

# **Learning for and from the city: the role of education in urban cohesion**

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## **Abstract**

Learning is a central factor for the dynamics of social and spatial cohesion. Moreover, educational institutions are relevant for the reproduction or transformation of social relations by conveying values and practices that either sustain or contradict the dominant societal structures. Learning is also crucial for the enhancement of urban governance, insofar as it is associated with the promotion of critical thinking and access to information. This paper discusses the issue of access to education in relation to social inequality and explores three main challenges related to its role in urban development: innovation and creativity; citizenship; and cultural diversity. The last section focuses on two particular topics that closely link education/learning and the city: local learning communities - learning in and from the city; and the role of educational institutions in socially inclusive urban regeneration processes - learning for the cohesive city.

**Keywords:** education; knowledge; learning; social cohesion; social innovation;  
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## 1. Introduction

Education and training consist of the practices and institutional configurations that involve the imparting, acquisition and construction of knowledge, i.e., structured information about the world, including facts, representations, meanings and values. Education is usually regarded as the broader concept of the two, in that it may refer to the imparting and acquisition of any kind of knowledge (e.g. know-what, know-why), whereas training is typically used to refer to knowledge of an applied nature (know-how). Both are inextricably bound with the further concept of *learning*, which reflects an acknowledgement of the inherently active nature of the process whereby knowledge is produced. Depending on the theoretical perspective, learning and knowledge have been regarded either as the product of a one-sided social relation in the context of which the learner seeks to reproduce what is taught by the teacher, or as the result of an interactive relation whereby the learner constructs knowledge with the support of various educational agents (teachers, television, books, internet, etc.) and in various ways (observing, questioning, debating, etc.) (Glaserfeld, 1995; Wilson, 1996).

In everyday usage, we tend to use the concepts of education and training in a narrower sense, to refer to the development of knowledge which fulfils somewhat more demanding criteria: in particular, the criterion

of taking place within institutions validated through official scientific and pedagogical norms. This of course promotes the social recognition of certain types of education, learning and knowledge to the detriment of others, and in itself provides clear evidence of the political character of the realities conveyed by these concepts. Indeed, learning and education are important constitutive elements of power relations, insofar as they can serve to advance and reinforce the extant economic, social and cultural structures. At the same time, however, education and learning can also serve as a means to transform power relations through the dissemination and promotion of information, practices and values that do not conform to, and may even contradict or subvert hegemonic knowledge (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970).

Reflecting upon the role of education and learning in socio-spatial cohesion, in the context of a holistic understanding of the latter as a *problématique* (Novy et al, this issue), forces us to think beyond the mere ‘inclusive-liberal’ mobilisation of education to tackle social exclusion by providing individuals with added skills that are recognised by the dominant institutions in society (particularly the labour market). It is true that, especially from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, success in formal education has functioned as a crucial vehicle for social mobility. However, a holistic understanding of socio-spatial cohesion requires us to acknowledge, and delve upon, the fact that education and learning are also decisive in shaping the society in dynamic collective ways.

While far from novel in terms of theoretical and philosophical production, the latter understanding of the role of learning and education in socio-spatial cohesion has been largely absent from most mainstream, large-scale research projects undertaken in Europe in recent times, particularly those funded by the European Union's Framework Programmes (FPs). That was the conclusion reached in a study recently conducted and which reviewed 33 research projects supported by the various FPs between 1994 and 2006 in the education domain (André et al, 2009). Based on a typological analysis, this study identified four main types of research, which have focused on the following sub-topics: i) education and training for the labour market ('labour' type); ii) institutional views on education and training ('institutional' type); iii) creative and communicational learning ('innovative learning' type); and iv) learning processes focused on the urban context ('urban' type).

The research projects included in the 'labour' type are characterised by instrumental concerns with the economic consequences of learning, typified by the centrality of the concept of 'human capital' (Kokosalakis, 2000; Budría and Díaz-Giménez, 2007; Budría and Pereira, 2007). They involve an understanding of learning skills as tools to enhance individual integration, particularly in the labour market, and institutional effectiveness. In such a perspective, learning is basically seen as a process to integrate people into society, and social cohesion is only an individual concern. In

