citizen, in Arendt's sense, is not one who is right, but one who can appear in public and participate in political life through speech and action. This comparison reveals a shift from a model of political education grounded in absolute truth to one grounded in plurality and responsibility. Whereas Plato seeks political stability through knowledge, Arendt seeks political freedom through action and dialogue. Civic education thus ceases to be a pathway to power and becomes preparation for shared life in a world without metaphysical guarantees.

5. CONCLUSION

"Political resistance against oppression, the terror of violence, and authoritarian silencing appears as necessary and advances both as a right and as a duty. It is a right because every human being is entitled to the prerogative of resisting any situation that affronts their dignity." (SILVA; SILVA, 2026, p. 22).

Comparing Hannah Arendt with John Dewey, Confucius, and Plato demonstrates that education consistently occupies a zone of tension between tradition and innovation, truth and politics, preservation and reform. Hannah Arendt offers a distinctive perspective: education is not meant to solve all social problems, but to sustain a common world robust enough for new generations to begin anew. This approach holds particular significance for societies in transition, where education is often instrumentalized for short-term economic or political goals. Re-reading Arendt in dialogue with Dewey, Confucius, and Plato opens the possibility of developing an educational philosophy that respects tradition while safeguarding freedom and plurality in modern life.

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