turn, in the ‘institutional’ type, the perspective on learning is mainly concerned with the roles played by teachers and formal educational institutions: learning is associated with the formal school environments in which conventional learning processes take place, and the analysed European research projects tend to focus mostly on the consequences of various strategies and institutional configurations within a rather narrow understanding of learning and knowledge (Guile and Griffiths, 2001; Glastra et al, 2004). The ‘innovative learning’ type emphasises the creative and communicational dimensions of learning, which is regarded from a significantly less ‘conventional’ perspective (by focusing on the active and collective dimensions of learning, as well as on the community as a paramount source of useful knowledge). This perspective tends to focus substantially on the potential role of new technologies in this context, while also being concerned with issues of citizenship, diversity and tolerance (Hakkarainen et al, 1999; Lindblad et al, 2002; Block, 2004). Finally, the ‘urban’ type has a specific focus on the social aspects of learning in the context of urban environments. The research undertaken from this perspective has strongly emphasised the city and the community as sites of knowledge production and acquisition, and explored the linkages between learning processes, exclusionary dynamics and socially creative strategies (Bourdieu, 1984; Charles, 2007; Tierolf and Nederland, 2008).

It is clear that the latter ‘type’ of research perspective, which is closest to our own holistic understanding of the role of education and learning in socio-spatial cohesion, forms very much a minority; no more than two large-scale research projects (Critical and Katarsis) were found to have adopted a perspective linking education and learning with (urban) social cohesion in a sense close to that endorsed in this paper. By and large, and not surprisingly in an era of ‘inclusive neoliberalism’ (Porter and Craig 2004), the instrumental-individuation view of education and learning has predominated in recent research.

It need not be so, however: this paper argues that a research agenda focusing more centrally and explicitly on the relationships between education/learning and socio-spatial cohesion, and which can frame more progressive public policies, is both possible and desirable.

## **2. Access and inequalities**

School attendance in developed countries is close to its theoretical maximum, i.e. almost 100% of the children and the vast majority of young people actually attend school; on average, approximately 82% of the teenagers aged 15 to 19 attend school in OECD countries (OECD, 2009). This indicator has undergone an impressive growth and between 1995 and

2007 increased from 74 to 82% (OECD 2009). This increase has been particularly pronounced in a number of Eastern and Southern European countries (Hungary, Czech Republic, Greece and Portugal), which constitutes a substantial improvement in terms of European territorial cohesion. Seemingly, one may conclude that the improvement of access to education has been on a very successful path in developed countries. However, this general picture of equality of opportunities conceals huge inequalities, namely affecting those who did or do not have access to schooling, such as the older economically active population in Southern European countries or the immigrant population. In 2007, the unemployment rate of the population with an educational level below secondary schooling in OECD countries was actually three times as large as that for the group with tertiary education. In addition, “the earnings premium for tertiary education is substantial in most countries and exceeds 50% in 17 out of 28 countries” (OECD, 2009, p. 137).

Also worthy of note is the impact of gender and ethnicity in terms of educational performance (Crul, 2008). Data from the 2006 PISA Database (a cross-country profile of 15-year-old students) clearly shows the differences in school performance between native students and those with an immigrant background<sup>1</sup>, as well as gender differences that reproduce traditional patterns, such as men performing better in mathematics and science and women displaying better results in humanities.

The challenges posed by education and learning with regard to social cohesion are not limited to the gaps and differences pointed out above. The societies of developed countries currently face complex problems concerning their educational systems and, especially, their educational models (Green et al, 2006). On the one hand, scientific and technical knowledge evolves very quickly, causing the rapid obsolescence of the contents of the curricula adopted in schools and universities. On the other hand, the labour market (particularly its more highly skilled segments) imposes the need for constant learning and demands skills, such as autonomy and creativity, which traditional educational systems hardly provide. As a consequence, the improvement in the general levels of access to education does not curb social exclusion as effectively as in the past (Murie and Musterd, 2004).

The capacity of countries and cities to overcome these threats basically depends on the fulfilment of three conditions (Gradstein and Justman, 2002): investment in public education; the participation of communities in the design of educational programmes; and the development of a culture of schooling and learning among those social groups that largely ignore or reject the role of education in terms of empowerment potential.

Another crucial threat that is closely related to the issue of urban cohesion concerns the profiling of schools. Generally speaking, it is clear that in the poorest quarters of many cities 'black schools' tend to proliferate

(Whitty, 2001) – ‘black’ insofar as they face multiple problems of social exclusion risks and also because they tend to concentrate immigrant students. Most of these schools are locked in a vicious circle of disadvantage, such that the main challenge often consists simply of controlling and preventing violence, rather than of developing innovative learning methods (as in public or private schools in middle- or upper-class urban quarters). As we will discuss below, the family environment strongly conditions the development of personal, social and scientific capacities due to the role of inherited social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Despite the supposed role of public schooling in compensating for social disadvantage and promoting social mobility, the effect of the family context remains very powerful. In addition, the local environment can either mitigate or strengthen these social disadvantages through the various effects that the places where people live exert upon their future social careers (Forrest and Kearns, 2001; Florida, 2008).

Moreover, the prevailing socio-political models decisively influence both the quality of public schooling and what the most highly-valued skills in society are. As an example, neoliberal orientations favour competition and summative assessment from an early age, to the detriment of critical thinking or teamwork strategies. At the university level, these orientations are associated with the championing of individual entrepreneurship and the drive to disseminate ideas and approaches imported from management and

business administration. By contrast, cooperation and participation are clearly undervalued.

Within the context of what has been variously referred to as the age of information, information and communication technologies (ICT), especially the internet, have strong and controversial potential impacts in education and learning processes. On the one hand, the discussion has revolved around the possibility of regarding ICT as a set of instruments with the potential capacity to reduce inequity (e.g. by eliminating the costs associated with spatial distance via e-learning) but also as something which in itself is not able to significantly transform the underlying structural inequalities that characterize contemporary societies. This is something which has already been noted by authors such as Sutton (1991) or Woolgar (2002), who suggest that the use of ICT in different social contexts is more likely to contribute to reproducing previously existent inequalities than to curb them.

This acknowledgement has fostered a specific line of research that is concerned with digital inclusion but also with marginalization and exclusion from the digital realm, i.e. the digital divide (Norris, 2001; Graham, 2002). Usually, the digital divide is regarded as being linked to the existence of barriers to both physical and social/institutional access to ICT, i.e. the lack of access to computers and internet connections, on the one hand, and limitations in terms of the skills allowing one to make a proper use of

technology (e.g. literacy, social resources, etc.), on the other. However, from a critical perspective, Warschauer (2002) has suggested that the bipolar understanding of the digital divide fails to recognize the fact that there is a dialectical relation between ICT and society. In terms of education and training, this means that without proper human and social resources (solid institutional arrangements, coherent educational strategies and models, etc.), the mere fact that learning environments provide physical devices and infrastructure does not necessarily lead to an enhancement of knowledge and skills development. The converse is also true: the specific set of informational skills that are necessary to deal with many of the challenges and problems posed by contemporary societies require the existence of a set of reliable ICT devices and cannot depend solely on human and social resources.

As education and training frequently occur outside institutionalized formal contexts, in tacit, unregulated and fluid ways, it is important to seek to understand the various impacts exerted by the ICT upon social relations. On the one hand, some have suggested that the internet provides a privileged arena for people to interact, form new social ties and relationships, and build virtual communities. On the other hand, its use is considered as something which promotes a sense of isolation and reduces face-to-face interpersonal contacts. A more nuanced understanding is that provided by Katz and Rice (2002), who suggest that both types of social

relations influence each other, by promoting synergies across media and between mediated and unmediated activities. Both utopian and dystopian discourses on the use of internet have been put forth, giving rise to what these authors have called a *syntopia*. Literally meaning ‘joint/shared place’, the term reflects the concept of a place where social interaction occurs without a previously-defined outcome. Hence, the social use of the internet can promote positive interactions and social networking, as well as isolation and other socially harmful consequences. Still, at the local scale of the neighborhood, a number of experiences (e.g. Minnesota’s e-Democracy initiative, Vivre le Marais! in Paris, the e-Re@l employability network in Lisbon, etc.) do seem to suggest that ICT can play an important role in many socio-urban processes by enhancing decentralization and delocalization while promoting local development, thus strengthening local communities through the aforementioned synergies with virtual communities.

### **3. Key issues concerning the relation between education/learning and urban social cohesion**

#### **3.1. Innovation and creativity**

From the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, institutionalised educational models have stressed two main knowledge domains – literacy and numeracy – and

promoted conformity as the main competency of students. This educational model, which has evolved in pace with the development of industrial economies, has produced millions of workers ready to undertake routine tasks and conform to rules. Only the elites have been able to enjoy the benefits of professional autonomy, the capacity to decide and the possibility of being creative (Bourdieu, 1984).

However, this mainstream view of education has been confronted, especially in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, by alternative visions that have sought to shift the focus from the needs of the economic system to social development goals. Important social innovations inspired by these alternative visions, such as learner-centred education or the fostering of empowerment through the promotion of autonomous decision-making, have been introduced in some contexts – processes that have been characterised by Chambon et al. (1982) as ‘tiny revolutions’ with a huge potential in terms of bringing about social change. The Freinet pedagogical methods in France, the ‘modern school’ proposed by Francesc Ferrer in Catalonia and the practices inspired by the ideas of Paulo Freire in Brazil and Latin America constitute the main references in terms of educational alternatives and innovative experiences until the 1970s (Freire, 1987).

Another very important contribution is that of the American School of Pragmatism and, in particular, the ideas of John Dewey (1997). Dewey was a proponent of *experiential education* based on active learning and on the

interrelationship between the teacher and the student. The school was regarded as the central institution of modern democratic societies, by 'providing citizens with the skills and knowledge necessary for political participation' (Rury, 2002, p. 144), such as tolerance, fair-play, critical discussion of social issues and respect for the rights of others.

Incorporated in many pedagogical programs since the 1970s, the theory of constructivism developed by Jean Piaget may be considered as the single most important contribution to the promotion of creativity and innovation in the context of learning processes: learners are regarded as active agents who construct new knowledge from their own experiences and representations of the world.

In the 1960s and 1970s, these various perspectives on learning – which ascribe an active role to the student and are actively committed to social change – found a particularly fertile ground in urban settings, where the possibilities in terms of individual freedom and equal opportunities are in general considerably greater.

In the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the emergence and diffusion of ICT produced relevant innovations in the field of education and training (Abbott, 2001; Barajas, 2003) – not merely in a technological sense but also in terms of social innovation. Television and computers compelled teaching methods and contents to change and, on occasion, posed significant challenges to some of the main pillars of education systems. Distance

learning, e-learning and virtual learning communities amounted to some relevant achievements in terms of social innovation and socio-territorial cohesion in this context.

While maintaining the focus of education models on the needs of the economic system, the knowledge-based society did introduce some significant changes to education and training, by putting innovation and creativity at the core of pedagogical aims. Post-industrial economies need people who can easily communicate, work in teams and think creatively (Robinson, 2001). The rapid changes undergone by the labour market require flexible curricula based on transferable skills, which implies developing the students' capacity to deal with new problems and situations (Cropley, 2001). In this new context of the knowledge-based society, creative thinking and imagination are essential not only in order to design appropriate solutions, but also in order to be able to formulate critical problems that often go unrecognised. 'Creative and cultural education are not subjects in the curriculum: they are general functions of education' (Robinson, 1999, p. 101).

In line with the increasing drive to promote creative forms of learning, artistic education and artistic expression have come to play an increasingly important role in school curricula. This perspective argues that the arts render learning experiences more meaningful by increasing individual and collective engagement, and that artistic expressions help

communication not only between different cultural groups, but also at the individual level, by facilitating the expression of personal values and beliefs (Green, 1995; Fiske, 1999; Bono, 2008, André et al. 2009). More recently, the popularity of the concept and strategy of creative learning were further enhanced in the context of the possibility of fostering the emergence of local creative strategies in the cities (Gertler and Vinodrai, 2004).

### **3.2. Citizenship**

Citizenship is unarguably a polysemic concept, i.e. it has various meanings and several constitutive dimensions (Mouffe, 1992; Engin and Turner, 2002; Heater, 2004). Still, this complexity can be organised around two intertwined spheres of understanding: i) the relations between the members of a community and its spatial-political entity of reference; and ii) the relations of mutual support and solidarity that exist among such members because of a collective cultural identity and a shared sense of community. Whereas the former dimension is, to a certain extent, linked to the geographical notions of scale and place, the later refers mainly to socio-cultural relations established between individuals.

If we consider the arguments put forward by Kalberg (1993), it is possible to distinguish three periods, each one of them with a particular socio-spatial configuration. Whereas in the pre-modern period, citizenship was associated with such socio-spatial units as the Greek polis or the

medieval village ('bourg'), the emergence of the nation-state is the defining feature of the modern period, when citizenship became intrinsically related to the national scale. The post-modern period has witnessed the emergence of new socio-spatial configurations and multi-scalar levels of citizenship. In the modern as well as post-modern periods, the school has played a crucial role in the (re)construction of citizenship by fostering the attachment of young people to the societies and multiscalar networks of which they are a part.

As Mitchell (2003, p. 387) puts it, 'the contemporary citizen of the twenty-first century is a member of a deterritorializing state'. This reflects two fundamental structural changes. On the one hand, the fact that the modern nation-state has been waning away while, at the same time, the regional and neighbourhood/local community (e.g. communitarian citizenship) scales, as well as the supra-national scale (e.g. cosmopolitan citizenship), have become more important (Santos, 2002; Davies, 2006; García, 2006; Osler and Starkey, 2003). On the other hand, the ever growing mobility of people through migration processes, which increases the pressure upon socio-cultural systems by posing new challenges to the construction of alterity, have also become more relevant (Carvalhais, 2006). In order to tackle the challenges posed by these new socio-spatial configurations, education for citizenship should seek to incorporate these changes within a framework which allows both theoretical understanding

and practice. Education needs to stress the role of space and place – in other words, it has to take into account that the exercise of citizenship in the society of the 21st century is strongly dependent upon what Klein and Laurin (2005, p. 240) have called ‘territorial conscience’, that particular set of intellectual tools allowing individuals to identify the dialectic relations between local and global processes (e.g. economic, political, social, cultural, environmental) (González, 2007, p. 30). Hence, the urban space, which is regarded as a foremost arena in the context of these processes, should also be seen as an appropriate environment for education processes to take place. It allows for an expansion of the possibilities found within the postmodern polis (i.e. public sphere), as it promotes interpersonal relations with the ‘other’ while at the same time fostering personal reflexivity.

### **3.3. Diversity and interculturality**

The issue of immigration in Europe has become the issue of post-migration. In fact, the trend towards the settlement of immigrant families, alongside the changes in the demographic composition of immigrant populations (larger presence of women, children and teenagers), have strongly contributed to centring the debates around the issue of the social integration of immigrant families (Castles and Miller, 1999). The process of permanent settlement of immigrants is responsible for the increasing cultural diversity of European societies and has been challenging the old

paradigms of uniformity and homogeneous cultural values. In addition, the growing number of young descendants of immigrants in the host societies poses a series of specific challenges to the institutions – schools, employment organization, etc. - of those societies. All things considered, the permanent presence of immigrants and their offspring and the cultural diversification of European countries, especially their cities, have led to two major challenges: one related to the accommodation of cultural differences and the need to promote inter-cultural dialogue, the other to the process of specific disadvantages experienced by immigrants and especially their offspring (e.g. language proficiency) in the destination societies (Rex, 1985).

The lack of formal cultural resources prevents immigrant parents and their children from fully mastering the educational codes used in the schools of the host societies (Crul, 2008; Batalha, 2004). In addition, the lack of economic resources often requires that parents work longer hours and prevents them from systematically monitoring their children's progress at school. Other authors also stress the role of ethnic issues such as the families' cultural background and specific co-ethnic social networks in this process (Lindo, 1995; Modood, 2003). In line with these perspectives, the concentration of immigrants' children in the aforementioned "black schools" is also regarded as contributing to poorer school performances (Crul, 2008).

Most of the answers to these problems have been found within the principles of interculturality, e.g. the promotion of communication and positive interaction between the various cultural groups present in society. The development of the notion of interculturality has been more closely associated to the francophone world than to the anglo-saxon one, as demonstrated by the contributions of Clanet (1985) or Perroti (1994), and has been responsible for the emergence of a whole new line of thought in the pedagogy domain, namely intercultural pedagogy. The institutionalisation of the notion of interculturality in the 1970s in France or in the early 1990s in Spain and Portugal took place within the framework of new education policies that sought to foster competences in the cultural diversity domain (Rocha-Trindade, 1993; Rafoni, 2003).

The practical implementation of these intercultural principles in schools has often taken the form of compensation policies that specifically target non-autochthonous children and seek to tackle their lack of linguistic and formal social competences. Specific courses on the host countries' language or the use of cultural mediators are two of the strategies that have been implemented in schools across several countries. In some, such as the Netherlands or Germany, the principles of multiculturalism and the belief in the likelihood of the eventual return of the immigrants' offspring to their parents' countries of origin framed a pedagogical line that stated the

advantages of learning elements of the original language and culture of the immigrants' parents as part of school curricula.

More recently, these multicultural perspectives have been strongly criticized as something that has limited the effective integration of the children with non-autochthonous backgrounds, leading to fractures in society that challenge social cohesion . Therefore, since the mid-1990s, there has been a shift towards neo-assimilationist policies in a number of Central and Northern European countries, which has included such measures as compulsory integration courses for non-EU immigrants, including training in the host country's language and culture, or the withdrawal of support to the promotion of the languages and cultures of the countries of origin.

All in all, the instrumental implementation of intercultural policies in schools has first and foremost sought to tackle the specific disadvantages faced by immigrants and their offspring, rather than aiming for the effective promotion of intercultural dialogue. Nevertheless, interesting experiences have been implemented in many EU countries in such areas as the promotion of intercultural contacts in schools, conflict and cultural mediation, student exchange programmes between schools in the home and host countries, or the introduction of courses on the languages of origin countries that are part of the general school curricula and therefore open to every student. Unfortunately, comparative analyses of the results and

effectiveness of these intercultural measures are still lacking, despite the progress made in the context of inter-European research projects such as TIES (The Integration of the European Second Generation).

#### **4. Challenges to urban policy**

As we have previously argued, there has been insufficient debate on the articulation between learning as a means to achieve social cohesion and the city and/or urban neighbourhoods as active contexts for that process. Further theoretical discussion, methodological reflection and empirical analysis are required for a better understanding of the city both as a learning environment and as a learning resource – not least in order to be able to effectively take this dimension into account in the context of urban cohesion policies.

##### **4.1. Local learning communities**

Learning communities, whether in their territorialised versions (learning cities, learning regions) or otherwise (Kilpatrick et al, n.d.) are far from a novel concept. A bulging literature addressing the topic has flourished in recent years, typically as part of a broader trend revolving around the theory and ideology of the ‘knowledge-based economy’ (Armstrong, 2001; David and Foray, 2002; Powell and Snellman, 2004). As

might be expected, this latter approach to the concept seeks to identify and mobilise the untapped potential of territories as regards the production and dissemination of knowledge with the main aim of enhancing economic competitiveness. More often than not, knowledge is essentially regarded as a production factor, in line with such theoretical contributions as those associated with endogenous growth theory within economics or the literature on industrial districts, regional innovation systems and learning regions within geography/regional science (e.g. Becattini, 1992; Benko and Pecqueur, 2001; Moulaert and Sekia, 2003; Morgan, 2007).

Yet, as argued by Lambooy and Moulaert (1996) or by Plumb et al (2007), it seems increasingly clear that ‘narrow, economistic notions of the learning city can only contribute to a growing polarisation of the city’ (Plumb et al, 2007, p. 37) and do not challenge, but rather reinforce, the ‘overarching exploitative and wealth concentrating structure of the knowledge economy’ (Plumb et al, 2007, p. 42). It is not that numerous relevant insights cannot be usefully mustered from the aforementioned theoretical perspectives – e.g., with respect to the heuristic and theoretical worth of the concepts of tacit and collective knowledge (Ferrão, 1995, 1996; Antonelli and Ferrão, 2001). But it is clear that in order for those insights to be successfully transposed to the analysis of the ways in which learning processes serve to reinforce or overcome exclusionary dynamics, it is

necessary that social cohesion concerns take central stage, instead of playing second fiddle.

For this reason, it is our view that the setting of a ‘social cohesion’ research agenda on the topic of learning communities should begin by explicitly opting for a definition of the latter that: i) is explicitly oriented towards ‘emancipatory learning’, ‘really useful knowledge’, ‘critical thinking’ and ‘conscientisation’ (Charles et al., 2007, p. 63); and ii) draws on the concept of ‘community of practice’ as one where people creatively and collectively learn with a view to addressing problems and challenges that are themselves collective. In accordance with this perspective, learning has an irreducibly social and community character and it is closely related to the concept of empowerment (Friedman, 1992; Ninacs, 2008). Hence the strategic social cohesion potential of learning communities: through them, cohesion is promoted not only within the community itself, but also within the broader territory and society of which it is a part.

Research on the role and potential of learning communities as strategic drivers of social cohesion and community emancipation may usefully pursue a series of distinct but complementary paths. ‘Social learning by and for communities (...) is the most underdeveloped in literature and policy’ of all the ‘discourses on learning’ (Charles et al., 2007, p. 23). Among the main issues we would include: i) the ‘governmentality’ of education in urban contexts; ii) semiotic barriers to participation and

empowerment; iii) the mechanisms that characterise the production and dissemination of ‘socially non-legitimised’ knowledge; and iv) good practices in ‘bridging’ formal/institutionalised and informal/grassroots learning.

Governmentality is a term coined by Foucault that denotes the organised practices (mentalities, rationalities and techniques) through which subjects are governed (Mayhew, 2004). In this context, it explicitly reflects an acknowledgement of the inextricable relationship between knowledge and power. Semiotic barriers to participation and empowerment are related to the insufficient mastery over signs, symbols and codes, by individuals and/or communities in contemporary European cities, creating barriers to their emancipation. This draws on an acknowledgement of the importance of symbolic, non-tangible factors in shaping social hierarchies, group identities, and spaces of belonging.

In turn, socially non-legitimised knowledge refers to that collective knowledge that is produced and reproduced by socially excluded groups and communities, in the context of, and as a consequence of, their coping strategies in the city. While this occasionally refers to knowledge with respect to informal and illegal practices, more generally it should be taken to mean the often vibrant and creative ways in which these communities of practice address their specific problems and collectively devise solutions to them. This type of knowledge and learning is poorly appreciated by the

analyses and discourses that surround the knowledge-based economy; and yet they are powerful (and insufficiently understood) mechanisms that serve to countervail exclusionary dynamics.

Finally, the search for ‘good practices’ in bridging formal/institutionalised and informal/grassroots learning would seek to identify what it is that characterises those instances in which these two forms of learning engage in cross-fertilisation - on the one hand, through the incorporation of grassroots codes, practices and insights into formal curricula, with the aim of improving the richness, diversity and usefulness of the latter; on the other, through the active ‘reaching out’ to excluded communities by formal education institutions as a way of empowering them. The notion of ‘urban learning community’ builds on the idea that “urban space (...) is not designed from on high (...) rather, it is woven like cloth by [its] inhabitants as they engage with each other in acts of social learning in communities of practice” (Plumb et al, 2007, p. 46 , citing L. Brothers and J. Jacobs).

#### **4.2. Education and learning in the context of urban regeneration**

The democratisation of education and its multicultural profile in many European and North American cities has posed two main challenges to the educational system. The first one concerns the role of schools as key local agents, mainly in the most problematic urban areas. In many cases, the

school is the only access gate that is open to families to ask for various types of assistance. The second challenge relates to the specific difficulty of reversing the exclusion of certain communities through the education of children and young people (Cummings and Dyson, 2007). In most cases, instead of improving the life patterns of local communities, schools contribute to reproducing the deprivation of the areas where they are located: degraded buildings, high levels of teacher mobility, crime and drugs inside the schools, etc.

These challenges require a redefinition of the roles played by schools in the context of their local communities, especially in the case of deprived urban areas. Over the last few decades, several European countries have developed local policies and strategies in order to deal with this issue. At first, these initiatives consisted mostly of special custom-made assistance to children and young people, with a view to improving their learning and school performance. Later on, the focus shifted to parental involvement and, more recently, to the involvement of the local community (Crowther et al, 2003).

The building environment is also relevant to enhance the role of schools as promoters of young people self-esteem and social integration. Reflecting on the gap that exists between the educational systems of Northern and Southern Europe – which is partly responsible for the ‘brain drain’ from the latter to the former, Moulaert et al (2007, p. 144) highlight,

precisely, this specific dimension of the phenomenon: ‘a problem of spatial planning and the built environment, including the lack of school buildings (which implies rotating classes and teaching times), the use of inappropriate buildings or vandalism affecting school infrastructure’. Actually these conditions constrain the positive outcomes of the learning process, even when the later ones are potentially stimulated by the aforementioned immaterial actions.

Nevertheless schools often are crucial agents of local development processes, not only through the bridges established between the school and the families but also as resource centres. The ‘Schools Plus’ experience in the UK is a good example of this new role being assumed by schools, namely in terms of offering services to the community or simply providing the physical space for other agencies to locate inside school walls (Crowther et al, 2003; Cummings and Dyson, 2007; Gordon 2008). More recently, the school has also emerged as a facilitator of connections with the wider urban areas, seeking to break the isolation of dysfunctional enclaves and to expand the relational capital of children and young people.

In a different perspective, universities have also emerged in the literature of the last few decades as important agents of urban regeneration in another sense. Most of this literature has focused on the economic role of universities (Charles, 2003; Goldstein, 2004). ‘The UK Government is clearly convinced of the importance of universities in economic and

regeneration terms. In a recent report they claim that HE contributes over £50 billion annually to the UK economy and announced plans to open 20 new universities by 2013' (Robinson and Adams, 2008, p. 279). Nevertheless, the same authors also stress the role of universities within deprived local communities, namely referring to the possibility for them to act as "a bridge between regeneration professionals and the local community" (Robinson and Adams, 2008, p. 283).

The traditional campuses of Anglo-American Universities, which have been adopted in many other contexts across the world, has often been accused of giving rise to isolation and tensions vis-à-vis the local neighbourhood communities (Bromley 2006). In order to engage universities in urban development strategies, two main alternatives have been put forth: (i) opening up the campuses not only to science and technology parks but also to local micro-enterprises, third sector institutions, sports associations, local events, etc.; and ii) moving university buildings to the city centre in order to animate the commercial, cultural and other activities of that area, while at the same time promoting the requalification of the built environment (Perry, and Wiewel 2005).

'To build excellence and invest in research-intensive universities and their graduate programs is to invest in the communities in which they are located. The university can act as a catalyst for economic development, but – more importantly – the university is also a crucial actor in making places

more open and diverse, thereby contributing to wider goals of social inclusion and cohesion within Canadian society' (Gertler, M. S. and T. Vinodrai, 2004, p. 10). An interesting European experience is the 'migration' of two Faculties of the University of Barcelona from the Pedralves Campus to the city centre - the Raval neighbourhood -, along with other public cultural institutions, with the deliberate aim of serving as catalysts for the revitalisation of the city centre.

The desirable embeddedness of Universities in cities and their potential role in urban cohesion – either by opening up the campuses or by relocating them to city centres – bring to light the need to find new partnership-based governance models. However, such profound changes in the status and functions of universities almost inevitably face strong adverse reactions on the part of the most conservative sectors of the academia that support a monopoly of the 'core businesses' of teaching and research.

## **5. Conclusion**

The access to education has been tremendously expanded in developed countries. However, this 'democratisation' of education has not been without its downsides – in particular, the greater risk of social exclusion at which those affected by formal educational skills' deficits (such as the elderly population, immigrants or specific national groups like the

Roma) have found themselves. Other factors putting people and communities at risk of social exclusion are also closely linked to the issues of learning and education. For example, the quality of learning processes, which is influenced by prior endowments of cultural and social capital, is also strongly affected by certain specific features of schools (experience and motivation of the staff, adjustment of the courses to the needs of the students, pedagogical strategies adopted) and has an impact in the performance of the students, contributing to enhance social and spatial divides. Certain city neighbourhoods and districts experience systematic disadvantages across a variety of educational aspects and, as a consequence, the schools located in those districts consistently exhibit below-average performance levels. Indeed, in many cases, schools actually contribute to segregation, rather than promoting social cohesion. The title of a book by Richard Florida (2008), 'Who's your school?' is certainly a good predictor of individual social mobility.

In recent times, the digital divide has become another important factor of social and spatial fragmentation. At the macro-scale, differential access to social and economic resources conditions the levels of access to ICT and thereby increases inequality. However, at the micro-scale, ICT (and the internet in particular) have also made it possible for many interesting learning processes and experiences to occur outside their traditional institutional contexts, promoted the strengthening of community ties –

especially among such geographically-separated groups as migrants – and encouraged empowerment strategies.

Despite the social and cultural inequalities that beset this social domain, education remains one of the main pathways to promoting social and urban cohesion, particularly via the development of competences related to creativity, citizenship and interculturality. The ‘cultural turn’ has brought creativity, innovation, critical thinking and artistic abilities to the centre of the learning and education debate. Moreover, artistic skills are nowadays recognised as communication facilitators between different cultures and as leverage to increase the self-esteem of the most vulnerable individuals and groups.

The multi-scalar nature of contemporary territorial belonging and identity has posed some fundamental challenges to the theory and practice of citizenship as shaped by the modern nation-state of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Education for citizenship seeks to meet these challenges by linking the values and practices of tolerance, dialogue and sharing, while once again highlighting the city as a key locus of citizenship, where social and cultural interaction is compatible with individual freedom and privacy.

Finally, in urban contexts characterised by significant and increasing cultural diversity, the issue of intercultural dialogue has itself become an increasingly important issue and has posed its own specific challenges. Intercultural interaction requires conflict mediation as well as organised

learning processes that strengthen the links between human groups, foster the development of shared communication channels and contribute to assuming differences as a feature of everyday life that must be negotiated in order to prevent the transformation of difference into inequality.

This article has suggested two strategies linking education processes with social cohesion that can inspire future urban policies. The first one concerns local learning communities based on the concept of communities of practice, focuses on the neighbourhood as a learning platform for and in the city and encourages cross-fertilisation – both between formal/institutional methods and grassroots practices, and between codified and tacit knowledge. The second strategy highlights the role of educational institutions as pro-active agents of urban regeneration processes with a view to the construction of more socially creative cities, by emphasising their embeddedness in the urban community and calling for their active involvement in governance mechanisms and partnerships.

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<sup>1</sup> In OECD countries, there is 10.0% ‘top performers’ in the first group and 5,6% in the second.

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